

## **Salty People**

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1 Corinthians 2:1-12

Matthew 13-16

Imagine. Imagine it is a hot day in the Southern United States. Our people, people from Africa and the West Indies, we are working in the cotton fields, working not because we want to, but because we are forced to. Forced to by the rich man who owns us, who sees us as property, and marks our lives not as intrinsically valuable but by how much we can pick... and if you try to stop picking even for a moment, oh punishment would be swift.

When the hard day of work, from sunrise to sunset is over, it is not a warm house, but a dirt floor shack that we return to. It is crowded and there is little if any food, no warm water to wash... maybe no clean water at all. We live in a way that no white person would consider even for a moment to be acceptable. But for us it is seen as more than adequate. After all we are black slaves.

When things became too much to bear...some would try to run away, then the fox hunt would begin...men setting out with dogs and guns...to return slave to owner. Once caught, a lesson needed to be taught...if you thought the beatings in the field were brutal...

Ripped from our homeland and separated from family, living in squalor, and being caught at the blunt end of a stick or the stinging end of the whip, how could we not ask: where is God?

Slaves who had converted or been converted to Christianity looked to the scriptures to find responses to this question. The communities answer to 'where is God?' can be found in the 'slave songs' sung in the fields, in the homes and in the communities' worship. It was in the simple words of the songs sung by the community that they communicated how God was with them and how God was working with them for their liberation.

These songs drew on images and promises found in Scripture. God rescued the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, so there were songs of liberation. These songs drew on the psalms and prophets, and so there were songs of suffering, lament and hope. These songs drew on the teaching of Jesus who preached of the last being first and the first being last and whose life was directed by love and justice. So there were songs of vindication and of life eternal.

These songs not only passed time, and helped workers keep a working rhythm but they served to teach about God, they informed and shaped the community. Like Paul and the community of mature believers in Corinth, the songs sung by the African slaves spoke of the wisdom of God – a wisdom that was not reflected in the reality of the age and the situation in which they found themselves.

Both the community of Corinth and the black communities found themselves having to live under the laws and rules of an outside force. Both the communities were at risk of death if they spoke or acted in ways contrary to the rules of the governing class. Both

communities spoke of the wisdom of God, the love of God and the promises of God for the oppressed and persecuted. Both communities looked to the life, ministry and death of Jesus to inform their understanding and life.

Paul's exhortation that God's wisdom would outlast that of the current wisdom of the ruling class, I suspect would've been words of hope to the black communities who lived under a ruling class whose wisdom said that they were less than human, could be told what to do, abused and killed for not complying.

According to James Cone, a black liberation theologian, the source of hope for black slaves was God who promised to 'protect the poor' and 'defend the needy.' It was faith in the coming of God's justice that allowed them to hold themselves together in the face of servitude and sometimes even fight back, even though the odds were against them.<sup>1</sup>

In the face of attempts to dehumanize, in the face of oppression, in the face of abuse Black slaves kept faith. Trusting not in human wisdom, but the wisdom of God, wisdom that speaks of love, the Love of God who in Jesus took on flesh, and suffered at the hands of those in power, those who tried to break his spirit, who suffered rejection and abuse, but continued to love and show God's love, even to death.

And so the black slaves knew they were not alone, God was present with them and would deliver them from death and oppression and so they sang. In singing they shone the light of faith into the darkness of their reality, and were salt for each other in the struggle for life, dignity and justice.

I know that most of us, myself included, do not and cannot fully understand what it was like for black slaves. In moments when I am being truly honest with myself, I want to just believe that slavery was legislated away and that the attitudes that surrounded and fostered the maintenance of slavery are in the past, dead and gone.

But a hard look around our world, our country and our own community tells us we are not living as equals as the 'beloved community' of God with our black brothers and sisters. That divisions, fear and even hate still exist.

I am sure that at least a few of you are aware that The Chronicle Herald this past week ran a four-day exposition on the cross burning that occurred last February<sup>2</sup>. In covering the story the Chronicle tried to highlight the ongoing issue of racism in our own province.

As Christians we are called to be salt to the earth and the light of the world. When related to the issue of racism what does this mean?

As we individually work out our response as Christians I believe we must first remember the way of Jesus. Who sat with the outcast, who broke down political, religious and social barriers between people, who sought a community where all could live abundantly and in full communion with each other.

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<sup>1</sup> James Cone, Black Theology in American Religion. Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 53, 755-771

<sup>2</sup> For full story see The Chronicle Herald website at <http://thechronicleherald.ca/NovaScotiaBurning/7090240.html>

We must remember that humans are formed in the image of God and that we are all children of God. That in our faith and baptism we believe that there is no more Jew or Gentile, slave or free, that we are one through Christ... and therefore kin to each other.

If we truly accept that we are Kin, what does this mean?

I believe that it means that our well-being is intimately linked with the well-being of those around us. Much like we would not ignore the pain of our spouse or the cry for help from our children, we cannot be complacent when our 'brothers and sisters' speak of unjust treatment, we cannot be complacent when we see acts of hate or hear words that hurt. We must be willing to shine light into the darkness of hate and prejudice and expose systems of injustice. To stand with those who are oppressed and hurting.

We need to realize that Racism is not only personal hate towards another because of the colour of their skin or ethnic background, but that there is also systemic racism. This racism is harder to see and more insidious. It is rooted in our Euro-centric history.

I believe we need to embrace the idea that, as white men and women, we have benefited from structures that oppress. That when we are unaware and unwilling to challenge these structures, we are contributing to continued racism.

For myself, a Christian response means evaluating and changing my behaviors... admitting and asking forgiveness, repentance for my collusion with systems of oppression...and working for their elimination.

I believe like Jesus we need to develop relationships with the 'outsider.' Listening to their stories even when they are painful helps us to develop understanding and through shared understanding we move from an outsider who is feared to a friend. That in becoming friends we break down boundaries that exclude and limit and develop relationships that support and show solidarity.

And what of those who hold racist beliefs and act in racist ways. I think we are called to challenge and love. Called to challenge them to rethink, challenge them to stop speaking or acting in those ways, if only in our presence. Where ignorance is the root cause, we are called to educate. Through it all we are called to love the person. For hearts are not turned by hate but through love.

I believe that we will not be perfect, that change in attitudes will not happen overnight. But I do believe that we as Christians need to seek the kingdom of God here and now. The kingdom: a place where all are beloved children of God, where justice reigns, and love abounds.

Jesus said, 'You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.' You can make a difference, even a small amount of salt flavors the dish and a single light brightens the darkness.