

Podcast #73: Lessons from the Songs of the Slaves

I noticed when we last visited Mount Vernon, a section of the museum that used to house personal items of Washington's family was closed and they were creating an exhibit to highlight slavery. I've heard they are doing the same thing at Thomas Jefferson's home, Monticello. In fact, it seems there is a movement everywhere to bring awareness of the slavery issue to us.

I deplore slavery. It was a black mark on our history. But I fear they—whoever they are-- are using it to further divide us as a people and making it an issue of race. Slavery has never cared about the color of skin. Joseph was sold as a slave into Egypt, Daniel was carried as a slave into Babylon. The Lord's chosen people served as slaves to the Egyptians for 400 years. The Greeks were slaves to the Romans. Aesop was a slave. As was Saint Patrick for a time. Captain John Smith of Pocahontas fame was sold as a slave by the Turks. Cervantes who gave the world Don Quixote was a slave. There was a time when white Christians were captured from coastal cities in Europe and forced into slavery in the Ottoman Empire. In Africa, Africans captured and traded fellow Africans.

It is estimated that today, worldwide, that are 45.8 million people subject to some form of slavery, the most common is referred to as human trafficking. Even debt bondage is a form of slavery today.

So, yes, do teach your children about slavery. But it's not the single story of evil white people subjecting black people into slavery. Such a story makes us hate ourselves, when what we should really be focusing on is the fact that we actually abolished it!

Instead of focusing on the cruel stories of slavery, I'd like to spend some time focusing on the tremendous gifts the Africans brought to the soil of America. They played a vital role and provide us with some of the most inspirational stories ever of overcoming tremendous odds. Today I want to focus on their hearts as expressed through the beautiful Negro spirituals. And in the next podcast, I want to highlight the story of a hero of mine, Mary Macleod Bethune.

Most of what I am going to share with you came from a book written in 1915, *The Folk Song of the American Negro* by John Wesley Work. I'll link it in the notes. This man spent ten years hunting in out-of-the-way places, following trails from state to state to learn the story from the songs themselves and from the makers of the songs. The history and description came to him first hand from those who have been a part of them.

Folk song is the unguarded, spontaneous expression of a people's soul. It is their natural means of communication, which they understand among themselves. We know for a fact that it was never intended that the world should understand the slave music. It was a kind of secret password into their lives. ...the only reliable source of truth in regard to the fundamentals of his character, is his songs. .

The African soul for some inexplicable reason expresses himself in its own peculiar scale—1,2,3,5,6,—. Every shout of triumph, every note of endurance, every wail of sorrow, every cry of pain, every heart-throb of love, every prompting of religion, is expressed in that scale.

I will add—what that means is that all his songs can be played on the black keys alone on the piano.

When the Africans were snatched away to the new world to fell the forest and cultivate the fields, they left their all save their song. This they brought, because the All-wise knew the New World had great need of it.

Thirty centuries ago, amidst the dawning civilization of the Mediterranean shores, science taught that the earth was a circular disc surrounded by the ocean. Contemporaneous legends told of the swarthy Ethiopians living in two divisions; one in the extreme East, the land of the rising sun, and the other in the extreme West, the land of the setting sun. Consequently the Ethiopians dwelt in perpetual light. This light was symbolic of their own souls; pure, bright and happy. So worthy were they that the Gods from Olympus honored them with regular visits. Homer in narrating these events calls them the ‘blameless Ethiopians’ and Vergil speak of the black King of the Ethiopians, as the son of Aurora, the Goddess of the Morning and of Light.

Ruthless centuries have not overcast that brightness, nor have they destroyed the soul happiness of the Son of Light. His soul is a song. He expresses his every experience, his whole life, in terms of melody and he passes through the Valley of the Shadow of Death with a song upon his lips.

Mark Twain tells the story of an old negro servant of his, who seemed always to be happy. Her face was ever lighted with a smile and she shed a brightness wherever she went. “She was sixty years old, but her eye was undimmed and her strength unimpaired. It was no more trouble for her to laugh than for a bird to sing.” “Aunt Rachel, how is it that you’ve lived sixty years and have no trouble?” She told the story of her life. Of course, she had been a slave. She once had as happy a family as a slave could have. She had seen her husband and six children sold from her in one day. She saw them carried away into different directions, some away down South; and only one of whom, a boy, she had ever seen or heard of since. And yet, as Mark Twain says, “It was no more trouble for her to laugh than for a bird to sing.” Aunt Rachel is an epitome of her race. She lives at the mountain top.

The human heart cannot perceive righteousness in being torn from those it loves, from the memories and attachments that make up the happiness of life, to be forced to labor hard and long that another may eat, rest and be comfortable—yea, to suffer and die at the whim of a master. This is surely beyond a mortal’s comprehension of justice. Still through all these crushing experiences, the Negro slave trusted God. What faith!

Great souls are souls of great faith. Great faith is a mighty weapon for fighting battles and winning victories. No faithless, doubting soul has been a positive blessing to mankind...Judged by his own soul-thoughts, his supreme virtue is faith; for every one of his songs is a song of faith. Faith is the all-pervading power of all the Negro’s music. Someone has stated that if the Bible should be lost, it could be recovered and reconstructed from the mind of the Negro. Some masters who did not believe in the slave’s God or in his religion had some extraordinary experiences. In Southern Kentucky, a slave, John by name, was known for his piety, religion

and seasons of prayer and praise. Like Daniel in Babylon, nothing could prevent him from turning his face toward Jerusalem in prayer. The time came when John had to be sold. The master who was about to buy him said, "John, they tell me that you are one of these great praying negroes. Now, I want to tell you that when I buy you, all that stuff must stop." John answered, "Massa, if that's the case, you better not buy me, for I'se bound to pray, and I'se goin to pray." "All right, we'll see about that," said the master and John was bought. It was not long before this master missed John, and upon learning from the slave's own lips that he had been praying, his wrath blazed in angry flame, and with curses he tore John's flesh with the cruel lash. He did his best to kill him. That night, the master lay down in complacency, while John lay down in torture. But peace and complacency soon flew away on the dark wings of the night, and the master was troubled in mind. His soul was like a stormy sea. He left his bed and walked the floor. The love of a wife could not comfort him, and the physician he refused to see. The God of John and of John's religion had convicted the master of his sinfulness. When no help came to his tempestuous soul, in his extremity he said "Send for John." With labored step, John struggled to the big house with a prayer on his lips, and when the master saw him, he cried, "John, pray for me." In bloody pain, John sank down upon his knees and prayed for his weeping master. God heard that prayer, and the light a new life broke in upon the master's vision. He expressed, "the best investment I ever made, the best money I ever spent, was when I bought John."

A most natural consequence of having faith is having joy, for the soul that believes that all things will eventuate according to the laws of right, and that "God's in his Heaven," has joy in his security. ...The believer can smile through tears and shout Hallelujah! The Negro has the habit of being happy.

In all his song there is neither trace nor hint of hatred or revenge. It is most assuredly divine in human nature, that such a stupendous burden as human bondage, with all its inherent sorrows and heart breakings could fail to arouse in the heart of the slave sentiments of hatred and revenge against his master.

"No man can drag me so low as to make me hate him." The slave would say. The world needs to know that love is stronger than hatred.

Uncle Anthony was owned by an August County master, and lived happily with this faithful wife. Their cabin was a realm of melody. It was singing, singing, singing! One day, Heaven sent a child to them, and there was more singing, with a tenderer, more ecstatic note. The glad father worked at odd times upon a rude cradle for his babe, in which she could lie, rock and go to sleep in the comforting lullabies from the full-hearted mother. At last the cradle was finished, and with an overflowing soul he bore it home. His joy grew with every step; anticipations of opening the door of that cabin, seeing the baby in the cradle, and beholding the smile upon that mother's face made his heart swell and his breath come short and fast! The cabin was there; that was all! Mother and babe were gone with the trader, somewhere toward the South. The bud of his happiness was dead! He searched the whole creation for his wife and child. The forest, hills, and fields mocked his cries. Days and days he was a madman in his grief. No threats or lashings could quiet him or force him back to his work. His usefulness as a slave was destroyed, and when a man whose heart had been touched and softened by the poor slave's sorrow offered to

buy him, his offer was at once accepted. Two thousand dollars was paid. The bargain closed, he immediately made out “free papers” for Anthony and told him to go find his wife and child, promising that if he found them, they, too, should be purchased and freed. The last account of him was that he was still pursuing his quest somewhere in North Carolina, with this song upon his lips:

Nobody knows the trouble I see, Lord,
Nobody knows the trouble I see;
Nobody knows the trouble I see, Lord,
Nobody knows like Jesus.”

In the darkness of bondage, it was his light;...The songs of the slave were his sweet consolation and his messages to Heaven, bearing sorrow, pain, joy, prayer and adoration. ...he could always unburden his heart in these simple songs pregnant with faith, hope and love. The man, though a slave, produced the song, and the song, in turn, produced a better man.

These songs are to us a storehouse of comfort. How can we ever forget those by gone days when our mothers sang them to us as our lullabies? “This old-time religion, makes me love everybody.” Think of the great blessing of being sung to sleep by such a lullaby–‘Makes Me Love Everybody!’” Think of the great favor of being reared in the atmosphere of “Lord, I Want to Be Like Jesus!” In times of sorrow, we have heard our mothers sing “Keep Me From Sinking Down,” and often, oh! So often, “March on and You shall Gain the Victory,” has run with such meaning through the humble home. Can you blame us for loving these songs which have so much inspired us to be and to do?

Thus we find faith, hope, patience, endurance, prayer, joy, courage and humility and the love of mankind, of home, and of God to be the salient qualities of the Negro’s soul. Such is the testimony of the only true expression of his soul, his songs. .. And although the story brings tears to our eyes, our hearts swell with pride that we can claim such ancestors...with their sweet inspirations.

The picture is before you: Virtues powerfully blended upon an ample background of love, energized by the spirit of the eternal.

No, these songs cannot die. They are eternal.