

“Ceasing to Strip the Vineyard Bare”
A Celebration of African-American Spirituals
Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9-18 and Matthew 5: 38-48
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The Gospel is a two sided coin. On one side: to comfort the afflicted. On the other side: to afflict the comfortable. Yet, it is an unfortunate truth that the Bible, our Holy Scriptures, can be misinterpreted and misused for ill. Parts of the Bible have been used to afflict the afflicted, to keep the oppressed oppressed. Under slavery, slaves were taught the parts of the Bible (and interpretation of scripture) to the advantage of the masters. Of course, the slaves were not educated in any way. It's much easier to control an uneducated people so with rare exceptions, slaves were not taught to read and the only parts of the Bible they knew were the parts that their masters or the white preachers taught them. Sadly, today's Gospel reading from Matthew is one such example. Passages like this one had their obvious utility: “if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Turn the other cheek, love your enemies, don't resist. Scripture that should have served to teach those in power to dismantle the power structure, instead was used to keep them on top.

Likewise, certain passages from the Old Testament were used to promote obedience from the slaves. I'm sure parts of today's Hebrew Scriptures were common such as, “You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another.” Probably less so with, “you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor” and “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.” The idea was to share your bounty with those less fortunate, leave some of the harvest in the field for those with no other means to glean. “You shall not defraud your neighbor; ...you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.” Wages? What wages? Surely this scripture was not taught to the slaves, either.

Still, the slaves were able to use what they learned from scripture and develop not only their own understanding of the Bible and Christianity, but they, too, were able to use the Bible for their own utilitarian purposes. They sang songs about Moses, Jesus, heaven and other Biblical stories not only to express their faith, but to send messages or codes, to help each other to and through the Underground Railroad to freedom.

Today we celebrate African-American spirituals, or “sorrow songs” as they were first called. Booker T. Washington noted, “There is a difference between the music of Africa and that of her transplanted children. There is a new note in the music which had its origin in the southern plantation, and in this new note the sorrow and sufferings which came from serving in a strange land found expression.”¹ Joe Carter, a singer and educator of African-American spirituals explained that they were called sorrow songs, “because they were the expression of the great pain and the sorrow. But at the same time, they were always looking upward. They were always reaching. There was always some level of hope, as opposed to the concept of the blues. The blues was just singing about your troubles, and there was no hope. But there’s always the glory hallelujah someplace saying, ‘Oh, and on that glory hallelujah, then we fly.’”²

It is said that when some of the first slaves were brought from Africa to the Georgia coast, as they were getting off the boat they began singing a version of the song we just sang, “Oh Freedom.” They sang what was later translated, “Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom over me, over me./And before I’d be a slave, I’d be buried in my grave/And go home to my Lord and be free.” Then they turned around and walked into the water toward Africa, drowning themselves. The water brought them there and the water could take them back. They preferred death over slavery.³

These songs each tell a powerful, multi-layered story. The outer layer for most of these songs is the Biblical story they tell. The most obvious example of this are the songs about Moses, telling the story of Israel’s bondage in Egypt and God’s use of Moses to free them. When you think about it, it’s a bit surprising that the slaves became Christian at all, that they internalized the religion and made it their own. But when the African slaves were taught the Biblical stories, they didn’t become Christian because their white owners were showing them what wonderful people Christians were. They became Christians because, among various other reasons, they were able to identify with certain stories, such as the enslavement of Israel in Egypt. They were able to find hope in their release by God. They were able to identify with the unjust suffering of Jesus and find hope in his resurrection. And when the white foremen and masters heard the slaves singing these songs, they thought, “Isn’t that nice. They’re singing about Moses and Jesus.” Without realizing what the slaves were really singing about.

The second layer is the spiritual story. They sang songs like “Steal Away to Jesus,” and “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” to express their daily suffering and toil and their hope and faith that their sins would be washed away and that the suffering would soon be over and they would be united with Jesus in heaven. Sadly, for most, death was their best and only hope for release from the suffering of slavery. When they sang, “God’s a-gonna trouble the water” they were referring to the healing waters of Betheseda from the Gospel of John and expressing a spiritual healing for themselves in a life with no relief of daily circumstance. The song the choir just sang, “Get On Board,” is one of the many train-themed songs coming out of our slavery past. On the surface, these songs seem to be about taking that final ride up to heaven. Of course, they are also about the Underground Railroad, with “heaven” being the freedom of the North.

¹ Dr. Wyatt T Walker, *Somebody’s Calling My Name*, Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1983.

² “Speaking of Faith” July 10, 1997 <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/joecarter/transcript.shtml>

³ Dr. Wyatt T Walker, *Somebody’s Calling My Name*, Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1983.
“Speaking of Faith” July 10, 1997

Which brings us to the third, innermost layer: the secret messages relayed through the songs, effecting daily reality. Through many of these songs slaves were able to relay messages to one another, messages about when and where their secret prayer meetings would be held. “Let Us Break Bread Together,” which we often sing when we take communion, was probably also used to call people to secret meetings to discuss matters of concern or even to plan escape. The songs are also believed to have passed on messages to help those escaping to freedom on the Underground Railroad. The most obvious example of this is the song “Drinking Gourd.” Just as slaves weren’t taught to read, they also weren’t taught geography and most never left the plantation, so abolitionists had to teach them how to find their way north to freedom and the lessons were passed on through song. The drinking gourd was the Big Dipper constellation and the song gives directions on how to follow it north to freedom. “Steal Away to Jesus” isn’t only about escaping the grueling life of slavery through death and life everlasting with Jesus, but also about running away, literally stealing away to heaven, to the North, in this life. And surely the references to the devil have at least as much to do with masters, bounty hunters and dogs on their trail as they are about Satan.

Sometimes slaves would just sing one part of the song over and over to one another. If someone started singing, “I ain’t got long to stay here” people knew that that person was going to be attempting escape soon. Many of the songs make reference to specific landmarks such as bending trees in “Steal Away to Jesus.” These are believed to be verbal maps telling people what route to take to freedom. Whenever something is repeated three times in the spirituals, it emphasizes the points that are particularly important for the people to remember. “Wade in the Water” reminds them to travel through water to throw off the scent of the dogs who might be used to try to find them. “See that host all dressed in white” and “see that band all dressed in red” might have been specific signs of people to look for on the journey. A “Moses” is someone helping people across rivers. Again, many of the codes were in songs used train imagery. Those helping slaves escape might be referred to as “agents,” “shepherds,” and “conductors.” Of course, Harriet Tubman, was probably the most famous conductor in the Underground Railroad.

In an interview with Joe Carter, the host clarified that their intention was not to appear to be glorifying slavery in their discussion of these songs and their use as tools to withstand the brutality of everyday life for those who sang them. Mr. Carter replied, “You know, I think what we’re talking about human suffering and how do we survive when the worst happens. What are the mechanisms? And I think that African-Americans have shown the world, and other peoples have done it, too. Other people are doing it all the time, and it’s the same process. It doesn’t matter who the people are. It doesn’t matter whether the song is an actual song of notes and music or whether it’s the spirit of a people expressed in some other way, but you’ll find, for example, when I sing these songs I can sing ‘Motherless Child’ in Siberia; they know what it means. They’ve been through hell. I can go to Scotland and Ireland and Wales and sing these. They understand the sentiment.”

And this is why these songs are so timeless. Because, even though they are no longer used to relay messages about when to meet for a secret prayer meeting and or as musical maps to tell people how to take the Underground Railroad to freedom, they still reveal our own spiritual bondage, and our own ability, through Christ, to overcome those bonds to “Wade in the Water” of healing and to “Steal Away to Jesus” *today*. And when we do break the bonds of spiritual

slavery, we will be able to “Get on Board,” we will turn the other cheek, and not hoard our harvests for ourselves but share it for the poor and the alien, we’ll love those who otherwise might have been our enemies. And we will sing with joy, “freedom over me” and “I’m So Glad Jesus Lifted Me.”