

Matthew 13:1-9; Revised Standard Version. 13:1...***That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2...And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat there; and the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3...And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. 4...And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. 5...Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, 6...but when the sun rose they were scorched; and since they had no root they withered away. 7...Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8...Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9...Those who are able to receive communication, receive this communication."***

True to Our Native Land

The first time I was able to take a really close look
at the lyrics of the hymn/prayer/Black National Anthem,
"Lift Every Voice and Sing"
I had a question.

The answer may seem obvious,...*but I had a question.*

The third stanza ends, *Shadowed beneath Thy hand, May we forever stand,
True to our God, True to our native land.*

My question was, "Which native land is that?"

If we hang out in the dictionary, the answer *is* obvious. Kinda.
"Native" means where you are born,
or the place to which you are associated by birth,
whether you subsequently reside there or not.

I was born in North America, so maybe this is my native land.
And, because of my skin, my hair, my nose and my hips
I am **also** associated with Africa.

Those who are born in and/or reside in Africa in this era
find me not African in the least, and they don't mind saying so.

While, at the same time, many people in North America—
(I live near some of them in Alabama)
would not be willing to give up their assertion of my African lineage

under any circumstances whatsoever.
Frankly, neither would I.

Carter G. Woodson

The Father of Black History Month
was born in Virginia in 1875.

He grew up under the firm tutelage of his father,
James Henry Woodson
who insisted this:

*Learning to accept insult, to compromise on principle,
to mislead your fellow man or betray your people
is to lose your soul.*

Woodson had to wander first the country and then the world
to find the education he sought.
But he found it.

He earned his bachelor's degree from integrated and co-educational
Berea College in Berea, Kentucky in 1904, just months before
a new Kentucky law made it illegal for Blacks and Whites to be educated
together — or anywhere near each other - in that state.

He studied at the Sorbonne in Paris
then earned his Master's degree from the University of Chicago
and his Ph.D. from Harvard University...
the second African American, after W.E.B. Du Bois, to do so.

Woodson and his Chicago friends began
the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915.
Woodson began the *Journal of Negro History* in 1916.
In 1926... Woodson began Black History Week; it would later become
Black History Month.
And in 1937, Woodson began *The Negro History Bulletin*.

In very first issue of the *Negro History Bulletin*, October, 1937

We find a variety of articles including, on page 6,

an article on Africa in which Woodson explores:

The presence of a variety of "races" (so to speak) in Africa,
how that happened, and where they are located.

How local manufacturing in Africa

became international through long-distance trade.

Cities including Jenne/Djenne and Timbuktu;

Empires and kingdoms

that were built well before the arrival of Europeans

including Ghana, Songhay/Songhai, Hausa, Ashanti
Yoruba and Kongo.

A Story:

My only opportunity to teach while working at Berea College
came when a respected colleague had urgent business out of state
and invited me to teach a one-time, two-night course:
“Black Church in the United States.”

I had taught “Black Church in the United States” before
but at Historically Black schools
where the students had and received more background on the subject.

I decided Berea College’s assortment of Appalachian Whites, Blacks & Latinx
and a considerable number of international students—
all very able, excellent listeners, diligent about assignments
might benefit from reading some background material
before our first evening.

To my usual prep items I added a book written by African historians
on teaching the history of West Africa.

With that, I prepared **The Handout**.

As was always the case when I taught that course,
I purposefully began the story
centuries before the discovery of the New World.

As **The Handout** opened we were,
as Paul Simon would say:
Under African Skies.

When the class and I met, I chatted them up while they were getting settled—
“How’d y’all do with The Handout?”

I got several helpful answers, which was good.
Then something unexpected happened.

Two international students, both African - were sitting next to each other
in rapt conversation together, nodding and gesturing.
Then one of them turned to me, raised her hand and said,
“Your handout was the first positive thing we have read about Africa
since we came to the United States two years ago.”
And tears burned my eyes.

Jesus always gives us his heart and his care in his teaching and preaching.
He gives us salvation, a future Back Home in the fullness of each of our time.

Salvation is more than gift enough by itself,
But, in his teaching and preaching, Jesus also gives us an enhanced future

here, on earth.

When Jesus hands us a parable,
he also gives us his mind...and his patience -
because the parables are work, they require thinking.
Also, the parables warrant re-examination, because they can,
when handled prayerfully,
be gently reinterpreted
to illuminate many of the struggles of this, our Now.

The Sower and the Seed is specifically
about understanding, and accepting,
the gift of the Kingdom of God.
However, our lives in Christ are about more than the initial commitment
we make.
We don't just want to receive the Kingdom of God when it is fulfilled.
We also want to live as Christians, to follow Jesus,
day by day and week by week, here and now.

In addition to speaking specifically,
The Sower and the Seed speaks generally
about how a thing can be developed, be GROWN.
So the parable could also be about something else,
... say, a Lenten commitment, your Lenten Commitment,
made just 10 days ago.

In that context, then,
the seed that falls on the path to be eaten by birds
could be a Lenten Commitment
you are not quite clear about.
The text could be telling us what a Lenten Commitment looks like
when we're not sure why we're doing it.
(Its like Seed on a Path Vulnerable to Birds)
We want to complete the commitment,
but **our lack of clarity** about what we really intend
makes it possible to let our Commitment slip from our grasp.
SO...Today is a perfect day to **become clear**,
and add that clarity of purpose to your Commitment.

The seed that falls on rocky ground could be the Lenten commitment
we really got excited about
until we realized
that in order to attain the visible growth we have in mind
there will also need to be some less visible growth
to support it.
The effort we **see** growing up // needs roots we **don't see**, growing down.

Without enough root to anchor it in place, and supply what it needs,
this Lenten Commitment is fragile.
(It's like seed on rocky ground that grows fast with no roots, then falters.)
But it's not too late to **get some prayer soil under there,**
to get those roots what they need.

The seed that falls among thorns
could be the Lenten Commitment
that included an "unless."
I will do what I committed to "unless" this happens or that happens.
Then lo and behold, "this" happens or "that" happens,
or threatens to happen.
And the next thing we know we have more of a harvest in "unless"
than we do in "I will do -."
(It's like Seed Scattered Among Thorns.)
Within reason, it's time to say, "I will do this!"
and put an exclamation point at the end of that sentence.

What is at stake is the experience of growth,
the appreciation of sacrifice,
the renewal... and strengthening that comes
From a Lenten Commitment done as well as we are able.
That's the hundred-fold-harvest
from the Lenten seed that falls on good soil.

We see the exquisite versatility of this text.

So. When the Brothers Johnson - James Weldon and J. Rosamond -
the poet and lyricist who gave us "Lift Every Voice and Sing"
bid us to sing out our loyalty to our native land-
where did they mean, and does it matter?

The piece was written in 1899,
at a time when the Black community had a fierce commitment to
this United States (as we still do).
But, also, in many strong quarters, more than a century back,
African Americans held fast—
claiming Africa as a point of pride,
as a place of origin not to be denied.
They did this without hesitation and with at least a little bit of knowledge.

In point of fact, in proclaiming Black History Week,
Carter G. Woodson
meant that whole wide, deep swath of human history—
including
What we ALL had and have, in Africa;

the prominent role Africans had in shaping the ancient world.
Part of this inheritance is...

What happened when the world turned against Africa,
Africans,
and their descendants—
And what Africa in its 54 nations (now) is, and may yet become.

Indeed, when we page back through Black History we witness
the strong presence of Africa
in the lives of the then “negroes” or “coloreds”
and the things they held dear.

The 2nd independent Black church to be founded in this country
was First **African** Baptist, begun in Savannah, Georgia in 1775.

The North’s first Black Congregation
followed by the nation’s first Black denomination:
Bethel **African** Methodist Episcopal and
The African Methodist Episcopal Church, **AME**, were formed in 1787.

Virginia’s first Black governor, the first African American
to be elected governor of any state,
Douglas Wilder,
was a member of First **African** Baptist Church in Richmond,
founded - with great difficulty - in 1841,
and, yes, they were enslaved when they did that.

Some of the 209,145 people of color who fought on the Union side in the Civil War
[let me try that again]
Some of the 209,145 people of color who fought on the Union side in the Civil War
named themselves for Mother Africa:

For example, there was the First Arkansas Volunteers **of African Descent**
the **Corps d’Afrique** from Louisiana
and The **African Brigade** out of North Carolina.

The referencing of Africa in the Black community
wasn’t only related to a connection made visible in hair and skin.

Part of the reason for speaking up for Africa was because it was clear
that the developing world, *including and in particular*, the United States,
disdained Africa.

And, America’s disdain for Africa
was part of the glue that supported

its disdain for us.

Generalizing vastly: Economists and historians now tell us
That this denigration of Africa began
as the world entered its economic escalation
into the modern era; **It began no later than the 800s.**
It began, *when the world began*, to grow.

And, as parts of the rapidly developing world
pulled their people out of the world's markets-in-people,
they still wanted and *believed they needed* enslaved labor...
from somewhere.

None of us are surprised to know
that the morality of that *last major trade*
in enslaved women, men and children
was shored up, by making **those people**
appear to be fundamentally DIFFERENT
and making **their point of recent origin**
appear to be irrefutably LESS as well.

Over the years, as best they could,
Black America's thinkers, writers and orators
have looked, *and pointed*, to Africa.
Historians — like Woodson and Du Bois
Musicologists - like James Weldon Johnson and John Lovell, Jr.
Commentators - like Alexander Crummell working in Liberia
and Henry McNeal Turner, author of the “Back to Africa” plan
Leaders of Movements - like Marcus Garvey & the African Orthodox Church
Theologians - like Absalom Jones
Educators - like Daniel Alexander Payne at Wilberforce,
the first African American college president in the United States
Preachers - like Maria W. Stewart
Poets - like Langston Hughes and Louise Bennett
Writers - like Zora Neale Hurston and Alex Haley and
countless others have, even when their own hands were absolutely full,
continued to claim, study and reference Africa and Africans.

They did this not just to stand in respect of their
great-fore-parents and great-great fore-parents
of West African and Central-West African
villages and entities unknown.

They did this not just to stand up for themselves;
to refuse to have *anything more* taken from them against their will.

They did this because it was the right thing to do,
and even though it cost them to do it.
They did this because creating any people as LESS
or any place as LESS
was totally inconsistent with what they knew to be true of God.

Some of them, *some of us* “study on” Africa and Africans, *I do so*,
because when your ancestors lose so many people that they loved
and their homes as well—
In a way, as their descendants, you can’t stop looking for them.

We try to claim each other and our stories, our cultures
even though both stories and cultures have greatly diverged.
Still today, there’s a longing to sit at a Welcome Table
with everyone who has helped us here
and everyone who lost us there.

The mid-20th century brought the discovery that humanity first emerged as a species
in northeast Africa, the Great Rift Valley - modern Kenya.
According to the *National Geographic Atlas of the World*, tenth edition,
“Humans have lived longer in Africa, ...our ancestral home,...
than on any other continent.”

Africa is where humanity first fell in love,
made music,
and looked into the night sky with questions about our existence.

We now have a pretty good idea
of where **God, the Sower Ultimate and Magnificent**
saw fit to plant humanity.
That planted seed has, indeed, brought forth not 10s or thousands
but billions— generations and generations galore.

The burden of what was done to Africa
in misinformation - *lies* -
malicious speculation
highway robbery
and casual cruelty
lingers on into our times,

Just as The Great Untruth it was designed to support
lingers on as well.

But it seems to have pleased Almighty God,
to lend an assist toward the turning of that tide, just a bit.

Not surprisingly, The Church, the People of God
is-and-are up front in this work.
Participation of churches and denominations in this country
in partnership with African churches
is so very important
PLUS, it's joyful and nourishing to hear about.
I was excited to read of ELPC's Malawi Sister Church partnership.

And, since the Presbyterian Church USA sends its Giving Catalog
to every person in the country with a "Reverend" in their name,
despite the fact I'm American Baptist,
I get the catalog, so I get to give to communities in Africa;
I look forward to this each year.

In addition,
Dedicated packs of historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, linguists,
and several other kinds of "ists"
including Africanists, like Professor Yolanda Covington
are refuting much of the incorrect information extant on Africa
and substituting amazing, carefully-researched revelations.

One of my favorites is that done by Cambridge & Yale University
anthropologist, Roderick McIntosh,
who in 1977 located and began to excavate
the Ancient Middle Niger River city, Jenne-jeno.
Jenne's beginning dates 250 B.C.E. (Before Common Era);
the excavation is in Mali.
Ancient Jenne was one of the metropolises mentioned by Carter G. Woodson
in his first issue of the *Negro History Bulletin* in 1937.


Ancient Jenne had never been found before, **First**,
because it didn't have the traditional markers of authority.
It was a previously unseen kind of self-organizing urban entity,
a huge semi-democracy without king or crown.

Second, it was so large archaeologists had been walking on it for years
without realizing all that was the same super-sized community.
170,000 square kilometers;
More than 7,000 adjacent & connected villages.

And third, no one expected something this innovative

to be in the Middle Niger River area of West Africa
in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Another reason for hope-

We never know any people, really, until they can begin to speak for themselves.
The presence of more immigrants from West Africa, Nigeria in particular
and their US-born offspring
has brought fresh art, textiles, literature
and points-of-view to the United States.
Today's young people are reading Yoruba myths and stories,
and others of us are watching "Bob  Abishola" on CBS.

Plus, ancestry.com is rocking and rolling: [I am] Nigerian/Bantu/Senegalese

Inch by tiny inch, I am hopeful, we're drawing closer
to breaking from this **system**
of blaming-and-shaming the African continent
for being **the casualty** of the **pattern** of colossal greed
and wholesale "Otherness"
that ushered in the modern world.

All of which brings us back to planting and growing.

Is humanity seed on the path vulnerable to birds? I don't think so.

Are we seed on rocks, all tops and show, without enough roots?
a little bit, I think - ***Stony the road we trod, stony the road we built***
but now we begin to claim those roots.

Are we seed among thorns? *There are thorns*,
but history assures us that we grow more, and learn faster
when we're challenged, rather than when it's easy.
Perhaps that will be a blessing of these times.

But we know Where we came from.
We know Who we came from.
We know Whose we are.

We are the Children of the Most High,
blessed seed, blessed soil —
a beloved Work-in-Progress.

Amen, and amen.