Yet the Last Are Still Last

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Yet the Last Are Still Last

Originally composed in New Orleans, Louisiana while on a Civil Rights Movement Pilgrimage and updated to reflect changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic

By Ellen Jewett

Saving up riches without regard for the other
We see it in the rich fool of the Gospels
We saw it on plantations
Exploitation of persons
Humans as disposable
Beings owned by other beings
Dressed up, fattened up, exercised, and auctioned off
The notary signed off on the purchase
Noting the person in front of you as “moveable property”
Despite being created in God’s image

Your son would become a patriarch
Pépère
Two of his descendants become mayors of New Orleans
Is this the beginning of justice?
Is this the coming of the Kingdom?
“The last shall be first and the first shall be last”
And yet the last are still last
The “already but not yet”
Seems to simply be the “not yet”

You recoup the eight hundred dollars you pay for a person in four growing seasons
Then their life is not worth protecting It’s easier to buy someone else
Or to rent them for the season
Or to have your female slaves constantly pregnant
Property bearing property
Capital producing capital
At no cost to you
How economical

As Black bodies lie wounded in our streets
In our jails
In the shadows of society
Dying from police violence
From COVID-19
From dehumanization
From simple, brutal hate
Justice is absent
Yet again
The same violence continues
Just in new ways
Where is the redemption in that?

407,000 pounds of sugar in one year
At the cost of how many lives?

Raising a child as your own
A daughter to your childless wife
At least until she’s older
And attractive
And can carry your child
Whom you have baptized
With your own name on his birth certificate
But who is still considered property
Because his mother was your slave
Your slave whom you raped
Little did you know

Saving up riches without regard for the other
We see it in the Gospels
We saw it on plantations
We saw it in lynchings
We saw it in response to the Civil Rights Movement
We see it today
Monetary riches
Material riches
Emotional riches
Social riches
Awash in the blood of Black bodies