



Mankind Is Our Business / Jeff Simon

“Business!” cried [Marley’s] Ghost, wringing its hands again. “Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!”

Charles Dickens,
A Christmas Carol, Stave I, p. 22 (1843)

The appalling murder of **George Floyd** has ignited a firestorm across the United States of America. Black people especially, and all persons of common decency, are outraged and saddened by Mr. Floyd’s inexcusable death. But to fully appreciate what is happening today and tonight in our nation’s streets, and to begin to understand what we must do to build a better world from the shattered glass and ashes that litter those streets, we must understand that Mr. Floyd’s suffering and death was the spark for a raging inferno in-waiting that has been building fuel for over 400 years. We must understand that the legacy of slavery is at the heart of this firestorm. We must understand that commerce and profit are at the heart of slavery. And we must understand that, unless today’s business leaders are at the heart of making the fundamental change that is essential to bring hope to the hopeless, today’s troubles will be nothing but one more chapter in the American tragedy that will continue to be written every day for many generations to come.

The Uninterrupted Legacy of Slavery, from 1865 to Tonight

“Slavery ended in 1865.” We hear that all the time. Yes, with the passage of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution, the formal institution of slavery was banished in this country. But that magnificent political achievement certainly did not do away with the prejudices, economic realities, and inhumanity which allowed human bondage to

prosper for so long. After a brief period of Reconstruction, Black people found themselves back in essentially the same place, deprived of the ability to own land, build businesses, vote or join political parties, or otherwise participate meaningfully in white circles of trade and commerce that lead to individual prosperity. “Sharecropping” soon became the new euphemism. For many decades afterwards, over 4,000 Black people were lynched across the country, sometimes in public “celebrations” that included picnic lunches and severed fingers as souvenirs. Or they were simply shot in the street without consequence. One of those 4,000+ victims was General Lee, a Black man who was lynched by a white mob in 1904 for knocking on the door of a white woman’s house in Reevesville, South Carolina. The period from roughly the late 1870’s through the first part of the 20th century is sometimes known to the Black community as “The Terrors” because they were terrorized by their own society and their own government for economic, social, and political reasons.

The Terrors also saw the beginnings of the Jim Crow era, when laws ensured that Black people could not fully participate in the commerce and trade controlled by the white power structure. We are all familiar with the laws that precluded Black students from attending white schools, working at white jobs, or belonging to white country clubs where business was really done, just to name a few examples of the very intentional barriers that were

constructed to preclude Black people from a real chance at achieving prosperity.

Even more than that, Black people were functionally excluded from the primary means by which many Americans build personal wealth: by buying a home and enjoying its appreciation in value. Federal housing and lending policies going back to FDR's New Deal forbade lending to Black people in the white parts of town. Local developers ensured housing segregation through restrictive covenants which prevented Black people (and often Jews, Catholics, and other undesirables) from buying homes in the "better" neighborhoods.

Then came the "War on Drugs" started by President Nixon, which led to the next iteration of Black oppression: mass incarceration. Federal and state governments criminalized low level drug offenses with extraordinarily harsh prison sentences. According to Bureau of Justice statistics, the number of people incarcerated for drug offenses in the United States went from 40,900 in 1980 to 452,964 in 2017, a ten-fold increase, which now gives the United States the dubious distinction of having the highest incarceration rate in the world. Those incarcerated were grossly disproportionately Black males, who still remain much more likely than whites to be arrested and convicted. Criminal justice statistics establish that, once convicted, Black people are six times more likely to be incarcerated, and they receive much longer sentences than do whites.

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And it is beyond debate that a purpose of the War on Drugs was the continued oppression of Black people, as one of its chief architects later admitted to a reporter from Harper's magazine. John Ehrlichman, who served as Nixon's domestic policy chief, said, "The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies:

the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I'm saying. We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did."

The effect of this mass incarceration on African American communities was devastating. Fathers, brothers, and sons were no longer present in the family or in the community. And, when they got out of prison, their status as an ex-offender meant they faced enormous barriers in trying to get a good job or otherwise productively re-enter society. Combined with the movement of manufacturing jobs overseas, failing public schools, inadequate housing, spiraling crime rates, and disproportionate health challenges (witness most recently the glaring disparities in COVID-19 health statistics), the poorest Black families could barely keep their head above water—could barely breathe.

Slavery Means Profits

The first slave ship docked in the United States in 1619, at the behest of The Virginia Company. You see, The Virginia Company had a royal charter from the King of England to exploit the boundless natural resources of His Highness' vast new colonial possession. And chief among these was tobacco. But in order to grow tobacco, the heavily wooded wilderness needed to be cleared of timber (which was itself valuable, of course). Once the fields were cleared, they needed to be planted with the delicate and labor-intensive tobacco crop, which would then need to be tended, harvested, cured, packaged, and sent to market.

An expensive proposition in any era, but especially with 1619 technology. The solution? Free labor in the form of African slaves. Slavery as free labor was, of course, not a new concept – much older than the Egyptian pharaohs who used slaves to build their pyramids and canals, or the Roman emperors who used slaves to build their roads and power their naval ships. Whether king or businessman, the value of free slave labor to build and expand markets was obvious. And The Virginia Company was nothing if not savvy. The more slaves, the more profit. And as a bonus, the slaves themselves, as personal prop-

erty, had a market value as well. (Of course, even profits don't justify slavery if you think of slaves as people, as human beings, as children of God. So you don't.)

As time went on, more and more businessmen and plantation owners continued to build fortunes on the foundation of free slave labor. And the tobacco, cotton, rice, lumber, nails (Thomas Jefferson's slaves made nails), and other products they produced propelled growth and prosperity throughout the colonies and, later, states. In the North, these agricultural products and raw materials created even more wealth in the hands of mills, manufacturers, railroads, merchants, trading companies, bankers, and many others.

The horrors and sins of slavery and its legacy are, I hope, well known to you. They are certainly well beyond the capacity of this writer to even pretend to be able to express. If you need some insight along these lines, maybe start with a tour of the National Museum of African American History in Washington, D.C., or the Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama (also known as the Lynching Memorial), or any one of the thousands of pictures, oral histories, books or movies about what slavery did to the human beings whose fate it was to have been born Black. In Kansas City, maybe visit the marker down the street from the River Club where Levi Herrington was lynched by a white mob on April 3, 1882, after being falsely accused of killing a Kansas City police officer.

Here is the point: the deepest roots of slavery are economic. Slavery is directly and inextricably bound up with business and commerce, profit and loss, opportunity and expansion. The legacies of slavery are also rooted in economics. Excluding Black people from economic opportunity means more opportunity for whites, or so the thinking goes. For example, the Ku Klux Klan enjoyed a resurgence after World War I, even to the point of holding its own big parade down Constitution Avenue in Washington, D.C., in 1925. One of the reasons for its new popularity was that poor white men returning from the military faced a tough job market and did not want competition from Black men. If the business community created and perpetuated slavery in this country in the interest of commerce and profit, we must then ask ourselves what moral obligation that imposes on us now.

Mankind Is Our Business

As Marley's Ghost learned too late, "mankind was my business." He created in life the chains he carried in death. He made the chain himself, "link by link; yard by yard." Marley's Ghost tells Scrooge that he made each link of his own free will because his "spirit never walked beyond our counting-house...in life [his] spirit never roved beyond the narrow limits of our money-changing hole." *A Christmas Carol, Stave I, p. 22.*

Pity poor Marley, but it happens to businesspeople. Happens too often. We have day-to-day responsibilities that we carry 24/7. We have pressures and challenges, targets and goals, margins and year-end reports, partners and investors, employees and customers, etc. etc. etc.

But we also have neighbors and families. We also have personal hopes and dreams. We also have a country and a community that we live in and serve. And that community is suffering right now. And not just those who are suffering the worst—Mr. Floyd's family, the protesters, and all the human beings that they represent. All of us are suffering because, as Reverend Martin Luther King said:

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

Letter from
Birmingham, Alabama jail, April 16, 1963.

So that we might avoid the fate of Marley's Ghost, we need to remind ourselves that "mankind is our business." How can we say that our business is prospering when our streets are filled with unheard voices of pain and injustice? How can we say that our community is healthy when so many are sick and tired of being sick and tired? How can we say that we want peace if we don't work for justice?

The good news is that, here in Kansas City, the business community is beginning to get it.

The Chamber of Commerce launched the Urban Neighborhood Initiative several years ago, under the leadership of Diane Cleaver. It has already made a difference in the neighborhood it serves.

The Chamber is also kicking off its WORC initiative, Work Opportunities for Returning Citizens, which encourages and supports the businesses that comprise the Chamber's membership to hire individuals returning from prison and give them a reasonable second chance at prosperity.

The Civic Council has formed an Inclusive Prosperity Task Force, charged with determining how the Civic Council, its membership, and its KC Rising effort can help drive genuine economic opportunity into all parts of Kansas City, especially those communities east of Troost and elsewhere that have never been included in (and often very intentionally excluded from) the prosperity so evident in other parts of town.

Together with the Kansas City Area Development Council, these three leading Kansas City business groups recently issued a joint statement about the death of George Floyd and all that it represents. They recognized the "generations of systemic racism and inequity that have divided our country and our Kansas City community." They pledged to "continue our recent work toward inclusive prosperity, equity and a community that works for all." And they mean it. (I don't blame the doubters who question that—you have good reason to.)

Good for them. And good for all of the other businesses and institutions around Kansas City that are beginning to get it, beginning to try to figure out where and how they can step up and help.

We all must get it. Business interests, which drove and perpetuated slavery and its legacy, must be a part—a very active and deliberate and leading part—of the response to the moral imperative that confronts us all: the need to dismantle the 400 years of white prejudice and fear, systemic injustice, and deeply embedded barriers to prosperity that have fueled the outrage ignited by Mr. Floyd's tragedy.

The steps above are just the very, very beginning. They have to be. There is so much more work to do. And the most important thing we can do right now is to open our hearts, our minds, and our ears to the people and the voices in the street. To hear the voices of those who can't breathe, those whose breath the business community can help to restore if it acts with empathy, humility, compassion, and resolve. To feel the pain and indignity suffered by the victims of oppression and injustice. And to use the substantial resources which have fueled the prosperity of the Kansas City business community over the years to push back against the legacy of slavery in the hope of building a better world—a better world for everyone. ■

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