

Jena 6 and the Noose Epidemic: A Search for True Humanity **By Xavier Pickett**

In the last few weeks, there has been a serious outbreak of noose incidents all over the country. Just last week, a noose was placed on a Black professor's door at Columbia University. Previously, "In July, a noose was left in the bag of a black Coast Guard cadet aboard a cutter. A noose was found in August on the office floor of a white officer who had been conducting race-relations training in response to the incident. In early September, a noose was discovered at the University of Maryland in a tree near a building that houses several black campus groups. On Sept. 29, a noose appeared in the locker room of the Hempstead, N.Y., police department, which recently touted its efforts to recruit minorities. On Oct. 2, a noose was seen hanging on a utility pole at the Anniston Army Depot in Alabama."¹ If anyone believes the Jena 6 case/story is blown out of proportion, I think these recent noose sightings serve to demonstrate that, although, we are in a post-civil rights era, we are no where near beyond white supremacist ideologies and acts.

I want to begin by re-examining the all too familiar Jena 6 story. I believe if we truly understand what happened in Jena, this will allow us to put these other recent noose sightings in proper perspective and discover its meaning, even for us.

The White Teens

First, we need to uncover the deep (irrational) logic of why these White teens would decide to hang a noose from a tree in 2006 and other noose hangings in 2007. It is virtually unarguable that this noose was a symbol of hatred. And this symbol of hatred involves the positive recognition of past evils. Not only that, it is also a celebration of evil by evoking historical American terroristic acts (a la Cornel West) against Blacks, namely lynching. It is in this way that this is not only a symbol of hatred, but also an *act* of hatred and more broadly evil. Thus, these White teens have become participants in a barbaric ritual of past terroristic values and activities of their White American ancestry *through* their erection of a noose long before Al Queda.

But the question remains is why would these White teens in a post-civil rights era hang a noose from a tree? Of course, the obvious answer is they have some deep-seated hatred toward Blacks for whatever reason; or at the very least, they do not like Black people. Now there is no doubt that this is true as I have pointed out. But I think there may be more to the story. I would suggest what this evil symbolic act points to is that these White teens are in fact on a search for meaning. They in fact lack something in their humanity. They are living a deficient life, a life that lacks significance. So this event of hanging a noose is a way to search for meaning in their life. In other words, they are on a search for

¹ MSNBC.com. 10 Oct. 2007. Noose incidents evoke segregation-era fears. 12 Oct. 2007 <www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21228709>.

what it means to be truly human. I say this because they have chosen to hang a noose from a tree in an attempt to dehumanize Blacks while at the same time trying to gain a sense of significance, joy and satisfaction from evil. Therefore, for any individual or group to derive pleasure and place in the world by maintaining a ritual of terroristic symbolism aimed and designed for Black destruction really points up a tremendous deficiency in themselves and a failure to be truly human.

To be clear, there is no question that these White teens did not in fact physically lynch or persecute anyone by hanging a noose. But just because they did not physically harm anyone does not mean serious harm or damage was not done siding aside the legality of the matter, such as hate crimes. The reality is that they were evoking a heinous story and theodicy that never comes to a resolution or finds ultimate shalom and redemption. And to engage in such symbolism is to become a futile actor in this irresolvable and hopeless theodicy.

The Jena 6 Youth

Secondly, we must turn our attention to Mychal Bell and the other five. In Bell and the other five choosing to beat up another human with a shoe (and setting aside the question of whether the shoe was a weapon) they failed to muscle the courage to be and do what that momentous hour called for. Although, pursuing justice is something we should not shrink from, we also need to affirm that the hour did not call for a type of erratic retribution from the hands of angry youth. So that hour not only called them to something greater, but it also demanded of them to manifest true human flourishing in the face of human pestilence. In other words, this was a gospel opportunity for Mychal Bell and the other five to demonstrate for these White teens actually who they needed to become ironically from the very lives they were seeking to destroy.

Moreover, Bell and the other five failed to display what God looks like in and through humanity. So unfortunately, what the White teens saw in the Jena 6 youth through their misguided attempt of self-vindication was in actuality a reflection of themselves. Furthermore, Bell and the other five were enticed to also participate in acts of dehumanization by those who were trying to dehumanize them. So what ends up taking place is that the Jena 6 youth get unknowingly drawn into the same oppressive world created by White oppressors where they now become the new Black oppressor because they too were seemingly seduced by the false hope of manipulating an oppressive power.

A Way Forward

And if the Jena 6 youth did not learn that they need their White brothers and sisters, including these White teens who hung the noose, this lack of understanding would seal their tragic response and deepen their ignorance of the anthropological significance of this incident. See, what it means to be human is to be tied to humanity, tied to one another. And to be tied to one another is to be ultimately tied to God because we were all designed to need each other in order for full human flourishing and shalom to take place collectively across ethnicities. Therefore, given this truth about human solidarity as

divine image bearers, it is incumbent upon these White teens to not only respect Black humanity, but also *seek to be enriched by* and *appreciate* Black humanity. It is necessary to realize that Black humanity is composed of a people who reflect what God is like in their humanity and therefore their humanity must not be demonized through evil symbols. In other words, to devalue God's image in humanity is to devalue Him. So if noose hanging evokes deplorable and humiliating acts, such as lynching, then that is tantamount to hanging God from a noose, or (re)crucifying Jesus.

However, I need to make clear that this Jena 6 case and other noose sightings are all stories of failure. But Yahweh is a God who re-creates failed stories, even beyond their original state. That is why what I need (in fact what we all need) the Jena 6 youth and the Whites who participated in noose hangings across the country to do is courageously paint an alternative story, a more beautiful story – a story of hope and redemption. This is a story that shows what these White teens and Jena 6 youth are really longing for – something richer and beyond that which they saw for themselves. I am imaging a story where these White teens would not become new symbolic actors of the old evil drama of their ancestors in America. I am imaging a story where the Jena 6 youth would have had the courage to go against the grain (of mere retaliation) and live in the tradition of Fredrick Douglass, David Walker, Sojourner Truth, and Fannie Lou Hamer while standing in the face of this indelible terroristic symbol of evil. That is part and parcel of what it means to be human because that is what it means to be like God as image bearers. Since God is the archetype of overcoming evil by not avoiding it, but proactively making all things right only through standing up to the evil powers of Satan and destroying its dominion in the cross of His Son, how much more should we, as those who bear His image, follow this proper road to exhibit what it truly means to be human?

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