The Audacity of Eucharistic Hope

By Alex Mikulich, Ph.D.

Frederick Jermaine Carter, a 26-year old native of Sunflower, Mississippi was found hanging from this tree in the white section of Greenwood on December 3, 2010. Photo by Joshua Kristal (joshuakristal.com) from his ongoing "Lynching Memorial Project" in which he is documenting historical sites of racial violence in the U.S.

James Cone confronts U.S. white Christians and theologians with our forgetfulness of the scandal of the cross, of lynching, and of ourselves. Jesus died like a lynched black victim in torment, on the tree of shame. The crowd's shout, "Crucify him!" (Mark 15:14), echoes the white mob's shout, "Lynch him." And Jesus' final agonizing cry from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" reverberates in Sam Hose, a Georgia lynching victim who cried, "Oh—My God—Oh, Jesus" upon dying. Every lynching, like Jesus' death, "was a cruel, agonizing, and contemptible death."[1]

Do we hear the echoes of Sam Hose's cry? The legacy of lynching presents a bind for white U.S. Christians, for it concerns our failure to honestly contend with our role in the material history and spiritual wounds of lynching.

By lynching, I mean the extra-judicial terror practiced by crowds in U.S. history. The U.S. legacy of lynching involves at least the 4,749 known lynchings, recorded by the Tuskegee Institute, between 1882 and 1968. "Known" is critical because we likely do not know the full number due to underreporting, and the full number does not include lynchings since 1968, like those of James Byrd (1998) and Matthew Shepard (1999). Ida B. Wells estimated more than 10,000 lynchings in the early twentieth century. Seventy-three percent of documented lynchings (3,445) were African American (by contrast, there were a total of 2,974 deaths as a result of the 9/11 attacks in three locations).[2]

As Jacqueline Goldsby writes in her examination of lynching in American life, the "spectacular secret" of lynching is its hiddenness to white identity, and how proliferation and publication of photos of lynching kept African Americans' *experience* of lynching secret. While photography may capture a particular scene, it cannot capture the enduring experience of the terror, for "the ghost of the yell that slips and flutters down the street calls into question whether the scene stops or launches lynchings' violence."[3]

and the Legacy of Lynching

The "ghost of the yell that slips and flutters down the street" struck me while I was a lay pastoral associate at a Black Catholic parish in San Francisco in 1993. One parishoner told her story—with overflowing tears of the presence of the pain of the yell—of her family's experience of a lynching in Arkansas that led them to move to San Francisco in the mid-twentieth century. Her memory reveals how lynching is "buried deep in the living memory of the black experience in America."[4] I am struck by my white absence to what Cone terms "the nowness of lynching" for my African American brothers and sisters.

Theologically speaking, U.S. white racism is a negation of the creation of God that we celebrate in the central act of the church, the Eucharist. When we forget these lynched bodies, we forget and de-humanize ourselves, losing our own identity. I contend that whites remembering broken, lynched bodies throughout U.S. history is the condition of the possibility of engaging the impasse of white racism, and the enduring legacy of lynching, and of practicing the audacity of Eucharistic hope in this land.

The Second Vatican Council proclaims that the Eucharistic sacrifice is the "source and summit of the Christian life." Blessed Pope John Paul II underscores this point when he celebrates how the "Church was born of the paschal mystery. For this very reason the Eucharist, which is in an outstanding way the sacrament of the paschal mystery, *stands at the center of the Church's life*."[5]

In the Gospels, we learn how Jesus drew his disciples together and offered them bread and wine, his body and blood, sharing with them the hope of his death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins (*Mark* 14: 12-26; *Matthew* 26: 17-30; and *Luke* 22: 7-38). His celebration of the Last Supper fulfils the covenant established with Israel for the reconciliation of the whole of creation with God and provides a foretaste of the reign of God in its fullness. The Last Supper evokes memory of all the meals that Jesus shared with the excluded and condemned of society—people whom he welcomed to be first into the Kingdom.

Central to the Eucharist, our faith, and the possibility of new life bestowed in Eucharist is Christ's memory realized through *our living memory of Christ*. Eucharistic memory and solidarity begins in "intentional remembering of the dead, exploited, despised victims of history," explains M. Shawn Copeland. Although the victims of history may be lost, "we are alive. We owe all that we have to our exploitation and enslavement, removal and extermination of despised others."[6]

Yet, disturbingly, as James Cone meticulously recounts, "whites could claim a Christian identity without feeling the need to oppose slavery, segregation, and lynching as a contradiction of the gospel for America."[7]

If white U.S. Christians and theologians intend to witness to the redeeming memory of Jesus, then our spirituality and theology must practice the kind of Eucharistic memory that re-members the hopes, dreams, aspirations for life and love, anger and suffering of all those forgotten broken bodies that are strewn across the Atlantic Ocean through the slave trade, buried on stolen lands of Native American peoples, lynched, and imprisoned in our detention centers, jails, and prisons.

Eucharistic hope and memory does not forget or turn its back on these injustices. "Doing this in memory of me" means living in a way that makes life and authentic hope for all possible, by giving priority to listening, and hearing, the stories of those who have borne the deadly brunt of U.S. white racism.

At the conclusion of his novel *The Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison's narrator—an un-named black man—addresses the white man: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" Jacqueline Goldsby contends that learning the "un-listened to history of lynching" requires Americans to tune into the "lower frequencies," for that is where "the lives lost to us and made invisible by lynching and its cultural logic are waiting for us to listen."[8]

ENDNOTES

1 James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011), p. 161.

2 The Tuskegee record of state by state lynchings is online at http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchingsstate.html

3 Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 291.

4 Ibid., *Cross and Lynching Tree*, p.159.

5 Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia De Eucharistia*. (Rome, The Vatican, April 17, 2003), #3. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/special_features/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_ecclesia_eucharistia_en.html

6 M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), p. 100.

7 Ibid, *Cross and Lynching Tree*, p.159.

8 Ibid., *Spectacular Secret*, p.11.