

The Reverend Jacqueline Luck

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Text: Amos 5

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals, I will look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Sermon: Mississippi's Sons

The sermon this morning is titled *Mississippi's Sons*, referring to the authors I've read since arriving in the Magnolia State; a friend promises to loan me a Eudora Welty book, so I can soon preach on Mississippi's Daughters! Which will, indeed be a treat!

Mississippi's Sons has to do in actuality with the insight I've gained by reading Richard Wright's, *Black Boy*, and Clifton Taulbert's, *When We Were Colored*. ...What I've learned from them...to what they have opened my eyes.

Richard Wright, was born in 1908 on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi; he died in 1960 at 52 years of age. Wright spent many of his younger years in Jackson, MS, and left for Memphis when he was 17. He wrote these words about that year in Memphis:

That afternoon I addressed myself to forging a note. Now, what were those names of books written by H.L. Mencken? I did not know any of them. I finally wrote what I thought would be a fool proof note: Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy-I used the word "nigger" to make the librarian feel I could not possibly be the author of the note- have some books by H.L. Mencken? I forged the white man's name.¹

You see, Richard had with much forethought asked an Irish Catholic man at work, a man also hated by the white southerners there, a man they they called "a Pope lover," Richard asked that man if he could use his library card to get books

¹Black Boy, Richard Wright, 246.

at the library. Several days later the white man gave Richard Wright his card saying he would use his wife's library card.

Actually, that was a pretty risky, and I might add, a beautiful thing to do as Blacks couldn't have library cards in the southern segregated public libraries of Memphis, or Jackson, or elsewhere in the south at that time. The ruse worked-over, and over again, though the white librarian didn't like giving the books to Richard ...they were radical reading even for a white man in the South!

And, Richard consumed the books, reading all night, eating a can of cold pork and beans for breakfast, and working all day, dragging home to read more and more. He was changing. He was learning. He knew things, and he worked to keep his dangerous secret bottled within. He described this experience:

I felt trapped and occasionally, for a few days, I would stop reading. But a vague hunger would come over me for books, books that opened up new avenues of feeling and seeing, and again I would forge another note to the white librarian. Again I would read and wonder as only the naive and unlettered can read and wonder, feeling that I carried a secret criminal burden about with me each day.

That winter my mother and brother came and we set up housekeeping, buying furniture on the installment plan, being cheated and yet knowing no way of avoiding it. I began to eat warm food and to my surprise found that regular meals enabled me to read faster. I may have lived through many illnesses and survived them, never suspecting I was ill. My brother obtained a job and we began to save toward the trip north, plotting our time, setting tentative dates for departure.

I told none of the white men on the job that I was planning to go north; I knew that the moment they felt I was thinking of the North they would change toward me. It would have made them feel that I did not like the life I was living, and because my life was completely conditioned by what they said or did, it would have been tantamount to challenging them.

I could calculate my chances for life in the South as a Negro fairly clearly now.

I could fight the southern whites by organizing with other Negroes, as my

grandfather had done. But I knew that I could never win that way; there were many whites and there were but a few blacks. They were strong and we were weak. Outright black rebellion could never win. If I fought openly I would die and I did not want to die. News of the lynchings were frequent.

I could submit and live the life of a genial slave, but that was impossible. All of my life had shaped me to live my own feelings and thoughts. I could make up to Bess and marry her and inherit the house. But that, too, would be the life of a slave; if I did that, I would crush to death something within me, and I would hate myself as much as I knew the whites already hated those who submitted. Neither could I ever willingly present myself to be kicked as Shorty had done. I would rather have died than do that.

I could, of course, forget them; and find release from anxiety in sex and alcohol. But the memory of how my father had conducted himself made that course repugnant. If I did not want others to violate my life, how could I voluntarily violate it myself?

I had no hope whatever of being a professional man. Not only had I been so conditioned that I did not desire it, but the fulfillment of such an ambition was beyond my capabilities. Well-to-do Negroes lived in a world that was almost as alien to me as the world inhabited by whites.

What, then, was there? I held my life in my mind, in my consciousness each day, feeling at times that I would stumble and drop it, spill it forever. My reading had created a vast sense of distance between me and the world in which I lived and tried to make a living, and that sense of distance was increasing each day. My days and nights were one long, quiet, continuously contained dream of terror, tension, and anxiety. I wondered how long I could bear it.²

I choose to read Wright's words because I felt their power would be lost if summarized. And again, I read, this time from the forward to *Black Boy*, where Dr. Jerry W. Ward, Jr. of Tougaloo College writes that in this autobiography, Richard Wright:

"...names the lie upon which American society has historically fed: the

²Black Boy, Richard Wright, 252-253.

*beautiful and truly noble democratic theories of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The reality for a substantial number of Americans has been death, unfreedom, and the flight from despair. Black Boy (American Hunger) is to some degree, then an accounting for this reality, a critique of America's optimism betrayed. It deconstructs the myth.*³

Clifton L. Taulbert's, *When We Were Colored*, is a memoir written for his descendants highlighting the good things of his growing up in Mississippi. I learned from him ...I guess I really couldn't imagine much good in the lives he and so many shared. He speaks of pride and dignity and love, and of his community. He quietly mentions that the white high school was near his home, but that he rode the school bus over a hundred miles a day to attend the black school.

The objectives of the two books were not the same ...in fact Taulbert almost lulls one into "the American myth" of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all. But as I read his description of bathing in a galvanized steel tub in the kitchen as he prepared for his graduation in 1963, I realized this was no quaint story of some long ago time; this was his story at the same time I was occupied with circle skirts with layers of stiff petticoats, boys and bobby socks, oblivious to anyone bathing in the kitchen without running water, or riding the school bus for over an hour each day!

The words keep ringing in my ears: *Richard Wright names the lie upon which American society has historically fed: ...The reality for a substantial number of Americans has been death, unfreedom, and the flight from despair. Black Boydeconstructs the myth.*⁴

I was not thinking about these words when I wrote in my column for this month's newsletter about Americans going through an identity crises with the news of American involvement in torture, and of government spying on American citizens illegally. I was writing as if that American mythology of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all, had been true until now,which just goes to show how deeply we want to believe. Americans do not want to face the

³Black Boy, Introduction: Jerry W. Ward, Jr. Tougaloo College, xviii.

⁴Black Boy, Introduction: Jerry W. Ward, Jr. Tougaloo College, xviii.

deconstructed myth that has been thrown in our faces time, after time, after time.

We agree that the pursuits of life, liberty and happiness for all, are beautiful and truly noble democratic theories for which we strive. It is the goal to which this country and each of us aspires. Aspire to, but we should not lie to ourselves. Lee Greenwood sings, *I'm Proud to be a American*, but I believe he has the wrong words: We are darn fortunate to be Americans! This country has much to offer and does have much to be proud of, but there is much that makes our mythology a lie... a lie we tell ourselves.

This sermon is not a passive bow to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others of the Civil Rights Movement who thankfully led Americans out of the clutches of their evil and personal sins against humanity.

No. There is much to be done yet. Wednesday, I attended the state Mississippi Immigrant Rights Association⁵(MIRA) meeting, and heard what is happening in the wake of Katrina in Mississippi and Louisiana. The victims are not citizens. They come to this country voluntarily, often illegally, but then get caught up in a system of forced labor nearly impossible to escape. Americans benefit from their grief, and frankly from the grief of multitudes! Once again, Brother Martin, we have become morally guilty in our complicity in denying basic rights to fellow human beings!

Victoria Cintra of MIRA, reminded the Mississippi Legislature and later those of us in Wednesday's meeting that it is the immigrant community rebuilding the South. Basically we are using the immigrants while we need them, but what will happen after rebuilding? There are no provisions for the immigrant's situations to improve, or for them to be protected, or even to have legal rights while they rebuild the Gulf Coast.

She told of immigrant worker barracks often 18 wheeler trailers with beds for 61 workers each. Those beds are essentially shelves stacked on one and another. In one camp in Louisiana hundreds of workers were lodged in such barracks with policemen patrolling the entrance to the compound. The other sides are bordered by a bayou with alligators ...demonstrations of their voracity

⁵Mississippi Immigrants Rights Association, Director William (Bill) Chandler.

are performed by throwing chickens in the water on a rope ...the rope returns without the chicken. There is no way to escape.

Another such immigrant laborer's shelter in New Orleans is a motel with 150 rooms used for lodgings by 600 workers. The security officers can enter rooms at anytime, including the women's rooms. These are examples of housing provided by employers who have promised lodging for the workers. Others are forced to sleep in cars deserted in the wake of the water ...full of toxic residue, and mold!

Immigrant workers are hired by LVI Services,⁶ which advertises its mission "to provide the most cost effective, highest quality environmental remediation and demolition services available." LVI was hired without bidding to clean up the infrastructure on the Coast including the Super Dome. Certified workers are supposed to be used to clean up asbestos and toxic waste, but the demand is so great that LVI is using uncertified workers not really aware of the danger of the work. I understand this is an issue the Sierra Club is working on. Victoria said there was recently an immigration raid at the Super Dome. LVI's workers names were taken, and they were told they would be deported if seen again. This raid occurred before pay day and undocumented immigrant workers fled without their pay, with no legal recourse. This is a pattern for immigrant workers according to Victoria, and things are not really different in Mississippi.

One Honduran man fell off a roof in Mississippi, and after much begging and pleading was taken to a hospital and left by others on the crew. There was no worker's compensation because his employer had not paid insurance for the workers. The hospital did operate and put a steel rod in his leg. Some of the hospital staff then took him in a wheel chair to an apartment where he was soon evicted for no rent, and put on the streets in a wheel chair. Victoria Cintra found him in Gulfport, homeless, and in the wheel chair on the street. She arranged to place him in a shelter and has documented his story, one of many. We were shown pictures and video.

Often, as in the casino,the Imperial Palace, in Biloxi, the construction

⁶LVI Services, Inc., Abatement and Demolition Nationwide

worker that that appears the most "American" is designated as a crew chief, but Latinos, and Latino appearing, workers sign a document designating themselves as individual contractors making them ineligible for health benefits or overtime. All laborers sign these contracts before working even though they don't read English, and often workers are paid in cash leaving no paper trail, as you can imagine, when someone is injured there is no insurance. The Imperial Palace was a FEMA headquarters; these immoral practices were going on right beneath their noses!

Kellogg, Brown and Root, the subsidiary of Halliburton has a record of working immigrants and not paying them. There is a report of Gulfport police beating an immigrant who didn't understand English and their demands. I saw photos of him taken in the emergency room. "The Lie" continues to haunt us. However in all this Victoria Cintra sees hope in giving short-term or long-term amnesty to workers helping to rebuild the Gulf Coast. By legalizing immigrant workers in some manner, they would have more recourse for abuses of human rights.⁷

In closing, I turn again to Richard Wright who wrote of his later Northern experiences in *Black Boy*, resulting in the self's "knowing that all I possessed were words and dim knowledge that my country had shown me no examples of how to live a human life."⁸ I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human."⁹

In our hearing today and everyday, I pray that we and others be those "echoes" necessary to keep alive what is inexpressibly human in our hearts, and in the hearts of our brothers and sisters in Mississippi.

Go back to Mississippi, Dr. King charged his faithful, go back to Alabama, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be

⁷*OXFAM Exchange*, Fall 2006, *After the Hurricanes: A Chance for a New South?* Coco McCabe, 11.

⁸*Black Boy*, Introduction, Jerry W. Wade, Jr. Tougaloo College, xvix and 383.

⁹*Ibid*, 384.

*changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.*¹⁰ Somehow this situation, as all situations, can and will be changed. This situation will be changed!

May we be those "echoes" necessary to keep alive what is inexpressibly human in our hearts, and in the hearts of our brothers and sisters in Mississippi, and on the Gulf Coast! I pray, "May we be Thine instruments," of justice and healing, and, "may justice roll down like everlasting waters!"

May it be so! Amen.

¹⁰The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr, by Coretta Scott King,