

## THE CROSS AND THE LYNCHING TREE

When we hear the word *crucify* or *crucifixion*, we think of Jesus, don't we. We think of Jesus' agonizing death at the hands of the Roman authorities. We think about the religious leaders who plotted to have Jesus killed. We think about Judas, who betrayed Jesus, and the Roman soldiers who cast lots for Jesus' clothes -- and darkness covering the earth.

But what about the crowd, the onlookers who came out to witness crucifixions? Crucifixion was a public spectacle, big deal entertainment, as barbarous executions have been over the centuries. Who were those people, and why did they watch?

A story by Debra Mumford in *The Christian Century* recently likened crucifixion to a lynching, which was also a brutal public spectacle.

Ell Persons was an African American man accused of rape and murder, who was lynched in Memphis in 1917. Twenty-five men seized him from a train on which he was being sent to stand trial. The men decided there would be no trial, but that they would take matters of justice into their own hands. They spread the word that there would be a public lynching.

By the time the men got there with Persons in tow, thousands of white spectators had gathered. Parents brought their children along, and put them on their shoulders so they could see everything. They wanted to ensure that black people got the message, to stay in their place.

Persons was tied up with rope, doused with gasoline, and set on fire. But some people in the crowd complained that if he were burned he would die too quickly, so the fire was extinguished. Two men cut off his ears. The rope and the ears became souvenirs, trophies from the occasion.

Between 1877 (the end of Reconstruction) and 1950, more than 4,000 African Americans were lynched in southern states. Sometimes for crimes such as rape, but often for trivial reasons, like failing to step off the sidewalk to let a white person pass. Like

crucifixions, lynchings were sometimes preplanned, widely publicized public spectacles. Often vendors sold food and drinks.

Through lynchings, perpetrators sought to terrorize African Americans so they wouldn't even think about resisting their own oppression and racial subjugation.

In the case of the lynching of Emmett Till, however, the effort backfired.

In August 1955, the 14-year-old from Chicago was visiting relatives in the Mississippi Delta when he was kidnapped from their home after being accused of flirting with the wife of a white store owner. The store owner and his brother beat Till severely, gouged out his eye, shot him, and threw his body into the Tallahatchie River.

When Till's mutilated body was returned to his mother in Chicago, she insisted that his coffin be open for the funeral so that everyone could see the brutality with which her son was murdered. Thousands of people viewed his body in person, and African American publications printed images of it, sparking national outrage.

But Till's horrific murder didn't deter African Americans; it energized them. They resisted. Outrage over it helped to fuel the 381-day bus boycott that began when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat. A brutal murder, intended to keep African Americans in check, instead inspired and sustained their resistance.

In his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Dr. James Cone of Union Seminary in New York highlights a paradox of the Christian gospel – out of the shameful and humiliating act of crucifixion comes hope, hope and new life. Like lynching, the cross represents the worst inclinations of humanity – the willingness to execute even innocent victims for the sake of personal and institutional power.

Sadly we have stripped the cross of much of its meaning, so that today it's an ornament to be worn even by drug dealers and porn stars. Over the centuries of Christian history, the cross as a symbol of salvation and new life has been detached from any reference to the ongoing suffering and oppression of our fellow human beings.

We must not forget that the meaning of the cross is found in relationships – the relationship between Jesus and us, his followers 2000 years later; our relationship with

God. The cross inverts the world's value system with the news that victory comes by way of defeat, new life comes out of death, hope comes out of despair.

Followers of Jesus find in their crucified and risen Jesus hope – hope that Jesus understands the pain and the oppression of the marginalized because he too experienced marginalization. In the cross we not only share in Jesus' suffering but also share in his heavenly kingdom.

Until injustice of any kind is no more, may the cross inspire hope for all those who feel lost and forsaken -- the victims of gun violence, immigrants and refugees, minorities – you and me -- the least of these whom Jesus came to save.

At the beginning I asked who were those people around the cross, the onlookers, the crowd? To quote Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

We were there, and we're still there, whenever we allow injustice to prevail over love, separation to prevail over community.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?