



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

Deep River: The Importance of African-American Spirituals

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Psalm 137

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the willows
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us to sing songs
and our tormentors demanded songs of joy.
they said: "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?*

In 1619 a Dutch Man of War brought to this country the first group of African slaves. The ship landed on the coast of Virginia and for nearly 250 years, the slave trade was booming business. A slave could be bought for \$25 and sold upon arrival for \$150, that price rising sharply after the slave trade became illegal. This is so abhorrent to our modern mind that it's difficult to imagine humans selling other humans for personal gain.

Many slaves died en route, either from disease or starvation. The conditions on the slave ships were deplorable. Slaves were stuffed in the lower decks of the ships, without light or air, their legs and arms shackled. One slave ship was originally built to carry a maximum of 450 people but was carrying over 600 slaves from Africa to the Americas. On board the ship, the slaves were harshly treated and taunted by the crew, who took pleasure in humiliating them in a variety of ways.

(Way Over in Beulah Lan', André J. Thomas, p. 4)

Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth tell stories of ancestors who, being sold as slaves, were goaded into singing to amuse their captors. Adding to the injury of being ripped out of their native culture was this insult of being forced to sing as a way of making fun of the primitive African. Kidnapped from a culture where music played an integral role in daily living, where those operating the slave ships had observed with cynical bemusement the primitive singing and dancing that accompanied the daily activities in Africa, these slaves were forced to sing as a sport, as if they were some circus spectacle, not unlike the Israelites in their captivity in Babylon.

Out of this music and culture, however, evolved what has been called the Negro spiritual, one of America's greatest art forms, writes Benjamin May. "The creation of spirituals was no accident," he

says. “It was a creation born of necessity, so that the slave might more adequately adjust himself to the conditions of the new world.” As the slaves encountered Christianity, and found in it a certain sympathy for their plight, they adapted their native music to what they knew of the Bible, and, in the words of James Weldon Johnson:

The result was a body of songs voicing all the cardinal virtues of Christianity—patience—
forbearance—love—faith—and hope—through a necessarily modified form of primitive
African music. (Ibid, p. 6)

Today we honor Black History Month by remembering and by singing some of this music that was created out of the agony of oppression by foreigners held against their will. The spiritual was a tool to express their grief, their longing, their hope for a new life. Singing, while forced at first, became a lifeline for the African American slave. The spiritual long embodied this lifeline, providing the slave an outlet for the emotions and activities of everyday concerns.

One of the most familiar, and most representative of these songs is “Deep River.” It captures the pathos of the slave yearning for freedom, not only from slavery but also from the bondage and hard labor of life itself, to that final resting place in the presence of God. Theologian Howard Thurman says that this song is the most universal in insight and the most intellectual of all the spirituals. Water symbolized life where, as scientists tell us, we emerged millions of years ago to walk upright on the earth and for the slave it was also the means by which they were brought into slavery, the barrier that kept them from going home, as well as the means of escaping their freedom. It was both a physical and a spiritual symbol of hope. And so they sang:

*Deep river, my home is over Jordan,
O don't you want to go to that gospel Feast,
that promised land where all is Peace?
Deep river, I want to cross over into camp ground.*

On the plantation they heard stories from the Bible that were meant to oppress them into compliance and force upon them a Christianity that would drown them in Western white superior culture. But the slaves turned those Bible stories upside down, using them as a means to escape, if only emotionally and mentally, their captors; the story of the Hebrews enslaved by the Egyptians, for example, became a source of blessing as they learned of God's bringing them through the water to the Promised Land. The very thing that was used to oppress them gave them a context for their own salvation from that oppression. The question of the captive Israelites became the quest for the African slave: “How can we sing in a foreign land?”

There is a great strength in the assurance that they were children of destiny. They believed that God was at work in all history; that God manifested himself in certain specific acts that seemed to be over and above the historic process itself. The slave caught the significance of this truth at once when she sang:

*When Israel was in Egypt's land: Let my people go.
Oppressed so hard they could not stand: Let my people go.
Go down, Moses, 'way down in Egypt's land.
Tell ole Pharaoh, let my people go.*

The sheer number of existing spirituals is staggering. In 1998 the Library of Congress had on record more than 6,000 spirituals or fragments of spirituals, music that has endured the test of time. Universal is its message that, although the slave's experience was bitter, there was a heartfelt voice that triumphed and transcended the hardships that is still heard today!

I'm proud to say that New England Church was part of the Underground Railroad that helped slaves find freedom in years gone by. Our roots are in our parent church on Aurora's east side where we were very active participants in the risky business of harboring slaves and transporting them to freedom. We continue that same fervor today as we stand in solidarity with people who live under the oppression of governmental and social systems, with people still ostracized from the mainstream because of their gender, race, religion or orientation. As we honor Black History Month we recommit ourselves to bring freedom, justice, hope and unconditional love to everyone.

In that same spirit that fostered the role of the spiritual in everyday life, we play for you now an arrangement of six spirituals:

Deep River,
Swing Low Sweet Chariot,
In that Great Getting' Up Morning,
I want Jesus to Walk with Me,
Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,
and Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho

In the presence of God we commit once again to be the body of Christ by walking hand in hand with the oppressed as together we march toward the reality of freedom.

--Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of light and life, we come into this place once again to find sanctuary amid our busy lives. We come not to escape but to be nourished and quickened in spirit to go back out into the world you loved to be part of its joy.

There is so much about this world that is good. We are warmed by the beauty that surrounds us each day in cardinal red starkly contrasted against the gray of winter; chickadee songs even when it's cold and windy; flowers that even now are being awakened deep in the still-cold earth and will soon peek out above the brown earth to herald spring. We stand amazed at the rapid advances that are being made in medicine to cure or at least abate the ravages of disease, allowing more people the opportunity to enjoy life abundantly. Our minds can't quite grasp the knowledge that on the outer edges of solar systems beyond our own, new planets are being formed much like ours was formed millions of years ago. We are mesmerized to read about scientists who have observed the warping of space-time generated by the collision of two black holes more than a billion light-years from Earth. We are grateful for the strides that have been made in our pledge to bring liberty and justice for all into reality so that the artificial divide between race, religion, gender, orientation and intellect may dissolve.

But there is so much about this world that is bad. It's difficult to comprehend how people can become so angry that they torture and kill innocent human beings and steal the holy breath you have given them. It is incomprehensible to those of us who have found in a religious system an unconditional love and acceptance to see radicals misuse religious tenets to oppress, kill, undermine, negate, manipulate and usurp power over people who believe differently than they. There is so much more to be done in this world, and we pray you to empower us to be ever diligent in our commitment to be part of the resolution and not part of the problem.

Today as we honor Black History Month, we pray that the music and the words spoken one to another inspire us to go into our world renewed in spirit, carried on the wings of these spirituals and the message they convey and the perseverance of spirit that they represent. Seen in the context of their origins, they are sources of inspiration for everyone past, present and future. May our time together today be one of integrity, honesty and inspiration to be what you have called us to be in this time and place. In the name of the Christ we pray, Amen.