



James H. Cone
THE CROSS AND THE LYNCHING TREE
Reading and Discussion Guide,
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Emmanuel Memorial Episcopal Church

“He [Jesus] carried our sins in his body up onto the tree...”
(1 Peter 2:24)

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.

We suggest that in your first reading of this book, unless you already have a particular interest in 20th century American theologians, you skip chapter 2, in which Cone analyzes the work of his Union Theological Seminary colleague Reinhold Niebuhr. This chapter has interesting insights and can be returned to at the end if you like, but those who do not already know Niebuhr’s work are likely to find it less gripping reading than the other chapters.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

“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?

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.” (16)

- 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?

Cone quotes New Testament scholar Paula Frederickson: "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? What was the message to blacks? To whites?

Mamie Till prayed, "Lord you gave your son to remedy a condition, but who knows...the death of my only son might bring an end to lynching," and wanted her son Emmett's "battered and bloated corpse" on view at his funeral (66-7).

- 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?

Martin Luther King said, "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 was the "spiritual death" King was speaking of?
- How is the willingness to stand up for freedom, even if it entails suffering, redemptive?

"Black suffering needs...voices who can tell brutal and beautiful stories of how oppressed black people survived with a measure of dignity when they were not meant to" (95) 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 lynching or 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?

James Cone uses poetry, music and art to deepen our appreciation of narratives both from the Bible and from America's history of lynching. You can listen to some of the music on this playlist based on the book: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/546ijyUaF7wYpTfs8ldIRM?si=IW24rJi8TJasKBBW67VcTg>

- 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 situations in our contemporary world? What does this say to you?

"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)

- How would we know that redemption had taken place in the situation of racial divisions? What Scripture might we use to describe it?
- Did this book cause you to see the cross in a different way? To see yourself or your history in a different way?

This guide is adapted from 2016 materials produced by Elon Cook and edited by Linda Grenz for the Episcopal publisher LeaderResources, in collaboration with the Center for Reconciliation from the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island.