

Remarks by Rev. James Daniely of Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church, the church that held Joseph McCoy's funeral service in 1897.

Joseph McCoy Eulogy

April 23, 2022

Psalm 137: 4: How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?

From the time Africans came as indentured/enslaved people around 1619, we have caught hell. Arriving with the Dutch to New Amsterdam, later called New York, some were manumitted by 1644 and many others were granted full manumission in 1827, but only in New York. Yet still what does it mean to be granted your freedom? If granted, then it may be taken away! But did not the founding fathers grant freedom to all? The Declaration of Independence states: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." But they didn't Africans! In fact, in 1857, Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, declared, on behalf of the majority decision..." blacks have no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit." Is this carte blanche to do with blacks as any white person so determined? If so, a very dangerous scenario was alive in the land. How dangerous? Between 1890 and 1900, more than 1600 blacks were lynched by white mobs all over this so-called bastion of freedom! In fact, history tells us that there were nearly 5,000 black victims of brutality in that era, the post Reconstruction era, by white mobs bent on "keeping the darkies in their place". No wonder the protest song by Billy Holiday, "Strange Fruit", caught the imagination of blacks and angered white audiences as it was barred from radio broadcast, highlighting so-called 'lynching era' (1890-1940).

The House of Representatives did manage to put forth an Anti-Lynching bill in 1922, but President Warren G. Harding refused to push the matter before the US Senate. (A footnote: the Emmett Till Antilynching Act was finalized as a Federal law March 29, 2022. A little late, don't you think?)

Alexandria was not an exception to this vehement violence; in fact, we gather today to remember Joseph McCoy, another victim of the insanity which swept these shores. This is not to say that lawlessness ruled the land. What it does say is that there were many silent witnesses who either said nothing or did nothing to aid the victims. But there were also organized lynchings where newspapers advertised the upcoming events. And though images within the crowd were printed in local newsprint, law enforcement never could "identify anyone committing this heinous crime.

To see an injustice and not attempt to prevent it gives credence to the act. So where was the outcry? So, we turn to James Russell Lowell, writing during the stench of slavery in America. His epic poem speaks volumes against the injustices facing African Americans. However, he was in the minority and his words appear to have fallen on deaf ears:

Careless seems the great Avenger; history's pages but record One death-grapple in the darkness
'twixt old systems and the Word; Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne, —

Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown, Standeth God within the
shadow, keeping watch above his own. Then to side with Truth is noble when we share her
wretched crust, Ere her cause bring fame and profit, and 'tis prosperous to be just; Then it is the
brave man chooses, while the coward stands aside, doubting in his abject spirit, till his Lord is
crucified, and the multitude make virtue of the faith they had denied.

-James Russell Lowell 1819-1891.

He appears to declare that God was standing by, watching to see if any would side with Truth. Those in power didn't. Were they either cowards or timid politicians to afraid to act on the side of Truth? Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking against in another context, gives me a clear perspective on the matter:

“Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience asks the question, is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because it is right.”

So, the text before us comes at a time when Israel has been taken captive by the Babylonians. The psalmist is devastated by the chain of events. His beloved Jerusalem has been destroyed and the leaders have either been killed or taken into captivity. He knows firsthand of the atrocities his people have suffered and in prayer, asks for vengeance. He wants the Babylonians to suffer like he has suffered. Can I blame him? No, because it is righteous indignation. But is it right? You tell me!

As I stand before you today, I am appalled that more than a century has passed since 19-year-old Joseph McCoy was murdered and we're just getting around to passing legislature making it a crime. It might make one ask, is this too little, too late? He was arrested without a warrant, dragged from his cell by a mob (over 500 persons says the *Evening Star*) and shot multiple times, and finally, brutally lynched at the corner of Cameron and Lee streets. By the time an autopsy was performed, his head had been split open by an axe, and his body showed evidence of burn marks! What type of humans does this to another human?

His family refused to claim the body. A report from the *Evening Star* (dated April 26, 1897, states that an aunt said: “As the people killed him, let them bury him”. Accused of attacking a child of Richard Lacy, whom he worked for, he never had a trial by his peers. Oh, yeah, I forgot, “blacks have no rights which the white man was bound to respect...”

What's a minister to say at a time like this? The original eulogist, the Rev. William H. Gaines, pastor of Roberts Chapel, said: “Those who shed blood shall lose their own” Then, carefully, he added, “Mothers, take your sons into your confidence and teach them the higher principles of morality, that there might never again be a repetition of the terrible crimes committed and charged to have been committed.”

Hear him clearly, ‘that there might never again be a repetition of the terrible crimes’, my emphasis. I don’t think the twenty black persons in attendance missed what was being said. They were brave souls to attend, and I am certain they heard, **what happened to this young man should never, ever happen again**. As a follower of Jesus, the Christ, I agree that it should never, ever, happen again.

We must remember every atrocity; every dastardly deed perpetrated against humankind by humankind and find a way to forgive. In that forgiveness however is a determination to prevent them from happening again. In my resolve to fight injustice in every form, the words of the Apostle Paul help me in that regard: “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (I Corinthians 4 15:58). And this is the Lord’s work, laboring to make equal justice the law of the land. It’s the Lord’s work, bringing equity and healing to our land. We must be diligent, steadfast, and immovable in our stance against police violence against brown and black people! Equally adamant against politicians taking the expedient path in writing the nations statutes, as opposed to the right laws! But that’s not all, each of us must wrap ourselves in the concepts of holiness espoused through the Abrahamic Traditions: love of neighbor, charity for the poor, and justice for all! Those traditions include Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the Baha’i Faith, Druze, Samaritan, and Rastafari. Our task, those gathered here and those viewing/seeing this presentation, must be to become people on a mission to right all the wrongs in our society. To become the peacemakers during confrontations of hate. To make this American nightmare into the reality where all men and women in these United States are treated as equals, that they are protected by their governments to ensure their Rights, that among these are equal access to good representation, an opportunity to be trained for gainful employment, access to good health care, and education. Then, Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness has the same meaning to the sisters and brothers in the Burg as well as Beverly Hills and Chiri Laguna!” And that we will, by any means necessary, protect this grand thought and make it a reality for all of us. And all is one of those inclusive terms that leaves no one out! It’s not enough to hold others accountable, we, each of us, must be accountable to each other because we are our brother and sister’s keepers.

And to answer the question: How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? A land that devalues, belittles, and devours it’s brown and black citizenry...by not doing it alone. We must walk with Jesus...the song writer said,” I’ve seen lightning flashing, I’ve heard thunder the roll; I’ve felt sin’s breaker dashing, trying to conquer my soul; I’ve heard the voice of Jesus, telling me still to fight on; He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone, no never alone. He promised never to leave me alone!” That’s my story and I am sticking to it! Amen.