

Tuesday after the First Sunday in Lent, February 28, 2023

Recommended readings: pp. 51-61, "Race" (part two)

WARNING: Today's reading addresses systematic sexual abuse.

In her chapter on "Race," Dorothy Roberts reports how Black women and girls were allowed by law to be raped by their owners. The children who were conceived and born from these atrocities were considered to be black and were viewed by the law as slaves. Black women's bodies were used to forcibly create more slaves for their owners. Roberts writes, "The law continued to regard Black women and their children this way for many decades. In the 1850s, a Mississippi jury convicted an enslaved man named George for raping an enslaved girl under the age of ten. Judge E. G. Henry of Madison County sentenced George to death by hanging. George's enslaver appealed the decision to the state's High Court of Errors and Appeals. John D. Freeman, the lawyer representing George, argued that because the victim was enslaved, George had committed no legally recognizable offense. 'The crime of rape does not exist in this State between African slaves,' Freeman noted. 'Our laws recognize no marital rights as between slaves; their sexual intercourse is left to be regulated by their owners. The regulations of law, as to the white race, on the subject of sexual intercourse, do not and cannot, for obvious reasons, apply to slaves.'"

But if the man meets the engaged woman in the open country and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. You shall do nothing to the young woman; the young woman has not committed an offense punishable by death, because this case is like that of someone who attacks and murders a neighbor. Since he found her in the open country, the engaged woman may have cried for help, but there was no one to rescue her. (Deuteronomy 22:25-27)

This verse from Deuteronomy speaks of sexual violence toward a woman who is engaged to another man; the penalty for the crime belongs to the man alone. The mention of the remote location where no one could hear the woman's cry suggests that it would have been the duty of others who witnessed the offense to offer help. Sexual assault isn't new, but it is a deeply disturbing problem in our country. "The 1619 Project" provides historical background to the ways women have been treated as the property of either their husbands or their owners. Although laws have changed, attitudes towards women, especially black women, have been slow to change. Deuteronomy invites us to question the responsibility of all who hear the cry of a victim, to ponder not only our sexual actions but also our responsibility to protect the dignity of those who are victims of violence and injustice.

Prayer

O God, you weep with your daughters and sons whose bodies are used as objects for the gratification and pleasure of others. To those who experience sexual violence give your comfort and healing. Give us the courage to advocate for all who are victims of violence, oppression, and every injustice. Amen.