

Imagining Possibilities

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Nurtured in the black church tradition, and more specifically Progressive and National Baptist faith communities, my commitment to **make disciples for Jesus Christ**, to **renew the church** and to **transform the world** is shaped by a growing desire to discover, to reclaim, and to rename experiences that provide a more comprehensive depiction of shared stories. My dissertation, “Just Act: Ida B. Wells and Ethical Complications of Lynching”, which I defended in February 2008, confirms that lynching was and continues to function as a way to understand race relations in America. One of the ways that lynching can be used to understand race relations in the 21st century is through a modification of Wells’s three-fold approach to use boycotting, migration and narratives as strategies to combat this most vile form of inhumane treatment. Wells, a leading late 19th and early 20th century anti-lynching spokesperson and active church woman (Northern Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal, and Presbyterian) insisted that defending justice is not optional for people who profess to be followers of the one who is “the truth and the way.”

There are several ways in which my research and teaching interests are an expression of Saint Paul’s new mission statement. In particular, my research on the ethical complications of lynching suggests that we must be intentional about the manner in which we **educate leaders** to participate actively in **renewing the church**. This is especially true in a post 9/11 world where there is a tendency to ignore government sanctioned acts of terror. One of the reasons lynching was so effective following the legal demise of chattel slavery was the ability of its architects to use fear as a tool to control human behavior. I find that fear is still used as a tool to shape human response which in turn can hinder our ability at both an individual and corporate level to act as agents of justice. Of particular concern for me is the manner in which this reaction to tactics of fear can adversely affect the church’s ability to **make disciples for Jesus Christ**. I, however, remain encouraged. I attribute my attitude in part to an aspect of my research that offers some insight into how to develop strategies of resistance that can be used to facilitate collaborations on local, state, regional, national and international levels to “address the causes of human suffering that result from poverty” and a distorted or displaced understanding of privilege. I am also heartened by the fact that in every generation there are individuals whose life-experiences remind me that God continues to call us to live in a manner that point to the Divine’s ability to use us as agents to **renew the church** and **transform the world**.

A case in point is my reaction to a Wednesday, October 10, 2007 experience in Kresge Chapel. Rev. Wallace Hartsfield, Sr., then the senior pastor of Metropolitan Baptist Church in Kansas City, Missouri was the guest preacher. I recall neither the scripture nor the title of this message but remember that he shared a desire to want to know the Christ more intimately. Periodically, I reflect on an illustration he offered, during a post chapel community conversation, from his life experience that he attributed to his growing understanding of what it means to know the Christ. A few years shy of 80, Rev. Hartsfield vividly recounted a lynching that he witnessed in Florida at the age of eight. As he talked about the victim being dragged through the street, with his body visibly riddled with bullets after being used for target practice, it took much discipline on my part not to weep as I reflected on the similarities between 1892 (the year Wells began her anti-lynching campaign), 1937 (the year Hartsfield witnessed lynching), and 2007 and realized how much work is still required to foster a sense of justice in the United States. I left this session with Rev. Hartsfield motivated to continue my research on lynching. To that end, a future research project tentatively titled “Remembering Lynching: African American Pastors on Lessons of Hope and Resistance”, will look at the role of faith in shaping human response to moral problems. This project, along with my courses in Ethics and Contextual Education, is a wonderful opportunity for me to help students think about the manner in which we embody our core beliefs and what messages our actions signal about the God whom we say has called us to be agents of transformation.