

Christ's Strange Fruit  
Easter Sunday 2017  
John 20: 1-18  
Rev. Tom VandeStadt  
Congregational Church of Austin

Southern trees bear strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Abel Meerpol wrote the opening lines to his poem, *Strange Fruit*, after watching white people in Marion, Indiana, lynch two black men, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith. Meerpol's poem soon became the lyrics to a song. Billy Holiday sang them most powerfully and bitterly in her rendition of *Strange Fruit*.

Between 1882 and 1968, white Americans lynched at least 3,446 black Americans in nearly every state of the union. White Americans in Mississippi, Texas and Georgia lynched the highest number of black Americans. So intense was the terror of lynching for black Americans in the South, some said it was worse than slavery.

Theologian James Cone writes convincingly that American lynching and Roman crucifixion served the same purpose.

Roman crucifixion was a public spectacle of violence used to dominate the Jewish people. In the Jewish homeland, Rome crucified Jews they perceived to be rebellious or in any way threatening or disruptive to Rome's Imperial order. Crucifixion was a public act of cruel torture, sometimes long and drawn out. The intent was not simply to kill the condemned but to send a message to the Jewish population at large. Rome is your master. Rome will tolerate no resistance from you. Rome will not hesitate to torture and kill you.

In the United States, white Americans lynched black Americans with the same intent. James Cone writes:

Should a black in the South lift his hand or raise his voice to reprimand a white person, he would incur the full weight of the law and the mob. Even to look at white people in a manner regarded disrespectful could get a black lynched. Whites often lynched blacks to remind them of their powerlessness. Unemployed blacks passing through an area with no white man to vouch for them could end up in a chain gang or lynched. There were many "sundown towns" in the South and North, some with signs—Nigger, don't let the sun set on your head.

A black man could be walking down the road, minding his business, and his life could suddenly change by meeting a white man or a group of white men or boys who on a whim decided to have some fun with a Negro; and this could happen in Mississippi, or New York, or Arkansas, or Illinois.

On Good Friday we looked at the crucifixion of Jesus through a particular theological or spiritual lens, a lens through which we saw the crucifixion of Jesus as an act of solidarity with all people who suffer the most horrible forms of oppression, torture and death.

As an act of solidarity with all the people the Salvadoran Christian, Ignacio Ellacuria, called the “crucified people of history.” The poorest, most exploited, most persecuted.

As an act of solidarity with the thousands of black Americans that white Americans lynched. In 1916, Lorenzo Harris painted a scene portraying a mob of white people who just lynched a black man. Behind the black man is a silhouette image of Christ. Upon the tree from which the black man is hanging is a sign that reads: “Inasmuch as ye did it to the least of these, My brethren, ye did it unto me.”

Inasmuch as you lynch these, my black brothers and sisters, you lynch me.

Romans crucified Christ to enforce their dominance over the Jewish people. White Americans lynched Christ to enforce their dominance over black Americans. White Americans lynched Christ at least 3,446 times. Christ himself was the strange fruit hanging from the tree.

Southern trees bear strange fruit,  
Christ’s blood on the leaves and Christ’s blood at the root,  
Christ’s black body swinging in the Southern breeze,  
Christ, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Recall now these words from John’s Gospel. “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me, and I in them, bear much fruit.”

When we live in Christ and Christ lives in us, our lives bear Christ’s fruit. Our lives manifest Christ’s qualities. Christ’s disposition and way of relating to God and other people.

When we live in Christ and Christ lives in us, we are humble, merciful, compassionate and righteous like Christ. We share Christ’s sympathies and commitments. We bear the fire of Christ’s fierce passion for justice in our hearts. We love with his liberating, healing, reconciling love.

“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me, and I in them, bear much fruit.”

Yet we just noted that Christ himself, in solidarity with the oppressed, is strange fruit. Does that make us strange fruit as well, when we live in Christ and Christ lives in us?

Yes it most certainly does. We who give our lives to Christ, and who ask Christ to inhabit our lives, are strange fruit as well in this world.

We’re strange because we refuse to conform to a world in which some crucify others in order to dominate them. We’re strangers to a world like that. In the world we seek to create as people bearing Christ’s fruit, a crucifixion would never happen. In the world we seek to create, people do not dominate other people. We stand out as strangers to a world where people dominate and crucify.

We’re strange because we refuse to conform to a world in which people of one color lynch people of another color to dominate them. Or if no longer lynch, then red-line, racial profile and mass incarcerate. We’re strangers to a world like that. In the world we seek to create, racial prejudice and racial dominance do not exist. We stand out as strangers to a world where people of one color claim supremacy over people of another color.

We’re strange because we refuse to value much of what the conventional world values—looking out for number one, getting ahead, high status, possessing things, increasing our wealth, being successful in the ways the world defines success. We’re strangers to a world like that. In

the world we seek to create, people don't chase after and compete for these things. Our hearts and aspirations and commitments are elsewhere. We treasure other things. We cultivate other capacities. We stand out as strangers because we live a different way.

And now here's the Easter message.

We're strange not only because our sympathies and commitments are, like Christ's, to the people at the bottom rather than to those at the top, to the people who are dominated rather than to those who dominate, to the people who are crucified and lynched rather than to those who crucify and lynch, but more importantly, because we have faith that those at the top, those who dominate, those who crucify and lynch, will not have the final word on this earth.

We're strange because, despite all the evidence, despite how things now look, despite the way human history appears, we have faith that those who dominate, those who crucify and lynch, will not inherit this earth. They will not determine the outcome of human history. They will not have the final say.

Those who used the cross to dominate the Jewish people did not have the final say. They killed Christ. Crucified him on a cross. Sealed him in a tomb behind a big stone. And said to themselves, that's it. He's gone. Silent for good. No longer will he disrupt our imperial order. We have prevailed.

But Christ did not stay gone. Christ did not stay silent. Christ returned to those who loved him. And those who lived within Christ, those in whom Christ lived, continued to bear his strange fruit. Refusing to conform to the world in which some people dominate other people. Refusing to conform to the world's conventional values. Continuing to be committed to those at the bottom. Continuing to proclaim that the meek will inherit the earth, not those who dominate.

We're strangers because we have faith that God not only prevails over death, but that God will prevail over those who use death to dominate.

Here that again. God prevails not only over death, God will prevail over those who use death to dominate. And God will prevail not through force, not by killing, but through the liberating, healing and reconciling love that is the very fruit of Christ.

The liberating, healing and reconciling love that is the very fruit of Christ—that is the strange fruit that will have the final say in this world.

Christ is risen, indeed. Let us bear his fruit in our lives.