

To Follow Jesus

By M. Shawn Copeland

From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus preached a message that was familiar enough so that those who came to hear him could recognize their religious tradition. At the same time, that message was edgy, distinctive enough to make them uncomfortable, even as it stirred their hearts to want God more, and to want to be more for God and for others. The rabbi from Nazareth spoke with a conviction and authority that set him apart from other teachers, and his personal charisma drew men and women and children to him like iron filings to a magnet. Jesus pointed out the breakdowns in the prevailing religious establishment, but also pushed his hearers to seek the reign of God with all their minds, hearts, soul and strength, and to embrace a freedom that honored the Law even as it reoriented the Law for abundant life. He was not reluctant to criticize Roman imperial repression and subjugation; but the revolution he offered opened onto an entirely different world, begun and rooted in the here and now but capable of fulfillment through God's action in God's time.

Women and men followed him from village to village, town to town—eager eyes etching his face into their memories and their hearts, moving to the cadence of his voice, devouring his words, blinking in disbelief as a little girl presumed dead is returned sound and whole to her parents, mesmerized by his strong brown carpenter hands as he smeared mud on a blind man's eyes or broke bread or traced something on the ground. Jesus taught them a "way" to live for God and others in unimaginable openness, integrity and compassionate solidarity. But when he set out one exacting challenge, many paused: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8: 34).

The invitation to follow Jesus, to walk the way of the cross, has never been nor can ever be personally, communally or socially neutral. In a letter to a group of the earliest followers of the way that Jesus taught, Paul called the cross "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:22-25). The brutal death of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross distanced his teaching from other religious movements in the ancient world. Jewish as well as Gentile groups were scandalized by the notion of a crucified Son of God. The cross was the mark of the criminal and the slave. To accept the message of the cross, first-century Jews would have had to overcome deep-seated religious and cultural sensibilities toward the very act of crucifixion while at the same time grappling with a new notion of messiah. Scholars maintain that during the Judaism of Jesus' day, there was no uniform idea of the messiah. The various messianic movements disagreed, even as they shared the expectation that with the arrival of the messiah Israel's divinely ordained destiny would be realized: the Roman occupation would end, their sacred land healed of its pollution, a new age inaugurated. The messiah incarnated the aspirations of a long subjugated people. A crucified messiah, a messiah who would have died in such a shameful and criminal manner was unthinkable; a crucified messiah was no messiah at all.

For the Gentiles religious objections to the cross were joined to intellectual ones. Potential converts, particularly educated and sophisticated Romans and Greeks, pronounced the notion of a crucified God and any who would follow him contemptible. Belief in a crucified God was nothing less than madness.

Like hundreds of thousands of women and men before them, Africans enslaved in the United States were drawn to the rabbi from Nazareth. Chattel slavery stole parents and siblings, friends and lovers, position and prowess. It aimed to defile the body, break the heart, usurp skill and waste the mind. Yet slavery never triumphed absolutely. In the

constricted space of bondage, the enslaved people created modes of self-expression that disclosed lives of deep faith and love, persistent hope and prayer. Many of these enslaved women and men were spiritual virtuosos. While Christianity never exhausted the totality of their religious consciousness, intentionality and expression, it served as crucial means to realize personal and communal, religious and spiritual transformation. The legacy of their Christian discipleship testifies to Jesus' great yearning and compassion for the lowly and downtrodden, his great desire to give them the good things of the reign of God.

Close reading of slave narratives and spirituals provides an opportunity to appreciate the legacy of African-American Christian discipleship. For some time now, black and womanist theologians have been reading these narratives, transcribed interviews with the emancipated peoples, in order to understand their lives, experiences and aspirations. Early in the 20th century, three black educational institutions, Hampton Institute, Fisk University and Southern University of Louisiana, took on the task of locating and interviewing former slaves. Between 1936 and 1938, the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Project Administration (W.P.A.) systematized and increased the scope of these interviews and made them widely available. The precise origins of the spirituals may never be known, but they came to notice outside the black community in the early 19th century. These songs conflate, embellish, personalize and vividly retell events of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and often they focus on Jesus. Indeed, some enslaved people insisted that Jesus himself taught them the words of the spirituals. Most of the spirituals have been lost to memory and historical record, but fortunately some of these treasures remain.

Slave narratives and spirituals teach us much about the enslaved peoples' desire to follow Jesus. Two characteristics of their lived Christian discipleship—love and prayer—inspire and encourage us as we too seek to follow “the way” Jesus taught, to take up the cross that comes with being his disciple.

- Many enslaved people fell in love with Jesus of Nazareth. Such love was inevitable, for they recognized and understood that Jesus was for them. Instinctively these women and men recognized themselves in the poor, excluded and despised in the biblical stories—women and men who were ostracized and rejected and who suffered physical afflictions of every sort. They sang in the spirituals of a powerful man. Jesus was the one who could “fix” them for the long white robe, the starry crown; he was the one who could fix them for the journey home. Jesus proved himself transparent in word and in deed, and he was not afraid to defy social and religious conventions to show his love: “Did you ever see the like before/ King Jesus preaching to the poor. My Lord's done just what he said/ He's heal the sick and raised the dead.”

Yet even as the enslaved people celebrated his healing power, they understood that Jesus lived (and died) by a different logic. He was tortured brutally and suffered a dreadful death. Suffering was something that they knew first-hand. Delia Garlic remarked to an interviewer: “It's bad to belong to folks that own you soul and body, that can tie you up to a tree, with your face to the tree and your arms fastened tight around it, who take a long curling whip and cut the blood [on your back] with every lick.” So the spiritual, “Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, Glory, hallelujah!” was no metaphor. Slavery was their time on the cross. This sorrow-psalm protested the social oppression and death to which the enslaved people were assigned by the laws and custom of the United States; it testified to their belief that Jesus stood with them in their abject suffering; and it signified the opaque power of God.

With great feeling, reverence and attention to detail, many of the enslaved folk poured out their anguish at the death of their beloved Jesus: “They nail my Jesus down/ They put him on the crown of thorns/ O see my Jesus hanging high!/ He look so pale and bleed so free:/ O don't you think it was a shame, He hung three hours in dreadful pain?” When they sang, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” they were there. As Jesus stood with them in their sufferings, they stood with Jesus in his. They loved him.

- Nearly all enslaved people were denied even the most rudimentary forms of education. But some were denied opportunities for religious worship and training. One former slave, W. L. Bost, told an interviewer that despite this denial, “something inside just told us about God and that there was a better place hereafter. We would sneak off and have prayer meetings. Sometimes the patrollers would catch us and beat us but that didn’t keep us from trying.” Charlotte Martin and Reverend Allen recalled that slaves often were whipped if caught praying or singing, and some slaveholders interrupted clandestine prayer meetings and beat the slaves who were present. Perhaps the makers of the spiritual “Pray All [True Believers]” lifted up such incidents when they sang, “Pray all true believers / I’ve been to Jerusalem / Patroller around me / Thank God he did not catch me.” As individuals and as a group, the enslaved people did not allow brutality to turn them away from an appointment with Jesus. Despite grave personal risk, they took seriously Jesus’ admonition to pray and were faithful to it both in common and in private.

When they prayed, the enslaved peoples often assumed an intimate relationship with Jesus, and “a little talk with [him always] made it right.” They called him “rock in a weary land,” “shelter in a storm,” “cornerstone” and “Captain.” Jesus is a cherished friend who accompanies them through their hardships. Through his example, they learn to walk with one another. In “Travel On” the disciple is urged to heed what Jesus has to say, to keep on the way and to help others stay on the path as well. Those resolute believers, whose names are known only to Jesus, sang, “If you meet crosses/ And trials on the way,/ Just keep your trust in Jesus/ And don’t forget to pray.”

In the midst of death-dealing circumstances, the enslaved people typically struggled to create and live a life worthy of the calling of a Christian. The legacy of their discipleship inspires us; and their suffering and blood, like that of other Christian martyrs, seeds and nourishes our efforts to incarnate the mission of Jesus of Nazareth in the here and now.

There is little in contemporary life to help us grasp the horror and revulsion that people in the ancient world felt about crucifixion. Biblical scholars, historians and theologians spell out for us how the Romans used crucifixion to control subject peoples, subdue rebellious slaves and intimidate would-be insurrectionists. They describe in detail the excruciating physical suffering of crucifixion and stress the humiliation of such death. What shock the disciples and the crowd must have felt when Jesus offered the dare, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8: 34). This summons ran counter to all religious, cultural and social expectations. Hearing this demand and recoiling from its implications, more than a few of the women and men who had been enthralled by the rabbi from Nazareth turned away. They feared crucifixion and wanted no part of it. But other women and men stumbled on after him—and have done so ever since.

To follow Jesus of Nazareth is to follow a way that requires us to take up the cross. We never know precisely when or how the cross comes to us: deep darkness of mind or heart, aching and persistent loneliness, foreclosure of a future, immeasurable loss, diminishment, breakdowns in society, the burden of speaking truth. But when the cross presents itself, we must pick it up and follow Jesus. As we walk, the wide road yields to a narrow way; ruts and obstacles jolt us on the journey. Jesus is just ahead of us, but we see him as if through a glass darkly. Not much is clear. Faith and love, hope and prayer are the meat and bread, sweet and drink that sustain us along with the example of enslaved women and men, who have walked this “way” before us; indeed, they walk with us now. If we close our eyes and open our hearts, surely we can hear them singing to bear us up: “O Jesus is our Captain/ We’ll meet at Zion’s gateway/ We’ll talk this story over/ We’ll enter into glory.”

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