

The Cross and the Lynching Tree

Lesson: Hebrews 12:1-2

A Sermon preached by Stuart Taylor

Elkin Presbyterian Church

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Eleven years ago my congregation in Tucson decided that it was high time for me to deepen my appreciation of being Presbyterian by experiencing for the first time in my career the Annual General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. The gift of an anonymous donor made it possible for me to attend the 217th General Assembly of the PCUSA held in Birmingham, Alabama. The theme of that year's assembly was the "great cloud of witnesses" taken from Hebrews chapter 12:1: "Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses let us lay aside every weight of sin that clings so closely; and let us run the race that is set before us looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith". It was easy to feel surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses in Birmingham, Alabama as Presbyterians gathered in that historic city where the power of nonviolence turned the tide of the civil rights movement in the early sixties. But I had no idea what an impact that week would have on my life. You see I was an unknowing boy growing up in the suburbs of Greenville SC when the Civil Rights movement was happening all across the south. Even when my own high school was integrated I was largely unaware of the depths of this struggle. So in some ways I have always wished that I could have been born earlier, a fully cognizant adult more aware of what was going on. So yes, I was looking forward to seeing Presbyterians do their thing in a general assembly. But I was even more interested in immersing myself in the Civil rights movement legacy that is so much a part of Alabama's history. This GA in Alabama gave me the opportunity to drink deeply at the well of the civil rights movement. I want to share with you a few reflections about that experience and where it has led me today in North Carolina with the sure conviction that the Civil Rights movement is not a thing of the past but is a present day struggle.

One morning, I walked to down town Birmingham to see the famous 16th Street Baptist church, a historic black church that was bombed because it was a force for integration. Four young girls were killed in that bombing, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair. And these innocent victims of hate are certainly now among the great cloud of witnesses. Across the street from the 16th Ave church is the Kelly Ingram Park in downtown Birmingham where non-violent protesters were attacked by Sheriff Bull Conner whose officers unleashed attack dogs and used fire hoses to blow down marchers. So many adults were arrested and put in jail that children and young people decided to take up the march themselves. It was there in that moment that Rev. MLK wrote the famous letter from a Birmingham jail. In jail King was responding to a letter published in the paper by a group of moderate southern clergy who were saying that it was not the right moment to push for the civil rights of black Americans. These clergy were not bad people. Some of them had been supportive of the movement up to a point. But King responded by saying that it is easy for others to say to the oppressed be patient, wait. Early another morning I joined a busload of Presbyterians on a 100 mile pilgrimage to Selma Alabama. During this long rich day, we visited Brown Chapel that was one of the historic black churches that embraced the civil rights movement. We heard the testimony of Delores an African-American woman who was an 11th grader in that church in 1963 when "Black Sunday" occurred. Between poll taxes and written examinations, and of course the threat of violence, very

few African Americans were registered to vote in Alabama. And to bring attention to this, MLK and the SCLC decided to march from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery. They left from Brown Chapel, marched through town and as they approached the Edmund Pettus Bridge spanning the Alabama River they were attacked by Ala. State patrol on horseback who plowed into women and men on foot, billy clubs swinging wantonly. Back at Brown Chapel, Delores and her mother heard the noise and began to see the wounded and bleeding marchers streaming back. She said that as long as she lives she would never forget the sight of A. State troopers on horseback riding up the steps of her church. 3 weeks later 20,000 marchers joined King on a triumphant march to Montgomery that became the catalyst for new voting rights legislation signed into Law by President Johnson. Delores shared with us that her older sister was arrested that day on Bloody Sunday and spent the night in jail and witnessed how many of the prisoners were tortured with a cattle prod. It takes a long time for the trauma of that kind of violence to be healed but thank God that healing does happen. Delores said to us: "I love Selma. This is my home. My community, black and white has come a long way". We closed our day by walking on foot across the Edmund Pettus Bridge and underneath a shade tree on the edge of Selma, a Presbyterian minister led us in prayer. This older minister had as a young man supplied food for thousands of marchers a few weeks later who completed the march to Montgomery. This minister asked that God continue to challenge the PCUSA to practice non-violence by standing beside the victims of prejudice and injustice.

During that week in Birmingham Alabama, I drank deeply at the well spring of the Civil Rights movement and realized again that this movement is not over but continues today across the nation, and here in NC. Some of you may know that I serve the larger church by serving with the Peace and Justice task force of Salem Presbytery. Our task force has made it our focus on dismantling racism and toward that end we have sought to resource the churches of Salem Presbytery who might be ready and able to continue that work. One thing we are doing is to assist local congregations in finally dealing with the terrible legacy of lynching that was so much a part of North Carolina history. Why bring up the traumatic past of southern history? Why go over that which is so painful and best kept in the past? Because as William Faulkner reminded us all the past is not dead and gone; it is not even past. It is our contention that the South has yet to deal with its tragic past and that is why it seems at times to be doomed to continue to repeat the past. It is because we have forgotten our past, swept it under the rug, never mourned it or repented fully of it that leaves us fated to continue repeating the past in a vicious cycle of violence directed against African Americans across our nation today.

This afternoon a multi-racial ecumenical gathering will take place in Salisbury NC to remember the murder of three African American men—Nease Gillespie, John Gillespie, and Jack Dillingham—who were lynched in Salisbury, North Carolina on August 6, 1906. These mob murders were ostensibly precipitated by the murder a month earlier of a local white family for whom the men had worked. And yet these sharecroppers had not fled for their lives but were working their fields, living their lives when they were arrested. Following the abduction of the men from the local jail they were tortured and lynched at midnight before an audience that some estimated to be in the thousands. This action is being carried out in Salisbury not because Salisbury is an especially bad place. Not to single out that one community. But to remember that lynching occurred all over NC. 102 that have been documented by the UNC –CH but surely there are others that are lost to memory, lost to history. We remember this crime against three

persons whose lives were exterminated in an act of terror to learn from our past, to mourn this violence, to repent of racism, especially the kind that masquerades as justice. We are hoping that faith communities across the state can lead the way, modeling how we can learn the history of lynching in their own communities and will be moved to memorialize these as liturgies of remembrance and repentance.

Let me share with you what we believe is the theological and ethical rationale for this kind of action. Dr. James Cone the African American Liberation theologian has brought a shining light on our collective sin of racism in his book *the Cross and the Lynching tree*. He reminds us that the lynching era in American history was the heart of darkness for the African American community. It was a time in which Billie Holliday the famed African American blues singer sang her laments in the song, "*strange fruit hanging on southern trees*". Theologically speaking Jesus was the first "lynchee" who foreshadowed all the lynched black bodies that were lynched on American soil. Jesus was crucified by the same powers and principalities that lynched black people across America. And every time a black person was lynched in America it was a lynching of Jesus again and again. Dr. Cone observes that white theologians across the last century have written thousands of books about the cross of Jesus and not one, not one has seen this analogy between the crucifixion of Jesus and the lynching of black people. What is invisible to white Christians is inescapable to black people. The cross of Jesus is a reminder that the world is fraught with many lynching trees. Black people cannot forget the terror of the lynching tree no matter how hard they try. It is buried deep in the living memory and psychology of the Black experience in America. But the tragic memory of the American holocaust is still waiting to find theological meaning. Through their own suffering African Americans have found themselves at the foot of Jesus cross. And then Cone asks the pivotal question for us today. Can the cross of Jesus redeem the lynching tree? And can the lynching tree liberate the cross and make it real in American history? Here is Dr. Cone's argument. He believes that the cross needs the lynching tree to remind Americans of the reality of suffering in our history and in our present. This reality of suffering can keep the cross from becoming merely an abstract symbol of sentimental piety. Yet the lynching tree also needs the cross because without the cross the lynching tree remains simply an evil 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 oppressive violence of the lynching tree.

So why remember what happened in Salisbury 111 years ago today? The lynching of Black America is still taking place in our criminal justice system where extra-judicial shootings of Black men are occurring seemingly every week. The hate that created the violence that lynched 3 black men 111 years ago has not disappeared. The seeming indifference of white people that fostered silence in the face of lynching is still with us. Unless we confront these questions today, hate and silence will continue to define our way of life in America. I am grateful that in Salisbury today many people of faith and good will come together to bear witness to the truth about our painful past. This gathering is evidence that if we are willing to understand our history we are no longer doomed to repeat it. And this gathering in the name of truth can open up a pathway for healing that is long overdue. And finally this gathering will be a sign of hope that when truth is matched by a commitment to racial justice the long sought reconciliation among the races may be dawning among us. May it be so. I do take great heart from the cloud of witnesses of all who go before us. And it is my strong conviction, that the Spirit of God that animated the women and men and even children who led the Civil rights freedom struggle for

African Americans is the same Holy Spirit that is leading us today, still striving to build the beloved community where all people regardless of color or creed will be honored fully as brothers and sisters in the family of God. “ Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses let us lay aside every weight of sin that clings so closely; and let us run the race that is set before us looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith”.