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CONCLUSION

LEGACIES OF THE CROSS AND THE LYNCHING TREE

They are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him in contempt.

—Hebrews 6:6

Remember those who are in prison, as though you were there in prison with them, those who are being tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured.

—Hebrews 13:3

The law enforcements 'n' highway patrol was altogether up there—you name 'em, they was there. I wasn't afraid. Because I know I had somebody there who was on my side. And that was Jesus; he was able to take care of me. That's who I can depend on and put my trust in. You can't trust white people; they will fail you. You can't trust black people, they will fail you. Even mother, father, brother or sister may fail you. But Jesus won't fail you. You can trust Jesus. He's my all.

—Bee Jenkins in Holmes County, Mississippi¹

Perhaps nothing about the history of mob violence in the United States is more surprising than how quickly an understanding of the full horror of lynching has receded from the nation's collective historical memory.

—W. Fitzhugh Brundage²

Life is not possible without an opening toward the transcendent; in other words, human beings cannot live in chaos. Once contact with the transcendent is lost, existence in the world ceases to be possible. . . .

—Mircea Eliade.³

I end this reflection as I began—acknowledging that my interest in the cross and the lynching tree stems from my identity as a black person and a Christian struggling to find justice in America today.

As a child, I remember worrying about my father when he did not come home from work at the usual time in the evening. My brothers and I would watch anxiously out the window, hoping that the lights from every vehicle would be the lights from his pick-up truck. My mother worried too, but she tried to assure us that “God would protect Daddy from any harm that whites could do to him” and that he would arrive home soon. I wanted to believe that, but I had heard too much about white people killing black people to believe what she said without deep questioning. When my father would finally make it home safely, I would run and jump into his arms, happy as I could be. For that moment, at least, my faith was renewed.

My wrestling with faith began in childhood. Belief in a good and just God was no easy matter for any black person living in the so-called Christian South. The first essay I wrote in college was, “Why Do People Suffer?” In graduate school, I deepened that reflection, and I have thought about suffering all my life, especially when my wife, the love of my life, died of breast cancer at thirty-six.

Such personal suffering challenges faith, but social suffering, which comes from human hate, challenges it even more. White supremacy tears faith to pieces and turns the heart away from God. The more I believed in God, the harder it became to sustain any faith. White supremacy was so pervasive that everywhere I

went it was there staring me in the face—in the North as well as the South. If God loves black people, why then do we suffer so much? That was my question as a child; that is still my question.

The struggle to make sense of being *black* and *Christian* in white America has motivated all my work as a theologian, starting in June of 1968, two months after Martin King's assassination, when I began to write *Black Theology and Black Power*. While writing that book in my brother's church (Union A.M.E. in Little Rock, Arkansas), a place of worship where blacks regularly "caught the spirit," something happened that I can't explain. It seemed as if a transcendent voice were speaking to me through the scriptures and the medium of African American history and culture, reminding me that God's liberation of the poor is the primary theme of Jesus' gospel.

Consumed by a passion to express myself about the liberating power of the black religious experience, I continued to write and speak about this spiritual revolution erupting in the cultural and political contexts of the African American community. This message of liberation was "something like a burning fire shut up in my bones," to use the language of Jeremiah; "I [was] weary with holding it in, and I [could not]" (Jer 20:9). All of my work since that first book has involved an effort to relate the gospel and the black experience—the experience of oppression as well as the struggle to find liberation and meaning. Inevitably, it has led to these reflections on the cross and the lynching tree: the essential symbol of Christianity and the quintessential emblem of black suffering.

To live meaningfully, we must see light beyond the darkness. As Mircea Eliade put it, "Life is not possible without an opening toward the transcendent." The lynching era was the Heart of Darkness for the African American community. It was a time when fragments of meaning were hard to find. Some found meaning in the blues and others in collective political resistance, but for many people it was religion that helped them to look

beyond their tragic situation to a time when they would “cross the river of Jordan,” “lay down dat heavy load,” and “walk in Jerusalem just like John.”

The Christian gospel is God’s message of liberation in an unredeemed and tortured world. As such, it is a transcendent reality that lifts our spirits to a world far removed from the suffering of this one. It is an eschatological vision, an experience of transfiguration, such as Jesus experienced at his Baptism (Mk 1:9-11) or on Mt. Tabor (Mk 9:2-8), just before he set out on the road to Jerusalem, the road that led to Calvary. Paul had such a vision—“a light from heaven”—as he traveled the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3). Malcolm X, while in prison, had a vision of God, and so too did Martin King hear God speaking to him in his kitchen at a moment of crisis during the Montgomery bus boycott. For all four, the revelatory moment in their lives helped to prepare them to face their deaths, sustained by the conviction that this was not the end but the beginning of a new life of meaning. To paraphrase Eliade, once contact with the transcendent is found, a new existence in the world becomes possible.

And yet the Christian gospel is more than a transcendent reality, more than “going to heaven when I die, to shout salvation as I fly.” It is also an immanent reality—a powerful liberating presence among the poor right *now* in their midst, “building them up where they are torn down and propping them up on every leaning side.” The gospel is found wherever poor people struggle for justice, fighting for their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Bee Jenkins’s claims that “Jesus won’t fail you” was made in the heat of the struggle for civil rights in Mississippi, and such faith gave her strength and courage to fight for justice against overwhelming odds. Without concrete signs of divine presence in the lives of the poor, the gospel becomes simply an opiate; rather than liberating the powerless from humiliation and suffering, the gospel becomes a drug that helps them adjust to this world by looking for “pie in the sky.”

And so the transcendent and the immanent, heaven and earth, must be held together in critical, dialectical tension, each one correcting the limits of the other. The gospel is *in* the world, but it is not *of* the world; that is, it can be seen in the black freedom movement, but it is much more than what we see in our struggles for justice. God's word is *paradoxical*, or, as the old untutored black preacher used to say, "inscrutable," a mystery that one can neither control nor fully understand. It is here and not here, revealed and hidden at the same time. "Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior" (Isa 45:15).

Nowhere is that paradox, that "inscrutability," more evident than in the cross. A symbol of death and defeat, God turned it into a sign of liberation and new life. The cross is the most empowering symbol of God's loving solidarity with the "least of these," the unwanted in society who suffer daily from great injustices. Christians must face the cross as the terrible tragedy it was and discover in it, through faith and repentance, the liberating joy of eternal salvation.

But we cannot find liberating joy in the cross by spiritualizing it, by taking away its message of justice in the midst of powerlessness, suffering, and death. The cross, as a locus of divine revelation, is not good news for the powerful, for those who are comfortable with the way things are, or for anyone whose understanding of religion is aligned with power. The religious authorities of Jesus' time were threatened by his teachings about the reign of God's justice and love, and the state authorities executed him as an insurrectionist—one who "perverts the nation" and "stirs up the people" (Lk 23:2, 5). Even Jesus' disciples misunderstood his teachings "that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected," "mocked and flogged and crucified" (Mk 8:31; Mt 20:19). They slept through his agony in the Garden (Mk 14:32), and deserted him when he was arrested, tortured, and crucified. One disciple betrayed him and another denied him,

because a suffering Messiah was not the one they expected. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Lk 24:21).

This reversal of expectations and conventional values is the unmistakable theme of the gospel. "What is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God" (Lk 16:15). "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Lk 18:14). This "transvaluation of values," as Niebuhr put it, finds its apotheosis in the cross. "In Jesus' cross God took up the existence of a slave and died the slave's death on the tree of martyrdom" (Phil 2:8). The cross, in Martin Hengel's words, points to God's loving solidarity with the "unspeakable suffering of those who are tortured," and "put to death by human cruelty. . . . In the person and fate of the one man Jesus of Nazareth this saving solidarity of God with [the oppressed] is given its historical and physical form."⁴ The cross," writes Dorothy A. Lee-Pollard, "reveals where God's kingdom is to be found—not among the powerful or even the religious, but in the midst of powerlessness, suffering and death."⁵ Bonhoeffer was right: "The Bible directs [us] to God's powerlessness and suffering. Only a suffering God can help."⁶

Great preachers preach the cross as the heart of the Christian message. The Apostle Paul preached the cross and transformed a Jewish sect into a faith for the world. Martin Luther preached the cross and started the Protestant Reformation. Karl Barth preached the cross and created a Copernican revolution in European theology. Reinhold Niebuhr preached the cross and developed a creative perspective on Christian social ethics in America. Fannie Lou Hamer sang and preached the cross and ignited a grassroots revolution in Mississippi. Martin Luther King Jr. preached the cross and transformed the social and political life in America, pointing to an American dream of justice, for which he gave his life.

One has to have a powerful religious imagination to see redemption in the cross, to discover life in death and hope in

tragedy. What kind of salvation is that? No human language can fully describe what salvation through the cross means. Salvation through the cross is a mystery and can only be apprehended through faith, repentance, and humility. The cross is an "opening to the transcendent" for the poor who have nowhere else to turn—that transcendence of the spirit that no one can take away, no matter what they do. Salvation is broken spirits being healed, voiceless people speaking out, and black people empowered to love their own blackness.

And yet another type of imagination is necessary—the imagination to relate the message of the cross to one's own social reality, to see that "They are crucifying again the Son of God" (Heb 6:6). Both Jesus and blacks were "strange fruit." Theologically speaking, Jesus was the "first lynchee," who foreshadowed all the lynched black bodies on American soil. He was crucified by the same principalities and powers that lynched black people in America. Because God was present with Jesus on the cross and thereby refused to let Satan and death have the last word about his meaning, God was also present at every lynching in the United States. God saw what whites did to innocent and helpless blacks and claimed their suffering as God's own. God transformed lynched black bodies into the recrucified body of Christ. *Every time a white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus.* The lynching tree is the cross in America. When American Christians realize that they can meet Jesus only in the crucified bodies in our midst, they will encounter the real scandal of the cross.

God must therefore know in a special way what poor blacks are suffering in America because God's son was lynched in Jerusalem. Jesus and other subject people suffered punishment under the Roman Empire as blacks suffered in the United States. He was tortured and humiliated like blacks. What are we to make of the striking similarities between the brutality in Rome and cruelty in America? What is most ironic is that the white lynchers of blacks in America were not regarded as criminals; like Jesus,

blacks were the criminals and insurrectionists. The lynchers were the "good citizens" who often did not even bother to hide their identities. They claimed to be acting as citizens and Christians as they crucified blacks in the same manner as the Romans lynched Jesus. It is even more ironic that black people embraced the Christian cross that whites used to murder them. That was truly a profound inversion of meaning.

White theologians in the past century have written thousands of books about Jesus' cross without remarking on the analogy between the crucifixion of Jesus and the lynching of black people. One must suppose that in order to feel comfortable in the Christian faith, whites needed theologians to interpret the gospel in a way that would not require them to acknowledge white supremacy as America's great sin. Churches, seminaries, and theological academies separated Christian identity from the horrendous violence committed against black people. Whites could claim a Christian identity without feeling the need to oppose slavery, segregation, and lynching as a contradiction of the gospel for America. Whether we speak of Jonathan Edwards, Walter Rauschenbusch, or Reinhold Niebuhr as America's greatest theologian, none of them made the rejection of white supremacy central to their understanding of the gospel. Reinhold Niebuhr could write and preach about the cross with profound theological imagination and say nothing of how the violence of white supremacy invalidated the faith of white churches. It takes a lot of theological blindness to do that, especially since the vigilantes were white Christians who claimed to worship the Jew lynched in Jerusalem.

What is invisible to white Christians and their theologians is inescapable to black people. The cross is a reminder that the world is fraught with many contradictions—many lynching trees. We cannot forget the terror of the lynching tree no matter how hard we try. It is buried deep in the living memory and psychology of the black experience in America. We can go to churches and celebrate our religious heritage, but the tragic memory of the black

holocaust in America's history is still waiting to find theological meaning. When black people sing about Jesus' cross, they often think of black lives lost to the lynching tree. Through their own experience of suffering, African Americans have often found themselves existentially at the foot of Jesus' cross, experiencing his fate, believing that only Jesus understands their lot because he suffered as they have.

Look-a how dey done my Lord,
 Look-a how they done my Lord,
 Look-a how dey done my Lord,
 Oh, look-a how dey done my Lord,
 Done my Lord, done my Lord,
 Done my Lord, done my Lord.

"Dey carry him to Calvary and dey licked him wid violence."
 "Wasn't that a pity and a shame."

To understand what the cross means in America, we need to take a look at the lynching tree in this nation's history—that "strange and bitter crop" that Billie Holiday would not let us forget. The lynched black victim experienced the same fate as the crucified Christ and thus became the most potent symbol for understanding the true meaning of the salvation achieved through "God on the Cross." Nietzsche was right: *Christianity is a religion of slaves*. God became a slave in Jesus and thereby liberated slaves from being determined by their social condition.

The real scandal of the gospel is this: humanity's salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity's salvation is available *only* through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst. Faith that emerged out of the scandal of the cross is not a faith of intellectuals or elites of any sort. This is the faith of abused and scandalized people—the losers and the down and out. It was this faith that gave blacks the strength and courage to hope, "to keep on keeping on," struggling against the odds, with what Paul Tillich called "the courage to be."⁷

The cross and the lynching tree interpret each other. Both were public spectacles, shameful events, instruments of punishment reserved for the most despised people in society. Any genuine theology and any genuine preaching of the Christian gospel must be measured against the test of the scandal of the cross and the lynching tree. "Jesus did not die a gentle death like Socrates, with his cup of hemlock. . . . Rather, he died like a [lynched black victim] or a common [black] criminal in torment, on the tree of shame."⁸ The crowd's shout "Crucify him!" (Mk 15:14) anticipated the white mob's shout "Lynch him!" Jesus' agonizing final cry of abandonment from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34), was similar to the lynched victim Sam Hose's awful scream as he drew his last breath, "Oh, my God! Oh, Jesus."⁹ In each case, it was a cruel, agonizing, and contemptible death.

Can the cross redeem the lynching tree? Can the lynching tree liberate the cross and make it real in American history? Those are the questions I have tried to answer.

As I see it, the lynching tree frees the cross from the false pieties of well-meaning Christians. When we see the crucifixion as a first-century lynching, we are confronted by the reenactment of Christ's suffering in the blood-soaked history of African Americans. Thus, the lynching tree reveals the true religious meaning of the cross for American Christians today. The cross needs the lynching tree to remind Americans of the reality of suffering—to keep the cross from becoming a symbol of abstract, sentimental piety. Before the spectacle of this cross we are called to more than contemplation and adoration. We are faced with a clear challenge: as Latin American liberation theologian Jon Sobrino has put it, "to take the crucified down from the cross."¹⁰

Yet the lynching tree also needs the cross, without which it becomes simply an abomination. It is the cross that points in the direction of hope, the confidence that there is a dimension to life

beyond the reach of the oppressor. "Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more" (Lk 12:4).

Though the pain of Jesus' cross was real, there was also joy and beauty in his cross. This is the great theological paradox that makes the cross impossible to embrace unless one is standing in solidarity with those who are powerless. God's loving solidarity can transform ugliness—whether Jesus on the cross or a lynched black victim—into beauty, into God's liberating presence. Through the powerful imagination of faith, we can discover the "terrible beauty" of the cross and the "tragic beauty" of the lynching tree.

Although James Baldwin rejected the Christianity of his youth, he did not reject the spiritual dimension of black existence or the capacity to find beauty in suffering.

This past, the Negro's past, . . . this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, . . . yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful. I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering— . . . but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. . . . It demands great spiritual resilience not to hate the hater whose foot is on your neck, and an even greater miracle of perception and charity not to teach your children to hate. . . . I am proud of these people not because of their color but because of their intelligence and their spiritual force and beauty. This country should be proud of them, too, but, alas, not many people in this country even know of their existence. And the reason for this ignorance is a knowledge of the role these people played—and play—in American life would reveal more about America to Americans than Americans wish to know.

Out of this wrestling with suffering comes a spiritual beauty and maturity that transcends traditional Christianity. As Baldwin put it:

The man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth—and, indeed, no church—can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable. This is because, in order to save his life, he is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind the words.¹¹

The church's most vexing problem today is how to define itself by the gospel of Jesus' cross. Where is the gospel of Jesus' cross revealed today? The lynching of black America is taking place in the criminal justice system where nearly one-third of black men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight are in prisons, jails, on parole, or waiting for their day in court. Nearly one-half of the more than two million people in prisons are black. That is one million black people behind bars, more than in colleges. Through private prisons and the "war against drugs," whites have turned the brutality of their racist legal system into a profit-making venture for dying white towns and cities throughout America. Michelle Alexander correctly calls America's criminal justice system "the new Jim Crow."¹² "The criminalization and demonization of black men," writes Alexander, "is one habit that America seems unlikely to break without addressing head-on the racial dynamics that have given rise to our latest caste system."¹³ Nothing is more racist in America's criminal justice system than its administration of the death penalty. America is the only industrialized country in the West where the death penalty is still legal. Most countries regard it as both immoral and barbaric. But not in America. The death penalty is primarily reserved, though not exclusively, for people of color, and white supremacy shows no signs of changing it. That is why the term "legal lynching"¹⁴ is still relevant today. One can lynch a person without a rope or tree.

When I heard and read about the physical and mental abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, I thought about lynching. The Roman Empire that killed Jesus at Calvary was similar to the American Empire that lynched blacks in the United States and also created the atrocities in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many white Americans seemed surprised and even shocked that such torture and abuse could come from the U.S. military. But most blacks were neither surprised nor shocked. We have been the object of white America's torture and abuse for nearly four hundred years.

People who have never been lynched by another group usually find it difficult to understand why blacks want whites to remember lynching atrocities. Why bring that up? Is it not best forgotten? Absolutely not! What happened to the hate that created the violence that lynched black people? Did it disappear? What happened to the hate that lynched Henry Smith in Texas (1892), John Carter in Arkansas (1927), and Reverend George W. Lee and Lemar Smith in Mississippi (1955)? Where did the hate go that opposed the black freedom movement and killed Martin Luther King Jr. and a host of white and black civil rights workers?

In 2005 the U.S. Senate formally apologized for its failure ever to have passed an anti-lynching bill. Did the apology get rid of the hate? What happened to the indifference among white liberal religious leaders that fostered silence in the face of the lynching industry? Where is that indifference today? Did the hate and indifference vanish so that we no longer have to be concerned about them? What happened to the denial of whites who claimed that they did not even know about lynching, even though many blacks were lynched during their adult years? Unless we confront these questions today, hate and silence will continue to define our way of life in America. For "if racial healing is ever to come to our society, it will mean remembering and retelling our story of racial injustice and honoring the voices and the actions of those who stood against it."¹⁵

Just as the Germans should never forget the Holocaust, Americans should never forget slavery, segregation, and the lynching tree. As a nation, we are in danger of forgetting our ugly lynching past. As Fitzhugh Brundage reminds us, "Perhaps nothing about the history of mob violence in the United States is more surprising than how quickly an understanding of the full horror of lynching has receded from the nation's collective memory."¹⁶ Because Emmett Till was remembered, the civil rights movement was born. When we remember, we give voice to the victims. Many white religious leaders, scholars, and churches have done everything they can to forget the vigilante violence unleashed on African Americans. But other white and black scholars, especially historians and writers, are helping us to remember. Whites today cannot separate themselves from the culture that lynched blacks, unless they confront their history and expose the sin of white supremacy.

The cross of Jesus and the lynching tree of black victims are not literally the same—historically or theologically. Yet these two symbols or images are closely linked to Jesus' spiritual meaning for black and white life together in what historian Robert Handy has called "Christian America."¹⁷ Blacks and whites are bound together in Christ by their brutal and beautiful encounter in this land. Neither blacks nor whites can be understood fully without reference to the other because of their common religious heritage as well as their joint relationship to the lynching experience. What happened to blacks also happened to whites. When whites lynched blacks, they were literally and symbolically lynching themselves—their sons, daughters, cousins, mothers and fathers, and a host of other relatives. Whites may be bad brothers and sisters, murderers of their own black kin, but they are *still* our sisters and brothers. We are bound together in America by faith and tragedy. All the hatred we have expressed toward one another cannot destroy the profound mutual love and solidarity that flow deeply between us—a love

that empowered blacks to open their arms to receive the many whites who were also empowered by the same love to risk their lives in the black struggle for freedom. No two people in America have had more violent and loving encounters than black and white people. We were made brothers and sisters by the blood of the lynching tree, the blood of sexual union, and the blood of the cross of Jesus. No gulf between blacks and whites is too great to overcome, for our beauty is more enduring than our brutality. What God joined together, no one can tear apart.

The lynching tree is a metaphor for white America's crucifixion of black people. It is the window that best reveals the religious meaning of the cross in our land. In this sense, black people are Christ figures, not because they wanted to suffer but because they had no choice. Just as Jesus had no choice in his journey to Calvary, so black people had no choice about being lynched. The evil forces of the Roman state and of white supremacy in America willed it. Yet, God took the evil of the cross and the lynching tree and transformed them both into the triumphant beauty of the divine. If America has the courage to confront the great sin and ongoing legacy of white supremacy with repentance and reparation there is hope "beyond tragedy."