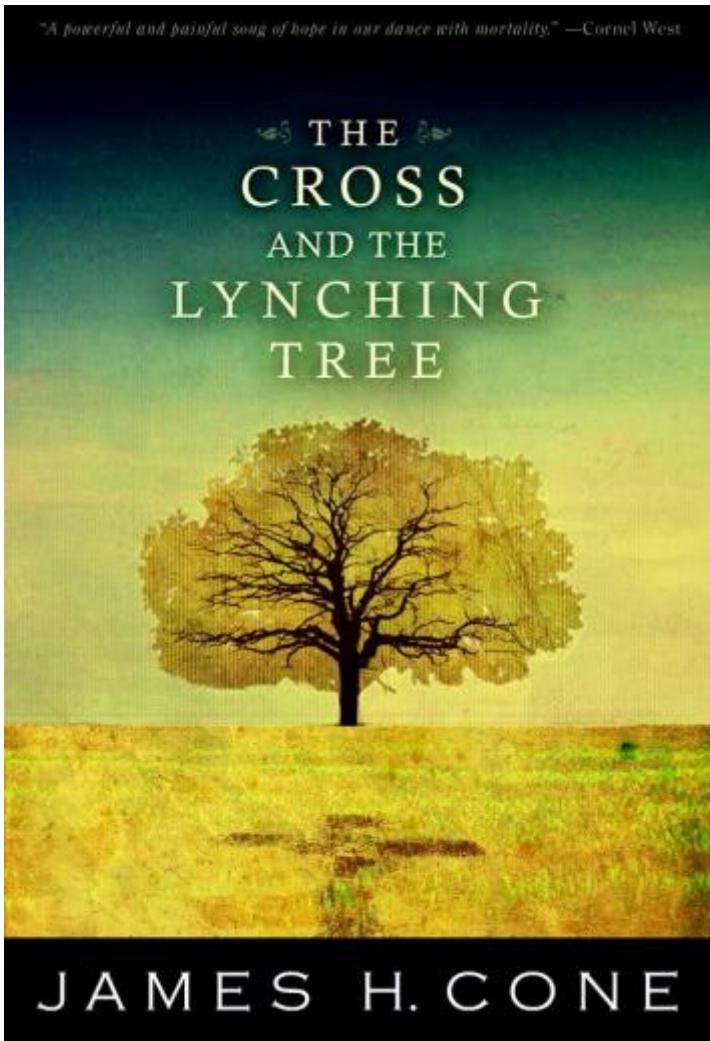


# THE CROSS AND THE LYNCHING TREE

DISCUSSION GUIDE AND ACTIVITIES FOR SMALL GROUPS



**GUIDE DEVELOPED BY ELON COOK**

Edited by Linda L. Grenz

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## A Forward by Bishop Nicholas Knisely

As I write this today, I'm reading news reports online about a black church in Greenville Mississippi that was burned overnight and had the words "Vote Trump" painted on the side. As much as I want to believe that we are making mighty progress toward learning how to live as one people in our country, events like this remind me of how far we have to go, and how slow our progress is toward that goal.

The only hope I have is in the Gospel and its power to change our minds and hearts. That is why I believe this Lenten Study program based on the book The Cross and the Lynching Tree is vitally important today. It is only when we fully understand the Cross of Christ that we can hope to understand our country's history of racial violence. And it is only through the Cross and the victory of reconciliation that God won in that event that we can hope to find reconciliation between people who have for so long been estranged.

I do not believe this will be an easy book to study. It will challenge us to reexamine our understanding of who we are and what our history contains. But we cannot be the people of the Gospel without a commitment to embrace and face the truth – even a painful truth.

There is no way to get to Easter without journeying through Lent. I invite you to turn your face toward Jerusalem and the peace that God has for us in that place, and walk this Lenten path this year.

+Nicholas

## THE CENTER FOR RECONCILIATION

This resource is a project of the Center for Reconciliation. The Center for Reconciliation fosters inter-racial reconciliation through programs that engage, educate and inspire. We are actively working toward the creation of the Beloved Community, in a time when people of all races are reconciled to one another.

The Center, is a place where people can build new skills and knowledge while engaging in the work of reconciliation. We are developing a museum that explores the intersection of faith and the history of slavery, slave trading and enslaved resistance in Rhode Island. As the Center grows we will continue to host performances, lectures and transformative educational experiences for people of all ages.

While the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island has taken the lead in organizing the Center for Reconciliation, this project is an effort that engages the city, state and even partners from around the nation. Several of our area colleges and universities are already finding multiple ways to support this effort as are a wide range of organizations.

Race and reconciliation are on the minds of many Americans today. The uprisings, protests and violence are strong reminders of our need to be reconciled to one another. The Center was created to help guide the public through these challenging but brave conversations, but we cannot do it alone. To learn about the many ways you can partner with the Center for Reconciliation, email [info@cfrri.org](mailto:info@cfrri.org) or visit our website, [www.cfrri.org](http://www.cfrri.org).

This resource project, like many other public projects by the Center for Reconciliation is a **free** resource. Consider making a gift to the Center for Reconciliation so we may continue to offer free programs and materials. Gifts can be made online ([www.episcopalri.org/give](http://www.episcopalri.org/give)) or mailed to The Center for Reconciliation, 275 North Main St. Providence, RI 02903.

## Introduction

This study guide includes evocative quotes from the book, conversation starting questions, suggested prayers, links to thought provoking songs and videos, engaging activities and a variety of resources to help participants continue to deepen their knowledge beyond the five book study sessions.

This study guide is especially appropriate for Lent when we focus on Christ's death on the cross. However, this study can be used at any time of the year and can help congregations seeking to reflect on the current racial issues. Below is a list of suggestions for getting started; using the study guide and maintaining an emotionally and spiritually healthy study group.

### **CREATING AND LEADING YOUR GROUP**

If you do not already have a set study group, you may want to take this as an opportunity to recruit participants from your congregation or community with diverse backgrounds. If you already have an established church study group and it is racially homogeneous, now may be a good time to reach out for new members or pair your group with a group from a congregation that has a different racial background. Sometimes it can be challenging to talk about race with people outside of your own racial identity group. Keep in mind that one of the main points of this book is that "racial inclusiveness" is "a test of the Christian identity of the church."

Already have a racially inclusive study group? Great! Groups made up of people with a variety of backgrounds will bring a diversity of perspectives and questions to the discussion. However, do be careful not to single out individuals because of their race when asking questions or allow members of the group to do so. For instance, "Julie, can you explain why White Americans feel X about Y event?" This point is especially important if the individual who is singled out is the only one from their particular racial or ethnic group. No one should be made to feel like they must speak for everyone with their background. Instead encourage all

participants to speak up, share openly and discuss how they feel about what they read. Establish this as one of your group norms before you begin.

Discussion groups should be kept small. If you are working with more than 8-10 people, break the group up for some of the discussions and send the groups to separate parts of the room. This will make it easier for everyone to be heard. Some activities can be done alone or, collaboratively in silence in pairs or small groups.

## MUSIC

James Cone refers to many songs throughout the book that participants may have never heard before. You can use a laptop or smartphone with speakers to play the recommended musical selections off of a specially created YouTube playlist or by clicking on the links within the study guide. This can be a great way to set the mood while participants settle into their seats for the conversation. A song can also be a great conversation starter that evokes a feeling, memory or emotion that cannot be tapped by simply reading the lyrics. Encourage participants to sit quietly and close their eyes while they listen.

## CREATING SAFE SPACES AND SETTING GROUP NORMS

Conversations about race are inherently uncomfortable, and may perhaps even feel unsafe for most Americans due to generations of conditioning. Many of us were taught that race, slavery and privilege are taboo subjects. After all, we are supposedly living in a “post-racial” country, full of color-blind citizens. Yet racism, like other –isms, still exist in this country. In fact the more we try to ignore them the worse it gets. Some Americans were raised talking about race, but only within their families or racial groups. Most of us have had only limited opportunities to have those conversations with people of another race. Some Americans think that seeing or mentioning color is racist. Others may feel suddenly awakened by this book or recent events and are eager or excited to finally talk about race. We encourage you and your group to be brave, educate yourselves and get talking. Hundreds of years of silence and taboo has not worked, it is time to try something new.

During your first session, and at the introduction of new group members, ask your group for suggestions on how they deal with difficult or painful discussions. Make a list as a group of these suggestions. This is known as setting group norms. It is a set of “rules of conduct” or “guiding principles for discussion” the group should agree on. Then at the end of the first session, remind them of the

norms and ask how they did, if they want to add/change any of them, etc. If a group member begins breaking norms gently remind the whole group about the rules you agreed to. Remind them also of the suggestions for self-care and invite each person to pick one that best fits them and try it out.

Group norm examples:

- We will listen respectfully to one another even when we do not agree.
- We will not interrupt each other
- We will make comments using “I” statements instead of talking about the experiences of others.
- We will not insult each other or put down the thoughts or feelings of our group members
- We are coming into this conversation from a place of positivity, love for our community and faith that together we can make our world better.
- We will not share the conversations that occur in this room with others outside of this group session.
- If we hear a comment or story that was particularly meaningful we will thank the individual for their contribution and ask the individual’s permission to share the comment before doing so.

Remind your group that it is okay to be angry about 400 years of violent oppression. It is okay to be heartbroken about a recent injustice. But it is not okay to take out one’s feelings on someone sitting in the group. Participants may be frustrated by what they read, frustrated by something they had experienced or frustrated with another group member. We are only human, this is normal and should be expected.

As the leader, be sensitive to the feelings of group members during the sessions and talk about methods for helping participants deal with those feelings in ways that enable them to continue the conversation. Some groups may want to take time to stop and observe a few minutes of silence, listen to music, pray, take a break to stand up, stretch, grab a cup of tea, etc. Moving between a larger group and small teams of 2-3 people is another way to help people handle their feelings.

We recommend closing the conversation with a prayer and perhaps a discussion of self-care. For example, taking time to write in a journal helps some people to process their feelings. Others may want to talk with a good friend or go for a walk. Some will need to step back if the conversation gets too intense or painful – taking a break from the topic for a couple of days before revisiting the conversation or re-engaging the book can be helpful.

## LENT FORMAT

This study is especially appropriate for Lent. However, this guide contains more sessions than can be accomplished in a weekly Lenten study program. Therefore, you will need to select which quotes and questions you want to discuss or will use the first five sessions or, preferably, you will continue this group after Easter.

## PREPARATION

Each group member will need a copy of the book and the study guide. Quotes from the book have been provided in the Guide along with the discussion questions. This may be helpful if some of your group members have not been able to read the book in advance of a session. To find the quotes in the book, please remember that the page numbers in the Guide are from the fourth printing of the paperback edition.

There are several very informative interviews and speeches by James Cone that are available online and may be helpful as you prepare to lead a study guide group. You may be especially interested in watching the interview of Dr. Cone by Bill Moyers on PBS (2007). Dr. Cone's lecture at Duke Divinity School (link below) may also assist you in your preparation colleagues. The Youtube link below will take you to a special video playlist which includes interviews and speeches by James Cone and music from the book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* <http://tinyurl.com/j9d5gk3>

NOTE: This study guide uses the fourth printing of the paperback edition of James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011). It was printed in January 2015 by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York.

## SUGGESTED PRAYERS

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart and especially the hearts of the people of this land, that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

O God, you have bound us together in a common life. Help us, in the midst of our struggles for justice and truth, to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Heavenly Father, renew the ties of mutual regard which form our civic life. Send us honest and able leaders. Enable us to eliminate poverty, prejudice, and oppression, that peace may prevail with righteousness, and justice with order, and that men and women from different cultures and with differing talents may find with one another the fulfillment of their humanity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Lord God Almighty, you have made all the peoples of the earth for your glory, to serve you in freedom and in peace: Give to the people of our country a zeal for justice and the strength of forbearance, that we may use our liberty in accordance with your gracious will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Almighty God, who created us in your image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among the nations, to the glory of your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen*

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

O God, the Father of all, whose Son commanded us to love our enemies: Lead them and us from prejudice to truth: deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Look with pity, O heavenly Father, upon the people in this land who live with injustice, terror, disease, and death as their constant companions. Have mercy upon us. Help us to eliminate our cruelty to these our neighbors. Strengthen those who spend their lives establishing equal protection of the law and equal opportunities for all. And grant that every one of us may enjoy a fair portion of the riches of this land; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen.*

Prayers are taken from the *Book of Common Prayer*

# Session One

## INTRODUCTION

### *THE CROSS AND THE LYNCHING TREE*

If possible, put chairs in a circle or gather around a table. Provide hospitality (coffee, tea, etc.). Make sure there is adequate signage if you may be joined by people unfamiliar with your church building. In that case, you may want to ask someone to be stationed near the entrance to welcome and direct people to the room where you are meeting.

Welcome people. Say a few words about what this group is about and take a moment to point out the exits in case of an emergency and where they can find the restrooms.

Open with prayer, your own or one of those provided. You may also want to play a musical selection: “Nobody Knows de Trouble I See” as sung by the Dixie Hummingbirds. UMG Recordings. 1959 now and/or before the closing prayer.

Invite people to introduce themselves and perhaps say something about what drew them to this group or what they hope to gain from being part of it.

If this is the first time you are meeting, take time now to establish norms (you may want to write them on a large sheet of paper and post them in the room as a reminder) and talk about that fact that you will be discussing a topic that is often not talked about and can be very uncomfortable. Ask the group to think about how it may impact people and how you, as a group, will support each other. Write down the list.

Explain that this first session will focus on the introduction to the book. Duplicate the Discussion Questions and distribute them. Invite a group member to read each quote. Then ask the questions in turn. Encourage people to respond and listen to each other but not argue or disagree. Just listen and learn.

Close with one of the prayers provided or invite the group into a time of prayer. You may want to introduce the closing prayer time by playing some music from the playlist below as a way of letting people have some time and space to reflect before leaving.

The Cross and the Lynching Tree YouTube playlist - <http://tinyurl.com/j9d5gk3>

## SESSION ONE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Q1

"The cross and the lynching tree are separated by nearly 2000 years. One is the universal symbol of Christian faith; the other is the quintessential symbol of black oppression in America. Though both are symbols of death, one represents a message of hope and salvation, while the other signifies the negation of that message by white supremacy." (xiii)

- What are the symbolic connections between the cross and the lynching tree?
- Why do you think we transform the cross into "a harmless, non-offensive ornament that Christians wear around their necks?" What does that do to the meaning of the cross?
- Does the lynching tree have a different meaning for Black Americans than for White Americans? Discuss.

### Q2

"...as with the evils of chattel slavery and Jim Crow segregation, blacks and whites and other Americans who want to understand the true meaning of the American experience need to remember lynching." (xiv)

- Why must Black and White Americans remember lynching?
- Why is this history important for other Americans to remember as well?
- Many Jews see stories from the Holocaust as a part of their collective cultural memory. In a similar vein, most African American families have passed down stories about life during the Jim Crow era and perhaps even stories about lynching or from slavery. What cultural or racial memories have been passed down to you by older relatives?
- Are these stories important for future generations or are they better left in the past?

### Q3

"Unfortunately, during the course of 2,000 years of Christian history, this symbol of salvation [the cross] has been detached from any reference to the ongoing suffering and oppression of human beings...The cross has been transformed into a harmless, non-offensive ornament...Rather than reminding us of the 'cost of discipleship,' it has become a form of 'cheap grace'...that doesn't force us to confront the power of Christ's message and mission" (xiv)

- Do you agree that modern Christians have turned away from seeing the cross as a site of suffering and oppression?
- What has the cross symbolized in your life?
- Why do you think the Ku Klux Klan used the burning cross? What were they saying with that symbol? How did the burning cross effect the lives of Black Americans?

#### Q& 4 &

"...until we can identify Christ with a 'recrucified' black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy" (xiv)

- Had you ever considered the parallels between Christ's agony on the cross and the suffering of lynching victims, or other state-sanctioned acts of violence?
- Using the loose definition of a lynching on p. 3 ("Lynching was an extra-legal punishment sanctioned by the community.") can you think of an example of a modern day lynching?

**Keep the Conversation Going** - When you get home, find an opportunity to contact an older relative and talk to them about films like *Birth of a Nation*, *Roots* and *Gone With the Wind*. These films had a huge effect on the way older generations viewed race, and stereotypes about African Americans. Have you and your relative seen these films? What did your relative think of it? Did it affect how they looked at Black people or White people? Encourage them to talk about their experiences growing up, and listen through the lens of your experience with this book. What can you learn about your family's perspectives on race and how they have been passed along to you?

# Session Two

## CHAPTER ONE

**"NOBODY KNOWS DE TROUBLE I SEE:"**

*THE CROSS AND THE LYNCHING TREE IN THE BLACK EXPERIENCE*

### PREPARATION

Make copies of the Discussion Questions and the Handout "Why Were Blacks Lynched"? Set up hospitality, nametags, etc.

### LEADING THE SESSION

If you have new members at this session, invite people to introduce themselves again. Explain that this session will focus on the first part of the first chapter.

Review the norms and the conversation you had at the first session about having a respectful conversation.

Open with prayer. You may also want to begin by listening to and discussing the songs featured in Chapter 1. Close your eyes as you listen. Breathe slowly and allow yourself to fully experience the lyrics. Consider how the songs were used as safe, self-expressions of determination, humanity, hope, loss, faith and redemption. How else were the arts used by African Americans to process painful histories? <http://tinyurl.com/j9d5gk3>

Close the session with one of the prayers provided or invite the group into a time of prayer. You may want to introduce the closing prayer time by playing some music from the playlist above as a way of letting people have some time and space to reflect before leaving.

## SESSION TWO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Q1

"They put him to death by hanging him on a tree." (Acts 10:39) "...Crucifixion was recognized as the particular form of execution reserved by the Roman Empire for insurrectionists and rebels" (1).

- Why do you think most African Americans were lynched? (discuss your ideas then distribute and look at the Handout)
- How do you react to the explanations on this list?
- Why do you think lynching was the preferred method of "punishment" rather than other, legal options?
- What segments of the society do you think normally participated as members of lynch mobs?

### Q2

"Hundreds of Kodaks clicked all morning at the scene of the lynching. People in automobiles and carriages came from miles around to view the corpse dangling from the end of a rope...Picture cards photographers installed a portable printing plant at the bridge and reaped a harvest in selling the postcard showing a photograph of the lynched Negro. Women and children were there by the score. At a number of country schools the day's routine was delayed until boy and girl pupils could get back from viewing the lynched man."

The Crisis 10, no. 2 June 1915, on the lynching of Thomas Brooks in Fayette County, Tennessee (1) The Crisis is the NAACP's (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) official magazine. It was edited and co-founded in 1910 by renowned sociologist, historian, author, and activist W.E.B. Du Bois. You can read The Crisis online at [www.paperlessarchives.com](http://www.paperlessarchives.com)

- How did you feel upon reading the description of the scene at a lynching as recorded in the newspaper clipping from the Crisis Magazine?
- How do you feel about the fact that children were allowed to skip school and attend the lynching?
- How did the state, the schools and the community's sanctioning of the lynching of a single African American normalize the mistreatment of all African Americans by white society?

**Q3**

"Lynching was not regarded as an evil thing but as a necessity - the only way a community could protect itself from bad people out of the reach of the law." (4)

"...the two-time governor and US Senator from South Carolina, proclaimed that lynching is a 'divine right of the Caucasian race to dispose of the offending blackamoor without the benefit of jury.'(7)

"Strange...that the men who constitute these [mobs] can never be identified by...governors or the law officers, but the newspapers know all about them...what they are going to do, how and when it has been done," how the victim begged and how their body was mutilated, and "the whole transaction..." (11)

- Define the word "blackamoor"
- What impact did the hidden identities of the lynchers have on society?
- Did the hidden identities help romanticize vigilantes or play into popular ideals of masked superheroes saving a community?
- How did lynchings by white mobs affect the white community?
- Did lynching serve to neutralize or eliminate the inter-racial competition for employment, political and social opportunities?
- Did the unknown and yet known identities of the perpetrators of lynchings affect local Black communities? How?
- How long did these effects last? Do you think memories of the lynching era (1880-1940) still have an effect on Americans today? How?

**Q4**

"Bishop Atticus G. Haygood of the Methodist Church complained in 1893 that 'Now-a-days, it seems the killing of Negroes is not so extraordinary an occurrence as to need explanation; it has become so common that it no longer surprises'"... "the image of black men was transformed from docile slaves and harmless 'Sambos,' to menacing 'black beast rapists.'"(6).

Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger B. Taney stated, after the 1857 Dred Scott Decision, that "[blacks] had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." (7)

- What are stereotypes you have heard or seen about Black Americans?
- How were stereotypes of black men, women and children used to normalize violence against them?

- What was the effect of the 1915 film “*Birth of a Nation*” on American culture? Have you seen the film yourself? What did you think?
- Consider the ever lengthening list of unarmed African Americans whose names are frequently repeated in the media after being killed by police, security guards, neighborhood watch members, white home owners, admitted white supremacists, white car owners and others. Could the historically apathetic treatment of black death be connected to the #BlackLivesMatter movement?

## HANDOUT: WHY WERE BLACKS LYNCHED?

### Explanations Given for Lynching Blacks 1882 -1990

- Acting suspiciously
- Gambling
- Quarreling
- Adultery
- Grave robbing
- Race hatred; Race troubles
- Aiding murderer
- Improper with white woman
- Rape
- Arguing with white man
- Incest
- Rape-murders
- Arson Inciting to riot
- Resisting mob
- Assassination
- Inciting trouble
- Robbery
- Attempted murder
- Indolence
- Running a bordello
- Banditry
- Inflammatory language
- Sedition
- Being disreputable
- Informing
- Slander
- Being obnoxious
- Injuring livestock
- Spreading disease
- Boasting about riot
- Insulting white man
- Stealing
- Burglary
- Insulting white woman
- Suing white man
- Child abuse
- Insurrection
- Swindling
- Poisoning well
- Kidnapping
- Terrorism
- Courting white woman
- Killing livestock
- Testifying against white man
- Criminal assault
- Living with white woman
- Throwing stones
- Cutting levee
- Looting
- Train wrecking
- Defending rapist
- Making threats
- Trying to colonize blacks
- Demanding respect
- Miscegenation
- Trying to vote
- Disorderly conduct
- Mistaken identity
- Unpopularity
- Eloping with white woman
- Molestation
- Unruly remarks
- Entered white woman's room
- Murder
- Using obscene language
- Enticement
- Non-sexual assault
- Vagrancy
- Extortion
- Peeping Tom
- Violated quarantine
- Fraud
- Pillage
- Conjuring
- Voodooism
- Plotting to kill
- Voting for wrong party
- Frightening white woman

# Session Three

## CHAPTER TWO

*"THE TERRIBLE BEAUTY OF THE CROSS"  
AND THE TRAGEDY OF THE LYNCHING TREE*

### PREPARATION

Make copies of the Discussion Questions and distribute them to the group. Set up hospitality, nametags, etc.

### LEADING THE SESSION

If you have new members at this session, invite people to introduce themselves again. Explain that this session will focus on the first part of the second chapter (actually, just the first couple of pages). Review the norms and the conversation you had at the first session about having a respectful conversation.

Open with prayer and start the session.

Close the session with one of the prayers provided or invite the group into a time of prayer. You may want to introduce the closing prayer time by playing some music from the playlist as a way of letting people have some time and space to reflect before leaving.

## SESSION THREE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Q1

"In the 'lynching era,' between 1880-1940, white Christians lynched nearly five thousand black men and women... As Jesus was an innocent victim of mob hysteria and Roman imperial violence, many African Americans were innocent victims of white mobs, thirsting for blood in the name of God and in defense of segregation, white supremacy, and the purity of the Anglo-Saxon race. (30)

- Why do you think lynching was used to kill nearly 5,000 African Americans, instead of other forms of violence?
- Was there something uniquely "Christian" about the act of lynching?
- Was there a symbolic connection between the cross and the lynching tree in the minds of the perpetrators?

### Q2

"Crucifixion was a Roman form of public service announcement: Do not engage in sedition as this person has, or your fate will be similar...Crucifixion first and foremost is addressed to an audience." (31)

- Who was the primary audience at lynchings?
- Who was the intended audience for the message?
- What was the message to blacks? To whites? Did lynchings have an effect on non-black and non-white Americans? Did it effect recent immigrants?

### Q3

Distribute the ***Witnesses Handout*** for your group. Allow your group five minutes of silence to examine the photo and answer the questions. Then read aloud the **Reading** to provide the group with the history of the photo. Go over each question or prompt with the group. Have their feelings about the image changed now that they have more information?

## READING: DESCRIPTION OF THE PHOTO

This is a photo of the lynching of two teenagers, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith on August 7, 1930. It was taken in Marion, Indiana by studio photographer Lawrence Beitler.

In the foreground dozens of people are caught by the flash of a camera as they mill around at the feet of the black lynching victims.

In 1930 three African American teenagers, Thomas Shipp, Abram Smith and 16 year old James Cameron, were jailed after they were accused of robbery, attempted murder of a white factory worker and rape of a white woman. A mob of white citizens used sledgehammers to break the three teens out of jail on August 7, 1930. They were taken to a tree and nooses were placed around their necks. An unidentified woman convinced the mob to free James Cameron, and return him to the jail. Then, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith were lynched by a mob of white police officers, men, women and children.

Local photographer Lawrence Beitler captured the scene and, "for ten days and nights he printed thousands of copies, which sold for fifty cents apiece" (Smith, Shawn Michelle). In the book *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* a copy of the photo from a private collection included a handwritten inscription, "Bo Pointn to his Niga"\*\* (Smith). This suggests that Bo is the man with his hand raised, pointing at one of the victims. Had he employed the lynching victim he was pointing to? Or had he participated in the lynching of that particular young black man. Is the gesture a claim of prideful responsibility or a threatening warning to viewers?

Smith, Shawn Michelle, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture*. Duke University Press. 2004;135.

\*\*Should you say the word "Niga" while reading this passage? Are you African American/Black? Then it is probably ok. But some participants may find hearing the word upsetting. Are you White or otherwise non-Black person? Then we do not recommend you reading the word out loud. Even though you are reading a direct quote, the N Word is a highly offensive and controversial term and hearing a White person say it may have a more negative than positive effect on the group dynamic. This however, may be a great opportunity to discuss the term's use and its history.

## HANDOUT: WITNESSES



Photograph from Bettmann/Corbis

Examine the photo and answer the questions below:

1. When and where do you think this photo was taken?
2. Describe the facial expressions of the people in the photo.
3. In three sentences or less write a story about this scene.
4. What is missing from the photo? Why?
5. "Taking our place, Jesus suffered on the cross and gave 'his life a ransom for many'" (Mk 10:45). "He [Jesus] carried our sins in his body up onto the tree..." (1 Peter 2: 24) In the photo two teenagers were accused of crimes they may or may not have committed, then were lynched by a mob. For whose sins did they suffer?
6. How does this image make you feel?

# Session Four

## CHAPTER TWO

*"THE TERRIBLE BEAUTY OF THE CROSS" AND THE TRAGEDY OF THE*

*LYNCING TREE*

*A REFLECTION ON REINHOLD NEIBUHR*

### PREPARATION

Make copies of the Discussion Questions. Set up hospitality, nametags, etc.

### LEADING THE SESSION

If you have new members at this session, invite people to introduce themselves again. Explain that this session will focus largely on the second chapter. Briefly review the norms and the conversation you had at the first session about having a respectful conversation.

Open with prayer. You may also want to begin by listening to one of the songs on the playlist.

<http://tinyurl.com/j9d5gk3>

Close the session with one or the prayers provided or invite the group into a time of prayer. You may want to introduce the closing prayer time by playing some music from the playlist above as a way of letting people have some time and space to reflect before leaving.

## SESSION FOUR DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Q1

"Because Niebuhr identified with white moderates in the South more than with their black victims, he could not really feel their suffering as his own." (39)

- Why didn't Niebuhr relate to the victims of suffering in the way that he related so strongly with the suffering of Jesus? Or of the Jews whom he called "our brothers" vs. his identification of Blacks as "our Negro minority?"
- Did the lynching victims need to suffer for the sins of white Americans? Whose souls were redeemed by this suffering? Or were blacks forced like Simon to carry the "crosses of slavery, segregation and lynching" for someone else? (48)
- What role does empathy play in who we see as victims versus perpetrators? What role does empathy play in how we visualize Jesus' body on the cross? Will we empathize more or less with him if his hair is long and blonde or short, black and wooly; if his skin is dark brown or light tan.

### Q2

"Niebuhr speaks about 'God's judgment on America. He calls 'racial hatred, the most vicious of all human vices,' 'the dark and terrible abyss of evil in the soul of a man,' a 'form of original sin,' 'the most persistent of all collective evils,' 'more stubborn than class prejudices.' 'If the white man were to expiate his sins committed against the darker races, few white men would have a right to live.'"

Niebuhr supported the "separate but equal" Supreme Court ruling which made Jim Crow segregation legal and was pleased that the Court added "with all deliberate speed" to their decision ending segregation in schools. "The Negroes will have to exercise patience and be sustained by a robust faith that history will gradually fulfill the logic of justice. He also said: "I never envisaged a fully developed interracial church at Bethel. I do not think we are ready for that." (43)

- How could Neibuhr call racial hatred a "form of original sin" while sympathizing with White families' fears of sending children to integrated schools, and urging Black Americans to stay patient and seek faith when they do not receive justice? (39) What was the impact of this major

theologian's perspectives on White American Christians and especially clergy?

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Neibuhr and Bonhoeffer were both noted theologians who taught at Union Seminary in NYC. Neibuhr was in America for several years; Bonhoeffer only for a year (1930-31). But during that time he immersed himself in the Black community, befriending Blacks, attending, preaching and teaching at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, reading African American history and literature, and seeing the Negro Spirituals as the most influential contribution the Negro made to American Christianity. Neibuhr, in contrast, showed little or no interest in dialogue with blacks about racial justice and seemed only marginally concerned about justice for black people even though he opposed racial prejudice in any form.

- Discuss the difference between sympathy and empathy.
- Bonhoeffer could empathize with Blacks in a way that Niebuhr never could. How do you think the different way they interacted with Blacks shaped their response?
- What can we do to move from sympathy to empathy?

While visiting Detroit where he headed the Mayor's Inter-racial Committee to study racial problems there, Neibuhr said: "Thousands in this town are really living in torment while the rest of us eat, drink and make merry. What a civilization!" (43)

- What is the role of religion, and especially Christianity, in the situation Neibuhr describes and that still applies today?
- Is our church actively addressing race, discrimination, police brutality or mass incarceration? How?
- Is our church racially integrated? What does or should that look like? Do members sit in racially homogenous groups or rows?
- How does a racially integrated congregation function successfully?

# Session Five

## CHAPTER THREE

*BEARING THE CROSS AND STARING DOWN THE LYNCHING TREE*

*MARTIN LUTHER KING JR'S STRUGGLE TO REDEEM THE SOUL OF AMERICA*

### PREPARATION

Make copies of the Discussion Questions. Set up hospitality, nametags, etc.

### LEADING THE SESSION

If you have new members at this session, invite people to introduce themselves again. Explain that this session will focus on the chapter. Briefly remind people about the norms and the conversation you had at the first session about having a respectful conversation.

Open with prayer. You may also want to begin by listening to one of the songs on the playlist.

<http://tinyurl.com/j9d5gk3>

You can use the Handout on *Sharing the Burden of History* as an optional activity at the end or distribute it and the extra resources list to participants at the end of the session as resources for those who wish to delve deeper into this work.

Close the session with one or the prayers provided or invite the group into a time of prayer. You may want to introduce the closing prayer time by playing some music from the playlist above as a way of letting people have some time and space to reflect before leaving.

## SESSION FIVE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Q1

"Lord you gave your son to remedy a condition, but who knows...the death of my only son might bring an end to lynching." (67)

- Who is Mamie Till, the mother of Emmett Till, speaking to in the above quote? Who is she hoping will empathize with her plea?
- Mamie Till wanted her son's "battered and bloated corpse" on view at his funeral (66). Why? Is there a difference in her reasons for allowing photos to be taken and shared of his body versus photographers snapping photos of other lynching victims?
- Mamie Till's hope was that her son's death might be redemptive. What is the relationship between that hope and our belief that Jesus' death on the cross is redemptive?

### Q2

The following are quotes from sermons or letters written by Dr. Martin Luther King: "...when Jesus fell and stumbled under that cross, it was a black man [Simon of Cyrene] that picked it up for him" (82) "this is the cross that we must bear for the freedom of our people...this suffering...will in some little way serve to make Atlanta a better city, Georgia a better state and America a better country...I have faith to believe it will...Our suffering is not in vain." (81)

- King frequently drew parallels between the suffering of black people and the suffering of Jesus on the cross, but here he compares black suffering to Simon picking up Jesus' cross and carrying it to Calvary. How much had you learned about the struggles of Simon? Were you taught that Simon was black or of African descent?
- Simon was compelled by the Romans to take up Jesus' cross. If the cross is the sins of others, what are the crosses that King suggests that black Americans bear? Who else might bear these crosses?
- If bearing the Cross is both an act of love and an act that one is compelled to do, how does that enhance your understanding of the meaning of the cross and its weight?

- What is the cross that we must out of love and duty, take up to move our country forward? Whose burden do we lessen by doing so?

**Q3**

"I will die standing up for the freedom of my people...If physical death is the price I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from the permanent death of the spirit, then nothing could be more redemptive" (82)

- What caused and what was the "spiritual death" (permanent death of the spirit) King was speaking of?
- What did his death mean to the Civil Rights Movement? What did it mean to America?

**Q4**

"Who can doubt that those who suffered in the black freedom movement made America a better place than before? Their suffering redeemed America from the sin of legalized segregation. And those blacks among us who lived under Jim Crow know that that was no small achievement." (89)

- How was the suffering of those in the black freedom movement redemptive?
- How do you think young people today view King's characterization of that suffering as redemptive? Do you think they see the suffering of Black young men in prisons or killed by police as redemptive? Are they seeking redemption or, if not, what are the Black Lives Matter Movement and other activists today seeking?
- Why should Blacks suffer to redeem America? How else might redemption or reconciliation happen?
- What can the church do now to carry out God's mission to "restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ?" (Book of Common Prayer, p. 855)

## HANDOUT: SHARING THE BURDEN OF HISTORY

"Who can doubt that those who suffered in the black freedom movement made America a better place than before? Their suffering redeemed America from the sin of legalized segregation. And those blacks among us who lived under Jim Crow know that that was no small achievement." (89) Martin Luther King, Jr.

Do you have a close friend or family member who lived through the early days of the Civil Rights Movement? Have a conversation with them about what they remember, or about what you both remember from the 1940's through the late 60's. It may be especially helpful for this exercise if you talk to someone of a different race. You can use the questions below as a guide.

Why is this activity called *Sharing the Burden of History*? Stories of lynching, racialized violence and oppression are often passed down within the communities of the oppressed and silenced, ignored or forgotten within the community of the oppressing group. By seeking out and bearing witness to these stories we, like the Biblical Simon of Cyrene, take on the loving duty of bearing some of the weight that this painful history has wrought on African Americans for generations. We can only image the true weight but in the process of listening we can begin to make ourselves more empathetic to the suffering of others.

- What was your life like during the Jim Crow era?
- How did Jim Crow effect where you worked, lived, went to school, or who you socialized with?
- Did you know about or participate in the Civil Rights Movement?
- Did you have positive, neutral or negative memories about that time period?
- How old were you when you first became friends with someone of a different race?
- How old were you when you first noticed race? Describe an early memory related to this new awareness.

Not feeling comfortable discussing race with your older family members or friends just yet? That's okay. This can be a tough conversation whether it is intergenerational or between two people of the same age.

## RESOURCES TO DELVE DEEPER

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*.

Kennedy, Stetson. Jim Crow Guide to the U.S.A.: The Laws, Customs and Etiquette Governing the Conduct of Nonwhites and Other Minorities as Second-Class Citizens

Eyes on the Prize <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesonthaprize/>

The African Americans Many Rivers to Cross –  
<http://www.pbs.org/show/african-americans-many-rivers-cross/>

The Civil Rights History Project – a collection of oral histories of the Civil Rights Movement at the Library of Congress

<https://www.loc.gov/collection/civil-rights-history-project/about-this-collection/>

# Session Six

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *THE RECRUICFIED CHRIST IN BLACK LITERARY IMAGINATION*

#### PREPARATION

Make copies of the Discussion Questions. Set up hospitality, nametags, etc.

#### LEADING THE SESSION

If you have new members at this session, invite people to introduce themselves again. Explain that this session will focus on the chapter. Briefly remind people about the norms and the conversation you had at the first session about having a respectful conversation.

Open with prayer. You may also want to begin by listening to one of the songs on the playlist.

<http://tinyurl.com/j9d5gk3>

Pay attention to recent events in the news about racial incidents, terrorism, etc. You may want to adapt the questions to reflect what is currently happening in the news.

Close the session with one or the prayers provided or invite the group into a time of prayer. You may want to introduce the closing prayer time by playing some music from the playlist above as a way of letting people have some time and space to reflect before leaving.

## SESSION SIX DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Q1

James Cone uses poetry, music and art to deepen our appreciation of both narratives from the Bible and from America's history of lynching.

- What poems or songs from the book had the biggest impact on you?
- Many of these pieces were created during the lynching era. Can any of them be used to portray something that is going on right now?

### Q2

"The South is crucifying Christ again. By all the laws of ancient rote and rule...Christ's awful wrong is that he's dark of hue, The sin for which no blamelessness atones; But lest the sameness of the cross should tire. They kill him now with famished tongues of fire, And while he burns, good men, and women, too, Shout, battling for his black and brittle bones." – 'Christ Recrucified,' Countee Cullen, 1922 (93)

- What "laws of ancient rote and rule" is Countee Cullen referring to in the poem?

"...what must we do to achieve our full humanity in a world that denies it?" (95)

- In what ways was humanity denied to black people during the lynching era? Does that denial still exist?
- Was humanity denied or lost by white people during this era?

### Q3

On pages 98 and 99 James Cone discusses the book of lynching photos, *Without Sanctuary* by James Allen. "These photographs, a type of pornography, were initially part of the apparatus of the lynching spectacle, created by photographers at the scene who sold them for profit as souvenirs for members of the lynching party, who then displayed them in family albums and gave them to friends and relatives who could not be present." (98)

Consider how murdered and often mutilated black bodies were used by white photographers, mobs, artists, politicians, social activists, the media and the families of the deceased.

- In what ways were images of black death used, to advance a particular agenda? How were they “a type of pornography”? (98)
- How are modern images of black death used now? Examples include Michael Brown, whose body lie in the street uncovered for four hours. Or the many deaths, like Laquan McDonald’s, that were caught on cell phone or police body camera footage, then shown repeatedly in the media?
- How does the sight of dead African Americans invoke or hinder the empathetic response in the viewer?

#### **cs 4 w**

“Where was God in these agonizing deaths? ‘Likely there ain’t no God at all... God, if He was, kept to His skies, and left us to our enemies.’ (99)

- Define and discuss “theodicy” (105)
- Discuss W.E.B. Dubois’s story of Mary and Joshua. Why did this story receive a hopeful ending?
- How was Christianity used to both enslave and to free African Americans?
- How is God seen as speaking directly too and through the black experience and also turning away or ignoring the black experience at the same time?

#### **cs 5 w**

“It is exceedingly doubtful if lynching could possibly exist under any other religion than Christianity...Not only through tacit approval and acquiescence has the Christian Church indirectly given its approval to lynch law... but the evangelical Christian denominations have done much towards creation of the particular fanaticism which finds its outlet in lynching” Walter White was the national secretary for the NAACP from 1931-1955.

- Does James Cone agree with Walter White’s assessment?
- Do you?

We currently live in an era where a small but vocal number of Americans have fanned fears of violent Islamic extremists murdering American citizens. News anchors talk about the inherent violence of Islam and Sharia laws.

- Could the modern representation of Islam as a violent religion be similar to White's representation of Christianity?
- Is there any truth in his statement? If so, what can white Christians do to redeem their image and their religion?

# Session Seven

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *"OH MARY, DON'T YOU WEEP"*

#### PREPARATION

Make copies of the Discussion Questions. Set up hospitality, nametags, etc.

#### LEADING THE SESSION

If you have new members at this session, invite people to introduce themselves again. Explain that this session will focus on the chapter. Briefly remind people about the norms and the conversation you had at the first session about having a respectful conversation.

Open with prayer. You may also want to begin by listening to one of the songs on the playlist.

<http://tinyurl.com/j9d5gk3>

Close the session with one or the prayers provided or invite the group into a time of prayer. You may want to introduce the closing prayer time by playing some music from the playlist above as a way of letting people have some time and space to reflect before leaving.

## SESSION SEVEN DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Q1

Play the song *Strange Fruit* as sung by Billie Holiday while reading Abel Meeropol's poem. <http://tinyurl.com/hx6g4y9>

"When I look at those pictures [ of lynchings in Allen's book Without Sanctuary] I don't see a lifeless body. I look at those pictures and I see my son, I see my brother, I see my father. If I look at the lifeless body long enough, I see myself"

- Who or what do you see? Male? Female? Young? Old?
- How has your view of who lynching victims were changed after reading this book?

### Q2

"Although women constitute only 2 percent of blacks actually killed by lynching, it would be a mistake to assume that violence against women was not widespread and brutal...They were tortured, beaten and scarred, mutilated and hanged, burned and shot, tarred and feathered, stabbed and dragged, whipped and raped by angry white mobs...Some were murdered because of their connection to "an intended male target" while others were lynched "because they courageously challenged white supremacy." (122)

- Was the torture and murder of women victims any different than from that of men?
- While women were murdered in smaller numbers, the vast majority of them were raped – repeatedly and often ended up bearing the child of their rapist. What role did rape play in America's race relations?
- Compare and contrast the rates at which women were lynched with the number of unarmed black women who have been shot by police or white citizens in the last few years. For more information you can read the article "Sandra Bland's Not the First Black Woman to Experience Police Violence" from Time Magazine, July 22, 2015.  
<http://tinyurl.com/zok2lhf>
- How about the number of unarmed transgender women who have been killed? For more information read the article. "Which

#BlackLivesMatter? The killings no one's talking about". MSNBC.  
<http://tinyurl.com/hc8fy5r>

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"What is redemptive is the faith that God snatches victory out of defeat, life out of death, and hope out of despair, as revealed in the biblical and black proclamation of Jesus' resurrection." (150)

- Is suffering and struggle the only way to be redeemed? What must be done so that America, white America, black America, Christianity, our lives can be redeemed?
- When we feel defeated in the fight for equity and inclusion, what scripture can we turn to that can help us snatch "hope out of despair"?
- What is the real lived legacy of the Cross and the Lynching Tree?
- Did this book cause you to see the cross in a different way?
- Do you see the noose in a different way?
- Do you see yourself or your history in a different way?