

Reflection: Community Lenten Supper

By Rev. Cynthia Simmons

On Wednesday, March 13, approximately 45 people gathered in Fellowship Hall at 6:00 p.m. for the first of five Lenten suppers and discussions. The theme for this year's study is African-American spirituals – what they meant to those who created and first sang them and what they can teach us today.

Spirituals, with their simple melodies, lend themselves to lovely choral arrangements by gifted composers, but there was nothing even remotely lovely about the circumstances that gave rise to the spirituals. The spirituals are not simply folk songs; they are cries from the heart of a people whose experience was very different from that of the white settlers who created so many American folk songs.

The spirituals are songs that were sung by people who had been torn from their villages, transported across the Atlantic packed into the bottom of ships as tightly as sardines in a can, and sold to planters in the U.S. - if they survived the trip. Or they were born into slavery in this country, because a child born to slaves was a slave, too – even if that child's father was the slaveowner. Enslaved persons were treated like livestock and slave owners could do with them as they wished. Life was brutal for enslaved people. And this is the environment which gave rise to the spirituals.

At our first gathering, which I led, we looked at the text of four different spirituals and the role they played in the life of the people who sang them, identifying some common theological themes: the “somebodiness” of enslaved persons – you are not just a slave, you ARE somebody in God’s eyes; liberation and deliverance; ultimate justice - God will make right in the next world what was not right in this one; and death as crossing over from this world of suffering to the next world of peace and rest.

Our first gathering essentially laid the foundation for the rest of the series, during which we will look at a new set of texts each week, asking what they have to say to us. Upcoming leaders are Sue Bennetch (March 20), Steve Simmons (March 27), J.C. Austin (April 3) and Joyce Smothers (April 10).