



HOLY COMMUNION SUNDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Holy Communion Sunday

In the earliest days after the crucifixion of Jesus, Christians gathered to share a meal that commemorated the occurrence of his death. According to Bernard Cooke and Gary Macy, authors of Christian Symbol and Ritual, the communion ritual carried multiple messages, including that Jesus was still alive and dwelling within the community of believers, that Jesus had freed Christians from sin and death, and that by sharing a communal meal, Christians pledged to live like Jesus did through activities that liberate and redeem humanity.¹

For African Americans, historically and modernly, however, communion may hold additional significance. Along with the ritual meanings enumerated above, Henry Mitchell, author of Black Church Beginnings, notes the relationship between the African practice of libation, that is, the pouring of liquid as a memorial and honor to the ancestors, and communion, which is practiced in memory of the notion that Jesus' death on the cross was redemptive.² Mitchell cites such examples of African elements and sensibilities in the practices of Christianity to suggest a synergy between African

American Christian worship and African practices that tie African Americans to the continent of Africa and to African Traditional Religions as well as to the earliest religious practices of those who were enslaved in the Americas. Such a connection, he maintains, demonstrates the tenacity of black faith and spirit, and the pervasiveness of African culture in black religion.³ As such, Holy Communion offers an opportunity for African Americans to embrace their heritage, remember their forbearers and celebrate the existence of their religious communities.

II. The Cultural Response

African American Christians have responded to the moment of Holy Communion in various ways. Some churches have chosen to connect the ritual to African and African American heritage aesthetically. For instance, many churches adorn the communion table with kente cloth—a type of colorful African material that is woven in Ghana and the Ivory Coast—and through use of wooden bowls and chalices and other items that represent African and African American cultures. To that end, Henry Mitchell suggests that the African American song “Let Us Break Bread Together,”—a song which is widely used in black churches for communion services—likely has African influences in its lyrics (see below) that facing the sun as an act of worship, as well as the tone-scale and call and response nature of the song, indicates African influence.⁴

Let us break bread together on our knees, (on our knees)
Let us break bread together on our knees. (on our knees)
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.

Let us drink wine together on our knees, (on our knees)
Let us drink wine together on our knees. (on our knees)
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.

Let us praise God together on our knees, (on our knees)
Let us praise God together on our knees. (on our knees)
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.⁵

Other churches have incorporated practices of libation alongside Holy Communion as a means of making the relationship between the two obvious. In order to make it a distinctly African American Christian form of libation, some congregations commemorate African American Christian ancestors, such as Nat Turner or Harriett Tubman, as part of their communion ceremony.

James Cone has recently argued for an even more compelling relationship between the lynching of African Americans and the ritual of Holy Communion (commemoration of Christ death on the cross):

To understand what the cross means in America, we need to take a good long look at the lynching tree in this nation's history -- "the bulging eyes and twisted mouth," that "strange fruit" that Billie Holiday sang about, "blood on the leaves and blood at the root." The lynched black victim experienced the same fate as the crucified Christ.

The cross and the lynching tree interpret each other. Both were public spectacles, usually reserved for hardened criminals, rebellious slaves, and rebels against the Roman state and falsely accused militant blacks who were often called "black beasts" and "monsters in human form" for their audacity to challenge white supremacy in America. Any genuine theology and any genuine preaching 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."⁶ The crowd's shout, "Crucify him! (Mark 15:14), anticipated the white mob's shout, "Lynch him!" Jesus' agonizing final cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) was similar to the Georgia lynching victim Sam Hose's awful scream, as he drew his last breath, "Oh my God! Oh, Jesus."

In each case, it was a cruel, agonizing, and contemptible death.

The cross and the lynching tree need each other: the lynching tree can liberate the cross from the false pieties of well-meaning Christians. The crucifixion was a first-century lynching.

The cross can redeem the lynching tree, and thereby bestow upon lynched black bodies an eschatological meaning for their ultimate existence.

The cross can also redeem white lynchers, and their descendants, too, but not without profound cost, not without the revelation of the wrath and justice of God, which executes divine judgment, with the demand for repentance and reparation, as a presupposition of divine mercy and forgiveness. Most whites want mercy and forgiveness, but not justice and reparations; they want reconciliation without liberation, the resurrection without the cross.

As preachers and theologians, we must demonstrate the truth of our proclamation and theological reflection in the face of the cross and the lynched black victims in America's past and present. When we encounter the crucified Christ today, he is a humiliated black Christ, a lynched black body.

Christ is black not because black theology said it. Christ is made black through God's loving solidarity with lynched black bodies and divine judgment against the demonic forces of white supremacy. Like a black naked body swinging on a lynching tree, the cross of Christ was "an utterly offensive affair," "obscene in the original sense of the word," "subjecting the victim to the utmost indignity."

In a penetrating essay, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote about "the terrible beauty of the cross." "Only a tragic and a suffering love can be an adequate symbol of what we believe to be at the heart of reality itself." The cross prevents God's love from

sinking into sentimentality and romanticism. "Life is too brutal and the cosmic facts are too indifferent to our moral ventures to make faith in any but a suffering God tenable."⁷

The gospel of Jesus is not a beautiful Hollywood story. It is an ugly story, the story of God snatching victory out of defeat, finding life in death, transforming burning black bodies into transcendent windows for seeing the love and beauty of God.

The church's most vexing problem today is how to define itself by the gospel of Jesus' cross as revealed through lynched black bodies in American history. Where is the gospel of Jesus' cross revealed today? Where are black bodies being lynched 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 18 and 28 are in prisons and jails, on parole, or waiting for their day in court. One-half of the two million people in prisons are black. That is one million black people behind bars, more than in colleges. Through private prisons, whites have turned the brutality of their racist legal system into a profit-making venture for dying white towns and cities throughout America. One can lynch a person without a rope or tree.

The civil rights movement did not end lynching. It struck a mighty blow to the most obvious brutalities, like the lynching of Emmett Till and the violence of the Ku Klux Klan.

But whenever society treats a people as if they have no rights or dignity or worth, as the government did to blacks during the Katrina storm, they are being lynched covertly.

Whenever people are denied jobs, health care, housing, and the basic necessities of life, they are being lynched. There are a lot of ways to lynch a people. Whenever a people cry out to be recognized as human beings and society ignores them, they are being lynched.

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? That was a long time ago! Is it not best forgotten? Absolutely not!

The lynching tree is a metaphor for race in America, a symbol of America's crucifixion of black people. It is the window that best reveals the theological meaning of the cross in this land. In this sense, black people are Christ-figures, not because we want to be but because we had no choice about being lynched, just as Jesus had no choice in his journey to Calvary. Jesus did not want to die on the cross, and blacks did not want to swing from the lynching tree. But the evil forces of the Roman State and white supremacy in America willed it.

Yet God took the evil of the cross and the lynching tree upon the divine self and transformed 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 the tragedy -- hope for whites, blacks, and all humankind -- hope beyond the lynching tree.⁸

III. Songs that Speak to the Moment

During communion services, African American churches sing what are known as “blood songs.” These songs, often old, allow the congregation to collectively focus on the magnitude of the death of Christ. They are even more poignant when sung by a people who have had so much of their own blood spilled in their quest for freedom. Perhaps this explains the high esteem in which communion services are held by Black Christians. We stand in solidarity with a Savior who was also oppressed in his quest to gain humanity’s freedom. He is indeed a high priest who shares our sorrow and knows our grief. Some of the most well known blood songs are “I Know it was the Blood” and “The Blood Will Never Lose Its Power.” A more recent communion favorite is Kirk Franklin’s “Behold the Lamb.”

I Know It Was the Blood

Verse 1

I know it was His blood,
I know it was His blood,
I know it was His blood for me.

One day when I was lost,
Jesus died upon the cross,
that's why I know it was His blood that saved me.

Chorus

I know it was the blood,
I know it was the blood,
I know it was the blood for me.
One day when I was lost,
(Jesus died upon the cross),
(that's why I know...)

Verse 2

His blood came streaming down,
His blood came streaming down,
His blood came streaming down for me.
One day when I was lost,
Jesus died upon the cross,
and I know it was the blood that saved me.

Chorus 2

The blood came streaming down,
The blood came streaming down,

The blood came streaming down for me.
One day when I was lost,
(Jesus died upon the cross),
(that's why I know...⁹)

The Blood Will Never Lose Its Power

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-4JcZylU3c>

Verse 1

The blood that Jesus shed for me,
way back on Calvary;
the blood that gives me strength
from day to day,
it will never lose its power.

Chorus

It reaches to the highest mountain,
it flows to the lowest valley;
the blood that gives me strength
from day to day,
it will never lose its power.

Verse 2

It soothes my doubts and calms my fears,
and it dries all my tears;
the blood that gives me strength
from day to day,
it will never lose its power.

Chorus¹⁰

Now Behold the Lamb

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXzfhG9NvFw>

Chorus

Now behold the Lamb
the Precious Lamb of God
born into sin that I may live again
the Precious Lamb of God (2x)

Holy is the Lamb
the Precious Lamb of God
Why You love me so, Lord
I shall never know

the Precious lamb of God (2X)

Solo1

Now behold the Lamb
the Precious Lamb of God
Born into sin that I may live again
He's the precious Lamb of God

Chorus

Thank You for the Lamb
the Precious Lamb of God
Because of Your grace
I can finish this race
the Precious Lamb of God

Solo2:

Even when I broke Your heart
my sins tore us apart
But I'm standing right here
in the midst of my tears
I claim You to be the Lamb of God
New life can begin (yeah),
for You washed away, washed away every one of my sins
Whom the Son sets free, is truly free indeed
I claim You to be the Lamb of God

Chorus

Now behold the Lamb
the Precious Lamb of God
born into sin that I may live again
the Precious Lamb of God
Oh Oh Oh
Oh Oh Oh

Why You love me so, Lord
I shall never know
Why You love me so, Lord
I shall never know
Why You love me so, Lord
I shall never know
the Precious Lamb of God
Oh Oh Oh
Oh Oh Oh
Oh Oh Oh

Why You love me so, Lord
I shall never know
the Precious Lamb of God
uh....
uh....oh....
You love me, Jesus
You died for me, Jesus
You shed your blood for me, Jesus on Calvary.¹¹

Additional beloved communion songs include: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” by Lowell Mason; “At Calvary,” by Daniel B. Towner; and “For God So Loved the World,” as sung by the Gospel Music Workshop of America.

IV. Audio Visual Aids

- See the video of the interview between Bill Moyers and James Cone, in which Cone explains his rationale for equating the death of Jesus on the cross with black bodies on lynching trees. Online location:
<http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/11232007/watch.html/> accessed 9 September 2009
- For the audio of Cone’s lecture on lynching and the crucifixion of Jesus see online location:
http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news/events_online/ingersoll_2006.html/ accessed 9 September 2009
- Without Sanctuary online museum. Online location:
<http://www.withoutsanctuary.org/> offers an electronic library of lynching photos and the background stories of many of them.

V. Resources for Holy Communion

Books

Kirk-Duggan, Cheryl A. African American Special Days: 15 Complete Worship Services. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Wilson Costen, Melva. African American Christian Worship. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007.

Communion Bulletins

For African American communion bulletins see
<http://shop.cbn.com/cbn/item.African-American-Communion-Broadman-and-Holman-Publishers.9780805438130.htm> [African American communion bulletins].

Notes

1. Cooke, Bernard and Gary Macy. Christian Symbol and Ritual: An Introduction. Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005. p. 93-4.
2. Mitchell, H. Henry. Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years. Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004. p. 14.
3. Ibid., p. xv-xvi.
4. Ibid., p. 14.
5. "Let Us Break Bread Together on our Knees." Traditional. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications. #686
6. Hengel, Martin. Crucifixion. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977. p. 90.
7. Neibuhr, Reinhold. "The Terrible Beauty of the Cross." The Christian Century 21 Mar. 1929: 386-388.
8. Cone, James. "The Cross and the Lynching Tree." The African American Pulpit (Spring 2008): 18-26.
9. Towner, Daniel B., "I Know it was the Blood." Arr. by the Miami Mass Choir.
10. Crouch, Andraé "The Blood Will Never Lose Its Power." Rock of Ages. New York, NY: EMI/CMG Music, 2008.
11. "Now Behold The Lamb." Kirk Franklin. Kirk Franklin and the Family – Christmas. Inglewood, CA: Gospocentric, 1995.