

The Cross and the Lynching Tree

James Cone

Coffee and Stretch Discussion Guide

Summer 2020

-Chapter 1: “Nobody Knows de Trouble I See” - The Cross and the Lynching Tree in the Black Experience

PART I - The Underpinnings; Spread and Repercussions of an Era of Utter Darkness

A. Refusing to be Defined by Evil. Cone says that the cross and the lynching tree each represent the worst in human beings and “at the same time ‘an unquenchable ontological thirst’ for life that refuses to let the worst determine our final meaning.”

Discussion Questions: (1) Had you known before reading this book that, for Jews, death on a cross was particularly painful and horrific, given that “anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (Deut. 21:23)? (2) Why do you think God chose the Cross as the way to communicate God’s love for humanity? (3) Do you think God, knowing the human capacity for evil and depravity, knew that the era of lynching would eventually come? (4) How does the fact that each of these represent the worst, the lowest form, of human behavior point to the nature of God? (5) How do its similarities to crucifixion highlight and help us understand and better frame the atrocities of the lynching era?

B. A Brief History of Lynching or “Mob Rule”. Cone discusses the necessity of “mob rule” at various stages and in various regions in our nation’s history, as well as its legacy and, in particular, how it became (and has continued to this day as) a vehicle for the oppression of blacks. Starting with “Judge Lynch”, who condoned it for “Tory supporters” in the late 1700’s during the Revolutionary War; to the Wild West, where communities outside of the reach of the law and the courts used it as a means to maintain order; to the Reconstruction Era, where it was focused with laser-like precision on blacks and on the idea of restoring the great traditions of the south; to the Civil Rights Era to today, where each of us witnessed the brutal murder of George Floyd.

Discussion Questions: (1) What do you think about the idea of enforcing the law through fear and intimidation? (2) Is it always necessary or ... is it EVER necessary? (3) Can you think of a more egregious form of “fear and intimidation” as a means of social control than the cross or the lynching tree? (4) How is the idea of enforcement through fear and intimidation reflective of what we are seeing in (and in the aftermath of) the George Floyd murder, the Ahmaud Arbery murder, the Breonna Taylor murder?

C. The Reconstruction Act of 1867 - Boundless Hope Met with Unquenchable Fury. The Emancipation Proclamation was supposed to be something that black Americans could point to as THE point in history when they would finally be recognized as fully human. Sadly, that did

not happen. Instead, it became the moment in history in which the depravity of mind prerequisite to justify and support the institution of slavery came to full fruition — in the complete and utter disregard of black lives. During the era of slavery, blacks were regarded as “property”, which is an abomination, but at least ensured that their lives were less likely to be threatened.

Discussion Questions: (1) What did Honest Abe forget or fail to do? (2) In your observations, what about human nature makes it fundamentally opposed to slavery? (3) And in it what ways is slavery contrary to the natural law? (4) Given this, is it surprising that whites in the South (and, really, whites throughout the United States) viewed blacks as “less than human”? (4) How is the Dred Scott case informative here? (5) What happens to property (say, cattle, for example) when you suddenly give it the freedom to go where it wants to go and do what it wants to do, but don’t clearly establish and change the general mind-set that it is not actually property is instead fully human? (6) In what ways did our government make similar mistakes during the Civil Rights era (in particular, the process of desegregating schools)?

D. The “Birth of a ‘Nation’”? The timing of the lynching era coincided with the rise of popular culture and mass media. As Cone notes, in “Birth of Nation” DW Griffith used the myth of a “Christian Nation” as a basis for condoning and advocating the notion of lynching as an “efficient and honorable act of justice” to reunite the North and the South. And as we have discussed, blacks were regarded as less than human. “Back in them days, to kill a Negro wasn’t nothing. It was like killing a chicken or a snake. The whites would say ‘niggers just supposed to die, ain’t no damn good anyway — so jest go an’ kill ‘em.’”

Discussion Questions: (1) In what kind of world could it possibly be considered an “act of justice” or “honorable” to systematically torture and kill black people? (2) How is the Book of Micah informative here and in what ways are the acts that have followed the “birth” of our nation similar to those of Israel that Micah is condemning (see Micah 2: 1-4; 3: 1-4 and 6: 1-2)? (3) What similarities do you see between Israel’s ascent after enslavement in Egypt and America’s ascent after escaping the control of King George and the British Empire (see Micah 6:3-4)? (4) What can Micah teach us about where we go from here and what does it mean to “do justice”; to “love kindness”; and to “walk humbly with God” (see Micah 4: 6-7 and 6: 6-8)?

PART II - The Societal Response: Two Very Different Reactions to the Era of Lynching

A. “Lynching Fever”; the “White Media Spectacle” and the “Unmoved”. Cone talks about how white America had become enthralled with the idea and the sight of lynchings - it was so bad, as he notes, that the most favored form of torture had become burning the black victim slowly for hours. He says that as many as ten- to twenty-thousand people would attend the event and that it was advertised in papers and other publications. Even worse, it was a “family affair”.

Discussion Questions: (1) How does it change your view of American “greatness” and “manifest destiny” to read about the horrific instances of violence brought upon black people during the era of lynching? (2) How is Cone’s description (the burning of black flesh and the cutting off of black body body parts) similar to the description at the beginning of Chapter 3 of Micah? (3) Why do you suppose most whites were “unmoved”, in the way that Cone describes President Harding? (4) Why do you suppose many whites have remained unmoved?

B. Pre-conditioned and Unconscious Responses. Wright says that even though he was never abused by whites, he had become “conditioned” to it “as though [he] had been the victim of a thousand lynchings”. Presumably, as we have discussed above, the power structures that existed for over 300 years before the end of slavery had “conditioned” a societal view that blacks were less than fully human. This was even confirmed by the US Supreme Court in Dred Scott in Justice Taney’s infamous decision. Cone says that lynching was such a shameful and painful way to die that black people often refused to talk about it.

Discussion Questions: (1) What are some ways that societal “conditioning” can contribute to mass atrocities, genocide, war, police brutality, bias and other forms of injustice? (2) What are some other examples of this throughout human history? (3) Once a society has been conditioned to a certain paradigm that is fundamentally unjust, how can it re-set or re-program itself to remove that conditioning?

C. The Black Response and the “Blues”. Cone says that blacks really didn’t have an avenue to respond or protest lynchings. Violent self-defense was tantamount to suicide and even affirming blackness took great courage. So the “blues” and religion became the greatest forums of protest. In particular, as long as blacks could sing the “blues” all day, they could have hope that some day their humanity would be recognized. The blues became a way for blacks to “assert loudly and exuberantly” their somebodiness.

Discussion Questions: (1) The “endemic capacity to live” is powerful, but reading the descriptions of lynchings and seeing our modern day experience, how do you think you would have reacted? (2) Do you think you would have “made the most of a bad situation” as Cone describes it? (3) Have you found music to be a salve in times of great stress or despair? (4) How does it change your understanding of black music and black art to understand the grief, the fear and the pain from which it was born? (5) How do BB King’s comments hit you — that the blues comes from a pain that he felt “deep down”?

D. The Power of Faith and the Power of the Cross. Cone points out that if the blues offered blacks a place to find their humanity, religion gave them hope. As Richard Wright says,

churches were “cool springs of hope” for blacks in America. Church is where blacks were able to declare that the conditions of despair would not determine their final meaning. “While the lynching tree symbolized white power and “black death”, the Cross symbolized divine power and “black life” — God overcoming the power of sin and death.” “The cross became the foundation on which their faith was built.”

Discussion Questions: (1) Why do you suppose the black church became the main source of hope for blacks during a time of lynching, while white churches largely ignored or even condoned the practice? (2) How did the dissonance persist, given that they were all looking at the same facts and reading from the same Bible? (3) Read one of the Black Spirituals, “Poor Little Jesus Boy”, together. Have you ever understood the Cross in this way; raw and emotional; anger and fear; despair... and hope? (4) How does understanding the era of Lynching help you to understand better the power of the Cross?

E. Solidarity with Jacob. “Faith empowered blacks to wrestle with trouble, as Jacob wrestled with his divine opponent until daybreak, refusing to let go until he was ‘blessed’ with meaning and purpose.

Discussion Questions: (1) Have you ever wrestled with God in this way? (2) Can you imagine what that wound would feel like? (3) And what do you think the lasting impacts are of that wound and that wrestling? (4) Can you imagine that the wound, and the blues, and the spirituals, and faith, have maybe left a current generation of blacks saying “enough”; I want to heal? (5) What are some implications for the church in this regard and how pressing is the issue of healing for the church’s long term viability?

PART I - How to Unscramble an Egg; Self-Interest and Power vs. Empathy; The Tragedy of Silence

A. Reinhold's Ironic "Realism". Cone notes that Reinhold Niebuhr was best known for his "realist approach in Christian social ethics". The term "realist" stemmed from his willingness to recognize that the transcendent love could not be achieved by humans. As such, the best humans could strive for is justice. And yet "justice" was something Niebuhr seemed to eschew later in his career when he insisted on the slow process of integration, as opposed to more immediate means of social justice for Black Americans.

Discussion Questions: (1) Given his remarkable insights and the provocative and imaginative ideas Niebuhr spoke about early in his career, why do you suppose he was so reluctant to push more aggressively for racial justice later in his career? (2) Do you find it ironic that his form of "realism" was to recognize the limits of human love and to instead seek justice? (3) Why do you suppose Niebuhr's views (or at least his approach) seemed to change as he grew older? (4) Have you noticed in your own life a tendency to grow more protective of the things you have accumulated and are you less of a risk-taker than you were earlier in life? (5) Do you see similarities at the societal level with regard to slavery, segregation and lynching and, if so, how do we unscramble that egg? (6) Is there another sin at work here, separate and apart from the sin of seeing a Black person as less than fully human as we discussed in Chapter 1?

B. Self-Interest and Power. As Niebuhr put it, "[n]o virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our own standpoint." His starting point for Christian realism is that all factors of our humanity be considered, including the factors of self-interest and power. This also meant that for Niebuhr, the cross was fundamental and required a "transvaluation" of human values... selflessness and powerlessness as opposed to self-interest and power. For Niebuhr, this revealed the fundamental character of human beings and of God. His starting point, i.e., the human experience, is contrary to Barth, whose starting point is God's revelation.

Discussion Questions: (1) Why do you suppose Cone believes Niebuhr's starting point has significant implications for the question of race? (2) How does confronting the realities of racial injustice (slavery, lynching, segregation) affect a conversation about the Cross? (3) And how should that conversation affect the approach Christians take in regards to issues of racial justice at a larger societal level? (4) In what ways has the refusal to confront the factors of self-interest and power perpetuated the problem of racial injustice? In what ways did it lead to the era of lynching?

C. Empathy and Imagination as the Conduits for Justice. According to Niebuhr, "people without imagination really have no right to write about ultimate things." Only poets can do justice to complexities of the Cross and the Christian Faith. As Cone sees it, Niebuhr at one point exhibited this characteristic when described the "terrible beauty" of the Cross. Cone also talks about the difference in Niebuhr's approach to racial injustice when compared to the likes of Clarence Darrow, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Harper Lee.

Discussion Questions: (1) How would you define “empathy” and in it ways is it difficult for non-Blacks to empathize with race-based oppression? (2) Why do you suppose Bonhoeffer was so much more capable than Niebuhr in his experience of empathy? (3) How does Harper Lee’s notion of stepping in Black people’s shoes and “walking around in them” help you to understand both the need for and the path to empathy? (4) What do you think of Clarence Darrow and do you think his empathy was intentional or simply a part of who he was and what his job was? (5) How does the Clarence Darrow example point us to the importance of having laws on the books that are consistent with equality and the natural law? (5) In what ways does Billie Holliday’s “Strange Fruit” help you to empathize? (6) In what ways did George Floyd’s experience allow a wide range of Americans to experience empathy (and to challenge our legal system) in a way they had not before?

D. The Tragedy of Silence. Rabbi Joachim Prinz, when speaking about the Holocaust, said “[w]hen I was a rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime ... the most important thing I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problems. The most urgent and most disgraceful, the most shameful, the most tragic problem is silence.” In his dialogue with Niebuhr, James Baldwin said “the Christian majority in this country has exhibited a really staggering level of irresponsibility and immoral washing of the hands ... the white people in Birmingham are [not] monstrous ... but they’re mainly silent people, you know. And that in itself is a crime.”

Discussion Questions: (1) What do you think is behind Niebuhr’s silence? (2) What do you think is behind our own? (3) Do you think the ideas described above about unscrambling eggs, about self-interest, about power have anything to do with it? (4) Why is silence more urgent, disgraceful, shameful and tragic than either bigotry or hatred? (5) How can we as individuals and as a church break the patterns of silence and do you find yourself feeling hopeful or pessimistic on this point?

PART II - Poor Professor Niebuhr

A. Niebuhr and a Speech Pathologist from London. For some reason, Cone's somewhat bumbling description of Niebuhr kept reminding me of Henry Higgins from *My Fair Lady*. In his own mind, Professor Higgins was going to great lengths to improve the life of a poor flower merchant with a Cockney accent. But at the same time Higgins was completely unaware of the ways in which he was mocking and oppressing her. Higgins was silent to the plight of the poor in London's lower classes in the same way Niebuhr seemed silent to that of Blacks in Christendom and in the United States.

Discussion Questions: (1) Do you think Cone's treatment of Niebuhr is fair? (2) In what ways is Niebuhr's gradualism, patience and endurance approach to racial justice similar to silence and in what ways is he similar to Professor Higgins? (3) Why is it important to have a person (seemingly progressive in his theological leanings) to visualize what silence (or worse, silent oppression) can look like? (4) In other words, why is Cone picking on Niebuhr?

B. Comparisons to Other Leaders of His Day. Cone compares Niebuhr to several other leaders of his day (Bonhoeffer, MLK, Malcolm X, Rabbi Heschel) and notes distinct differences in terms of their ability to empathize with Black Americans as compared to Niebuhr. To a large extent, Cone seems to think it was the result of others either having lived the Black experience or having spent considerable time with those who had. However, Cone himself, as well several of these other leaders of that era seemed to rely heavily on Niebuhr in their thinking.

Discussion Questions: (1) What does this tell us about the limited value of ideas? (2) Did Niebuhr put his ideas into practice as it relates to racial justice? (3) Why do you suppose he did or didn't? (4) What does it say about human nature that someone could be so clearly aware of issues of justice and inequality and yet completely unaware of his own complicity in it?

C. Individualized Forms of Oppression vs. Institutionalized (or Systemic) Forms of Oppression. Cone focuses heavily on Niebuhr's individual shortcomings in the arena of "anti-racism". James Baldwin, when confronted with the same realization, chose a different path. He wasn't as concerned about individual views about race as he was about justice and the power of those individuals to negatively and positively affect the lives of Black Americans. Baldwin recognized, as Niebuhr did early on in his career, that you can't force people to change the way they feel.

Discussion Questions: (1) Do you think Niebuhr's actions toward racial justice constituted an act of individualized oppression or systemic oppression? (2) Do you think Niebuhr realized that he was now a barricade to the very thing he taught during the early parts of his career? (3) Do you think it makes it easier to talk about racial justice and white supremacy when thinking about it on a systemic level as opposed to an individual level? (4) Do you think there were opportunities for systemic change that were missed because of Niebuhr's failure to inform his theology and ethics with "critical reading and dialogue with radical black perspectives" as Cone describes it?

D. Niebuhr's Failure to Connect the Cross and the Lynching Tree. Cone seems deeply affected, almost at an emotional level, by Niebuhr's inability to connect the Cross and the Lynching Tree. He writes, "[h]ow could Niebuhr make the tragedy of the cross the central theme in his theology, while ignoring the obvious tragedies of slavery, segregation and lynching in the United States? ...unless we look at the 'facts of experience', as Niebuhr's realism demanded, what we say about the cross remains at the level of theological abstraction, like Karl Barth's Word of God, separated from the real crosses in our midst."

Discussion Questions: (1) What are some of the crosses in our midst? (2) Is it frightening to look at them in that light? (3) Do you think those experiences of "crosses in our midst" are meant to help us better understand the cross ... or is it the cross that helps us better understand those experiences ... or is it both? (4) How do you think Jesus would have responded to Niebuhr and other similar theologians? (5) What do you think Niebuhr could have accomplished if he had become a student of King, as Cone suggests? (6) What if he had hung out with Billie Holliday?

-Chapter 3: “Bearing the Cross and Staring Down the Lynching Tree” - Martin Luther King Jr’s Struggle to Redeem the Soul of America

PART I - The Underpinnings; Spread and Repercussions of an Era of Utter Darkness

A. The Spark that Started the Civil Rights Movement. Cone describes the horrific murder of Emmett Till. He talked about Mamie Till Bradley and how she refused to let Emmett’s death be in vain... “but who knows, but what the death of my only son might bring an end to lynching.” John Lewis, the US Congressman who passed away recently, noted that it “galvanized the country”. Others called it the beginning of the civil rights movement. This is in large part due to Mamie’s insistence that he have an open casket so that all could see what had been done to him.

Discussion Questions: (1) Had you heard about Emmett Till and the connection to the beginnings of the civil rights movement? (2) Why do you suppose his death became that spark and to what extent do you think Mamie’s “vision” was a message from God? (3) How is that the events around Till’s death had the opposite of their intended effect (meaning a spark for revolution as opposed to a method of keeping Blacks in their place)? (4) In what ways did traditional concepts of sin, punishment and crime prevention impact the lynching era and in what ways has it impacted policing even today? (5) How has the dehumanizing ideas of slavery driven the treatment of Black Americans in this country from 1865 right up until the present day?

B. Great American Leaders Impacted by Till. Cone discusses his own reaction to the Till murder, as well as the reactions of leaders like John Lewis, Martin Luther King Jr., and others. Each of them saw Emmett Till in themselves. Each saw how the perpetrators of that event were not punished by our criminal justice system and how many before them had not been punished either.

Discussion Questions: (1) Given the recent passing of John Lewis, spend a few moments reflecting on his life and the life of so many others who were affected by Emmett Till’s murder and progress (or lack of progress) that has been made since then. (2) What do you think of John Lewis’s mantra of getting into “good trouble”? (3) Where do you think our country would be without leaders like Lewis and King? (4) And to what extent do you think they would have risen to the same level of prominence without the wisdom and inspiration of Mamie Till Bradley? (5) Reflect on Cone’s comment that the voice Mamie heard was the voice of “hope that, although white racists could take her son’s life, they could not deprive his life and death of an ultimate meaning.”

C. The Repercussions of Till and the Christian Faith. In addition to the leaders it spawned, Till’s death had multiple other impacts. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus just three months after Till’s death. Blacks started to march in the streets demanding real freedom “now”. Cone notes that many of the actions stemmed from the Christian faith. While secularists drew inspiration from other sources, like Camus and Fanon, one leader in particular was inspired primarily by the Cross. As Cone notes, “Martin Luther King Jr. came to embody [the] faith,

courage, and intelligence” of “poor southern blacks, who had little formal education in philosophy or political philosophy”.

Discussion Questions: (1) What do you think of Cone’s connections between faith and the drive for freedom that embodied the Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s? (2) What are some of the key differences of King’s approach as compared to Niebuhr’s? (3) How would you have reacted knowing that each event you led could ultimately be your last and how would you have handled that fear of death? (4) To what extent do you suppose Till’s murder inspired King’s courage (as well as that of others, like John Lewis)? (4) In what ways was King similar to Niebuhr?

-Chapter 4: The Recrucified Christ in Black Literary Imagination

A. A Stark Contrast between Artists and Theologians. Cone notes that many artists, like the poet Countee Cullen, saw the direct linkage between the Cross and the systemic lynching of Black Americans. He then goes on to ask several rhetorical questions about how it is that theologians and religious leaders (both Black and White) could miss the imaginative leap, while artists did not.

Discussion Questions: (1) What about being an artist makes one more likely to make the imaginative connection between lynching and crucifixion? (2) Why do you think Cone believes that imagination is key to understanding “the mysteries of black life”? (3) Why is it important to have “radical and creative voices” of the “brutal and beautiful” stories about how “black people survived with a measure of dignity” in the midst of the oppressive world in which they have lived?

B. The First Leaf in a Line of Trees. Let’s spend a few minutes reflecting on one of Countee Cullen’s Poems:

How Calvary in Palestine,
Extending down to me and mine,
Was but the first leaf in a line
of trees on which a Man should swing,
World without end, in suffering
For all men’s healing, let me sing

Discussion Questions: (1) Did you immediately connect, as Cone does, Jesus as being “the first leaf in a line of trees”? (2) What aspects of the poem jump out to you? (3) Do you think the religious leaders of the time were just unable to make this connection that was being drawn out by artists like Cullen or were they intentionally avoiding it? (4) What were they missing and why?

C. White Religious Hypocrisy. Cone talks about Hawkins’ poem “A Festival in Christendom” and how it highlights the blatant hypocrisy of religious people who would go to church and then go watch a lynching. “And so this mob did turn; from prayer to rob, to lynch and burn. A victim helplessly he fell; to tortures surely kin to hell.”

Discussion Questions: (1) How do you suppose religious leaders reacted to the Hawkins and Cullen poems? (2) How could they have missed the connection between the cross and the lynching tree? (3) How could they have missed the blatant hypocrisy of preaching about the atrocities of the religious leaders of Jesus’ day and then perpetrating or turning a blind eye to the exact same atrocities playing out right in front of them? (4) To what extent do the dehumanizing elements of slavery embedded in our legal system contribute to that lack of imagination?

D. The Impact of Pornography and More Laws on the Topic. Cone talks about the impact of collections of photos of lynchings, referring to them as a type of pornography, and how they were at first a sort of souvenir of the event. Later, much later, both white and black people who viewed the photos were seemingly shocked at the horrific methods used in lynchings. One particular collection of photos by James Allen, called “Without Sanctuary” in 2003, led to a formal apology by the U.S. Senate for failing to have passed anti-lynching legislation when it was first proposed some 105 years earlier.

Discussion Questions: (1) Do you agree with Cone that the apology was appreciated but wasn't justice? (2) What would justice look like from a legislative perspective? (3) How is it that for one group of people these photos could be treated like pornography or souvenirs and for another they could be so horrific as to engender complete silence? (4) Do you find it interesting that Cone uses the word “pornography” and why do you think he chose that word specifically? (5) Are there similarities in the way that pornography dehumanizes its subjects? (6) Would anti-lynching legislation have been enough ... or would it been likely to have some of the same short-comings as the 13th and 14th amendments, which we have discussed previously?

E. Different Artists Emphasizing Different Aspects of Lynching. Cone points out that white and other non-black artists focused their works on a white audience and emphasized the brutality against black bodies and the racism of the lynchers. Black artists, on the other hand, emphasized the dignity of the victims and the suffering of the black community.

Discussion Questions: (1) What do you suppose is the genesis of this distinction? (2) Do you agree with Cone that this was evidence of the artists' imaginative ability to link the victims of lynching to Jesus on the Cross? (3) Have you seen any of the paintings that Cone talks about here and, if so, how did they affect you? (4) Have similar paintings affected you on this topic and in what ways do paintings and poems communicate truth differently than words? (5) In what ways do you think religious leaders like Niebuhr were blinded by the words they wrote and read and the inability to see truth in art?

F. W.E.B. Du Bois. Although a noted agnostic, Cone believes that Du Bois was an immensely spiritual man who connected and drew meaning from the idea that this life is not all there is... “evil does not have the last word and ... there is a spiritual force for right that cannot be crushed or defeated.” In fact, in his story “Jesus Christ in Texas” Du Bois posits that Jesus has returned in the form of a “mulatto” and the convict whom he greets is shocked to learn that Jesus is Black. The convict is eventually lynched and Du Bois goes to great lengths to connect that convict to the robber who was on the cross next to Jesus as he was crucified. Beyond his story-telling, Du Bois' condemnation of the White Christian Church is stark and, sadly, seems spot on.

Discussion Questions: (1) Is it possible that, at times, “religion” has the capacity to blind us to truth? (2) If that is true, do you think it's possible that if he had been a truly “religious” man, Du Bois might have missed some of the truths he so eloquently articulated in “Jesus Christ in

Texas”? (3) Do you think “religion” can impair one’s capacity for imaginative thinking ... or the type of thinking the Cone thinks is a necessary component in order to connect the Cross and the Lynching Tree ... and could that explain the dearth of religious leaders who were able to make that leap? (4) What do you think about the fact that Du Bois could not reconcile “White Christianity with the Gospels’ portrayal of Jesus” (I mean, wow!)? (5) Do you have a hard time seeing Jesus or Mary as Black the way Du Bois depicted them in “The Gospel of Mary Brown” and, if so, why do you suppose that is?

G. Demanding God’s Explanation for Black Suffering. Cone talks extensively about Du Bois’ struggle in understanding how God could allow the kind of suffering that Blacks endured during the lynching era and beyond. He says that this issue sits at the “nerve center” of black religion in America (not just the lynching era, but from slavery, to lynching, to the modern prison industrial complex).

Discussion Questions: (1) Do you struggle with this idea of how God could allow this kind of suffering and over such a long period of time? (2) Are there ways in which you reconcile and/or rationalize these inconsistencies in your mind? (3) Cone seems to think, and Du Bois’ writings seem to point to the idea that, the black religious belief is that suffering does not have final word; do you agree and do you find that comforting? (4) Cone says that Du Bois “used the paradox of faith and doubt together to explain the meaning of the black religious experience. One cannot correctly understand the black religious experience without an affirmation of deep faith informed by profound doubt.” In my mind, these words are almost overwhelming and stop me dead in my tracks... how do they hit you?

H. Discomfort as Means of Finding Truth. “Artists force us to see things we don’t want to look at because they make us uncomfortable with ourselves and the world we have created.” According to Cone, it was artists who were most successful at reshaping the perception of Americans as it pertains to Blacks. They saw “African American culture as something sacred and empowering.” They were able to shift perspectives in a way that allowed the humanity of Black people to be the thing we see first. And when you are confronted with the beauty and of another human being and can see them as the sacred God-created beings that they are, it suddenly becomes much more difficult to hate them.

Discussion Questions: (1) So the lawyers have failed again? (2) Can you see a power in art and literature to communicate truth where religion, and statutes and laws are impotent? (3) Why has it taken so long for our eyes to be opened and why have the lawyers and the religious leaders been unable to see what artists have seen all along?

-Chapter 5: “Oh Mary, Don’t You Weep.”

A. Black Women as Victims of Oppression — from White Mobs and from Black Men. Cone notes that Black women suffered at the hands of white men and women as well as at the hands of Black men. He points out that most female victims of lynching had no connection to the Black men who were the intended subjects of the violence and that Black women could be lynched for having the courage to stand up for justice and for mercy. The story of Mary Turner leaves one almost in tears ... a woman and her unborn child.

Discussion Questions: (1) What does it mean to be the “oppressed of the oppressed”? (2) What do you think about the image of “Christ as a Black Woman”? (3) In what ways was the era of lynching “more bitter” for Black Women than it was for Black Men? (4) ?

B. Violence in Our DNA. As you read through Cone’s stories about the victims of lynching and racial injustice, as we think about Jacob Blake and George Floyd, as we think about the violence at protests and the shooting in Kenosha ... it becomes apparent that violence is in our DNA, whether as a nation or as a species.

Discussion Questions: (1) What do you think is behind the violence that we witness through our history and today? (2) In what ways is a need for power and control at the root of our history of violence? (3) Do you think violence works? (4) Are there situations in which violence is an appropriate response or method for obtaining control? (5) Are there situations in which violence is merely the manifestation of anger? (6) Are there similarities in the latter case to drug or other addictions?

C. Spiritual Anguish in the Midst of Oppression. Cone talks about how Black men and women often either lost their faith altogether or found themselves more connected to God through the wrestling with characters like Job, like the Psalms, like Jesus? “Only the song, dance and the shout — voices raised to high heavens and bodies swaying from side to side — can express both the wretchedness and the transcendent spirit of empowerment that kept blacks from going under, as they struggled, against great odds, to acknowledge humanity denied.”

Discussion Questions: (1) In what ways does suffering challenge (or contradict) ones faith? (2) In what ways does it strengthen it or, as Cone put it, how can faith “speak to” suffering? (3) What are some of the theological reasons one might lose faith in the midst of suffering? (4) What spiritual truths do we see in this struggle and this anguish? (5) What does it mean to “acknowledge humanity denied”?

D. The Importance of Faith to Black Women. Cone talks about how Black men often fled and sometimes escaped the evil of lynching... and one can’t blame them. But it was much harder for women to escape the oppressive violence of the lynching era. Aside from the difficulties of being a woman “on the run” and threats to their safety, Black women had to consider children and other responsibilities at home rather than just running off. In the midst of this, many Black women developed a deep and abiding faith. “God may not come when you want, but God is right on time.”

Discussion Questions: (1) How do you suppose faith gave Black women courage, patience and hope? (2) In what ways is this insight more intuitive than it is logical or rational and can you see a connection to the story in the Rolheiser book about the rural women praying by her sick son's bedside? (3) What lessons can we learn from this? (4) In what ways does this inform our understanding of "Christ as a Black Woman" and in what ways could Black women relate even more powerfully to Jesus in the midst of their suffering? (5) Why do you think faith was so important to Ida B. Wells? (6) In what ways did Ida B. Wells give birth to the "Gospel of Empowerment" and what lessons can we draw from that today?

E. Ida B. Wells. Cone talks about Wells' militant opposition to lynching and how it was born out of her experience as a slave and as a witness to the lynching of a close friend and two other companions. Born a slave in 1862, she had the benefit of being literate, incredibly wise and a compelling writer. Ida pointed out that lynching is not an irrational act by an enraged mob, but a "cool, calculating deliberation of intelligent people who openly avow that there is an 'unwritten law' that justifies them in putting human beings to death without complaint under oath, without trial by jury, without opportunity to make defense and without right of appeal." The ASWPL said that the real victim of the crime of lynching is not the person killed by it, but "constituted and regularly established government." I think we can agree that both were victims, but point taken.

Discussion Questions: (1) We've talked about this before, but do you see the connections between lynching and the laws on our books that initially justified slavery? (2) Quickly recall some of the short-comings of the 13th and 14th Amendments relative to core issue of viewing Black Americans, on a systematic societal level, as something less than fully human. (3) What lessons can we draw from Ida's insights and, when you consider responses from large swaths of society to the Jacob Blake shooting (in particular, those pointing out that Blake was accused of sexual assault as a basis to condone or support the officers for shooting Blake), in what ways is Ida's comment about the "intelligent people" believing in that "unwritten law" still very much an issue in our present day? (4) Who are some of today's Ida's?

F. The False Narrative of Rape; Keeping Blacks in Their Place. Ida B. Wells initially struggled with the idea of opposing lynching in the case of rape, but quickly realized that (1) even those accused of rape were entitled to due process of law and (2) oftentimes, the claims of rape were completely made up. Moreover, she was well aware that those in power would do anything to ensure that Blacks were not considered their equals. And she knew that lynching was the primary enforcement tool in that endeavor.

Discussion Questions: (1) What are some experiences from your childhood or from parenting that you can recall in which a story was exaggerated or entirely made up in order for one sibling to get the upper hand over the other? (2) How did your parents (or you) respond? (3) Why do you suppose due process is such a critical element of the Magna Carta, the US Constitution and our founding principles (as well as those of all other democratically formed governments)? (4) Why is that people are sometimes so willing to deny it of others and why have we struggled so mightily as a nation to ensure that Black Americans benefit from it?

G. “Silence is Violence”. Delving a bit deeper into what Wells taught us, Cone points to her view of White Christianity and its blatant hypocrisy. This hypocrisy stemmed not only from those openly supporting slavery, segregation and lynching, but also from those churches who were silent about it. Collectively, this comprised almost all American white churches at the time. Her words stand as condemnation against many churches even today. Cone says that both the conservative churches who outwardly condoned lynching and the liberal churches who were silent in the face of it were both placed “outside of Christian identity”.

Discussion Questions: (1) In what ways is “silence” the same as “violence”, in particular, as it pertains to those in power? (2) In your own words, how would you describe what “silence” means in the context of lynching... and in the context of police brutality and racial injustice? (3) How does it make you feel knowing that White Churches in America largely missed the chance to act for justice? (4) What do you think of Ida’s words for the Women’s Christian Temperance Union ... that “it’s great heart ... was, toward our cause, pulseless as a stone”? (5) What about Dwight Moody, who was apparently too busy “saving white souls” to worry about the lynching and burning of Black lives? (6) In what ways (if any) should churches actively seek out opportunities to “right the ship”?

H. The Story that Tells Itself. Ida B. Wells in her conversations with Frederick Douglas about why she wasn’t nervous responded that she wasn’t an orator trying to make an eloquent speech, as she was. She was simply a mouthpiece for the story of lynching. She said “I do not have to embellish, it makes its own way.” Other Black women activists felt similarly to Ida. Lynching was so blatantly wrong, it didn’t require deep theological analysis to explain why.

Discussion Questions: (1) Do you agree with Ida that the story of lynching “makes its own way”? (2) What about our modern story of police brutality and what about George Floyd and Jacob Blake? (3) If lynching is so blatantly wrong, how could it have persisted for nearly 100 years in a Christian nation? (4) How can we use the experience (and condemnation) of White Christian churches in the era of lynching as reference points for Christian churches in our own era of police brutality and other forms of racial violence against Blacks?

I. Strange Fruit Reprise. Cone returns to Holiday and her convicting rendition of “Strange Fruit”. Adding to his prior commentary on this song, Cone points out that in her performance, White Americans were forced to face the brutality of lynching. As Cone says, “no white person could listen to [it] without feeling indicted and exposed.”

Discussion Questions: (1) How do you feel when you hear that song? (2) Are there other songs that elicit similar feelings of “indictment” over circumstances that persist today? (3) What about the comparison that Cone makes between “Strange Fruit” and “Were You There”? (4) Why do we have such a hard time facing truth and having our eyes opened on issues like racial injustice? (5) How can we be better at it? (6) How can we be “jolted out of complacency” the way audiences were when they first heard Strange Fruit?

