



CULTURAL RESOURCE

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Lection - Ephesians 2:14-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 14) For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. (v. 15) He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, (v. 16) and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. (v. 17) So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; (v. 18) for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. (v. 19) So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, (v. 20) built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. (v. 21) In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; (v. 22) in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

I. Introduction

This lectionary moment provides us with the opportunity in a divided, unjust and contentious social, economic and political landscape to weigh the cultural and religious meaning and application of reconciliation, and to discuss ways that communities that are strangers to one another can commune together. Harper Collins Bible Dictionary defines reconciliation (Greek: *Katallage*) as changed relationships for the better between persons or groups who formerly were at enmity with each other.¹

When dealing with racial injustice, reconciliation requires individuals and communities to create a dynamic racial justice movement that detangles the social, economic, spiritual, and political thickets in our lives and clears a path for us to live in right relations with God, each other, and all of creation. Reconciliation is community building and coalition work at its highest; I believe it is socially and spiritually driven. It has something in it for all of us. Reconciliation is best expressed in community; this offering focuses on such reconciliation and building bridges between communities that are strangers to one another.

II. African Americans Seeking Justice and Their White Allies

African Americans, from the moment of enslavement through the 20th century, developed a culture and ethic of reconciliation that depended on white allies who broke with the system of slavery and northern racism. In their solidarity with African Americans and acts toward reconciling whites and blacks, these allies took great risks to offer African Americans safe havens and to share other resources. They often helped us stay alive to do our work. Bravely, they stepped across the demarcation lines drawn by a white supremacist government, racist churches and communities.

There is more love somewhere
There is more love somewhere
I'm going to keep on till I find it
There is more love somewhere ...²

African Americans also stepped across racial lines to help their white neighbors. No story is more poignant than that of the free blacks in Philadelphia during the dangerous and devastating 1793 yellow fever epidemic. Many whites, themselves leaving the city, believed that the black community was immune to the disease and called for them to assist the sick and clear the dead. Although appalled at first, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones decided to mobilize the black community to help. After the outbreak subsided, Mathew Carey wrote *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever*, a pamphlet attacking the black community and their response to the epidemic. The pamphlet contained accusations of blacks not contributing enough to the cause and even profiting from it.

In response, Allen and Jones wrote and published *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the Year 1793 and A Refutation of Some Censures Thrown Upon Them in Some Late Publications*. The Jones and Allen pamphlet was a defense of the black community's efforts to battle the epidemic

and even described financial details so as to refute any claims of profiting from the disaster. It also criticized those who fled the city (including Matthew Carey) as well as those who remained but did not help the sick. The 1801 pamphlet contained in the preface a statement that further described the challenges created by black and white Christians coming together. In spite of the conditions that led Allen, Jones and other blacks to walk out of the white led St. George Church in 1792 and create the African Methodist Episcopal Church,³ these leaders rallied the Philadelphia black community a year later to aid their white neighbors being ravished by the yellow fever epidemic.

The story of Harriet Tubman's escape points to another instance where the community of runaway slaves met with abolitionists to fight together for justice and bridge differences that separated whites and blacks. Both the runaway slaves and their allies stood to suffer severe consequences for their actions. Sister Catherine Clinton, a white female historian, recounts this moment:

And in her favor, Tubman knew anti-slavery pockets dotted the countryside and perhaps she could take advantage. The Choptank Abolition Society had been founded in the 1790's and promoted anti-slavery in nearby Greensboro (Caroline County). The local marshes had been abundantly hospitable to runaways, if newspaper accounts were to be believed. Many Quakers in the region, charitable towards anti-slavery, offered shelter and guidance to slaves on the run.⁴

Within this culture of mutual aid, African Americans began to understand that whites can be allies in building a just and beloved community. The belief that we are, in the words of Frances Watkins Harper, "bound together" grounded their ability to accept whites as children of God and sincere but imperfect allies. "I hold that between the white people and the colored there is a community of interests, and the sooner they find it out, the better it will be for both parties. . . ."⁵

We shall walk thru the valley in peace
We shall walk thru the valley in peace
If Jesus himself shall be our leader
We shall walk thru the valley in peace.⁶

This acceptance did not mean that African Americans suspended our critique of racism or our critique of whites who wanted to keep their status and power while claiming to be involved in a movement towards justice and building community. The culture and ethic of reconciliation then was a dynamic and mutual process that moved African Americans and whites beyond the divided and unequal territories of slave and master or oppressed and oppressor to become one with each other.

We'll walk hand in hand
We'll walk hand in hand
We'll walk hand in hand today...
Oh if in my heart I do believe

We shall overcome someday...⁷

Both African American men and women stood at the forefront of creating, growing and sustaining a struggle for racial justice and reconciliation through community building, coalition activism and ecumenism that led to late 19th and 20th century racial justice movements. For these African Americans, coalition building was a very significant and achievable goal of reconciliation at home and away from home. They used sermons, community organizing, boycotts, and public gatherings such as festivals, songs, poetry, essays, oratory, and newspapers as tools to build coalitions.

III. A Brief Word about Festivals in Coalition Building

As with contemporary observances of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday, historically, national celebrations or festivals such as Emancipation Day or anti-slavery festivals gave African Americans and their white allies opportunities to move outside of their confined spaces to the public arena. Once there, some used cultural displays as acts of community building and resistance. The organizers of these festivals used them to create a neutral space where African Americans and whites could gather and get a closer view of each other and to present a larger community with an alternative to racial division and crippling oppression. Celebrations did, after all, occur in public—a public now accessible to freed people in ways it never had been before. For all its dangers, public expression did offer a means of altering white perceptions of blacks.

IV. African American Women as Coalition Builders: My Tongue Was Cut Loose

In partnership with African American male leaders and independently, African American women played a steady and powerful role in fighting injustice through coalition building. The records of their contributions can be found and are now more available: autobiographies, sermons, poems, visual and performance arts, biographies, anthologies and letters. It is clear that we cannot wholly understand the culture and ethic of reconciliation without their voices and stories.

There emerged in the 1790s into the middle 1800s a group of itinerant African American evangelists and reconcilers whose tongues caught afire during the Great Awakening⁸ and after. This band of women including Jarena Lee, Julia Foote, Sojourner Truth, Amanda Berry, Zilpha Elaw and Maria Stewart, defied the culture of their day that almost always forbade women to speak or preach in public. Their insistence on preaching came from a radical belief that they had something to say about God, emancipation, women, poverty and the well-being of the people of God. They used the Bible and their own experiences as a foundation for interpreting Scripture and testifying and bringing white and African American people together to see each other in new ways. They preached the gospel of redemption that was available to everyone, if they would join the circle of believers who drew on their faith, their belief in justice, and the love of others, to change the world. Listen to Sojourner Truth preach:

You seem to be expecting to go to some parlor away up somewhere, and

when us have been, burnt, you are coming back to walk in triumph over their ashes-this is to be your new Jerusalem! Now, I can't see anything so very nice in that, coming back to such a muss as that will be, a world covered with ashes of the wicked. But if the Lord comes and burns – as you say he will- I am not going away, I am going to stay here and stand the fire, like Shadrack, Meschach and Abednego!...No, I shall remain. Do you tell me that God's children can't stand fire.⁹

Only chain a man can stand
Is the chain of hand to hand
Keep your eyes on the prize hold on, hold on...
Hold on---- Hold on-----
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.¹⁰

This first generation of African American women took to the road to build coalitions toward reconciliation. To be on the road was very dangerous for African American women in a society where white men could abuse black women at will. In many instances, black women evangelists directly confronted the situation head on. This climate existed throughout the United States during the turbulent days of enslavement and northern racism. These women depended on the hospitality and protection of allies and their communities.

African American women in the 18th and 19th centuries pioneered a movement for racial reconciliation. They used cultural and spiritual tools to ground the movement and to seed new generations of movements for racial justice and reconciliation. Members of the Southern Freedom Movement best exemplified and extended the work of our African American sisters in the struggle for racial justice and reconciliation by drawing on the spirituals to create freedom songs, African American folk sermons and testimonies, poetry, novels, road work, and direct action.

V. Segregation in Churches

According to Michael Emerson, author of People of the Dream: Multicultural Congregations in the United States, fewer than ten percent of churches in America are integrated.¹¹ Emerson also points out that these churches are ten times less diverse than the neighborhoods in which they are located.¹² He also writes what many blacks have long known, blacks are more likely to make the move to worshipping with whites than the reverse. When asked why, Emerson responded, “Because I think whites are used to being in power, so when whites think we ought to have integrated churches they think, ‘People ought to come to our church. What can we do to get them to come?’... When we look at who are pastors and who are the head clergy of these congregations, they’re overwhelmingly white, just a few are African Americans, and those folks are usually called to what were formerly white congregations, or they started an interracial church from the get-go.”¹³ When asked if churches are glad they became multi-racial, Emerson writes, “I never met a church that wishes they didn’t do it. I’ve never met a leader that wishes they hadn’t done it. They will all say, to the person, it’s hard, it’s difficult ... But

they will all say it just does something. They could never go back to being a uniraical congregation again.” In his studies, Emerson has not found that one denomination has made more progress in being multi-racial; he has instead found that churches with more charismatic worship styles, meaning upbeat music and a lively style of preaching, are more likely to be integrated regardless of whether they are Protestant or Catholic. However, he does mention the Evangelical Covenant Church, headquarters in Chicago, as being a denomination that is pushing its congregations to be multiracial, even from the moment they are formed.¹⁴

Emerson’s book list seven principles for creating healthy multiracial congregations. Dr. Emerson, a Rice University sociologist, was part of a Lilly Endowment-funded research team that included George Yancey, a sociologist at the University of North Texas. The team used surveys, but also did an in-depth study of thirty congregations. Although Emerson’s principles are designed for churches that wish to be multiracial, his principles would likely also help churches interested in creating regular occasions during which persons of various races and ethnicities can worship together and do community building together. Emerson’s seven principles for success are:

1. An institutional commitment to racial equity, clearly stated, such as in a mission or vision statement.
2. Leaders who are personally deeply committed to racial equity.
3. A common purpose that supersedes racial equity. (Often, multiracial worship is a means toward the larger end of living out a common faith.)
4. Structures to foster racial equity within the church, “to ensure that outsiders feel like insiders.”
5. Internal forums and classes about race issues.
6. Willingness to make adjustments. Dr. Emerson uses the metaphor of a disc jockey for a party, saying some top leader must “constantly adjust the volume, bass level, and treble level” to make the church work for a diverse membership.
7. Recognize that people are at different places on race issues and help them move forward one step at a time.¹⁵

VI. Churches Bridging Communities

(A) Reverend Dr. Cecil L. Murray, retired Senior Minister of the First AME Church of Los Angeles, works on the frontlines in the church and out in the world for racial, economic and social reconciliation, as well as for the recognition of lesbians and gays as children of God. He says:

If you can reason with people, reason with them. If you can love it into them,

love it into them. If you can rhapsodize it into them, rhapsodize it into them. But you have got to get it into them! We have no option. The Church exists for all God's children.¹⁶

We'll all be together in that land
We'll all be together in that land
We'll all be together in that land,
Where I'm bound, where I'm bound...¹⁷

Again and again, this message that we must fight to bridge the isms that divide us pervades the language of all those who offer their witness to the anticipated wholeness of the Church. In the spirit of working to express the “wholeness” within our communities, historical lessons suggest that coming together to work and worship grows out of a determination to improve and transform our communities and grants rich opportunities for bridge building that will transform the world.

(B) Pastors Choose to Lead Their Churches to Worship Together

Imani Community Church, a predominately black church in Oakland, California, pastored by Reverend George Cummings, and Piedmont Community Church, a white church located in Piedmont, California, pastored by Reverend Bill McNabb, have pledged that they will always worship together periodically. The two churches even periodically come together for Bible studies, their choirs sing together and their children even went on a mission trip together. In May 2009, they held a service affirming their covenant with each other.

The churches indicate that they were brought together by the speech on race given by then senator, Barack Obama, who quoted the famous line concerning Sunday morning being the most segregated hour in America. After the speech, McNabb invited Cummings to Piedmont to talk about race and his church. Over a meal, the two forged a relationship and then presented plans to their churches about worshipping and studying together. Neither received any complaints or concerns from their church about the plan.

Although a black and white church worshipping together is major in and of itself, what really makes this story interesting is that the churches are located in communities that are dramatically different racially and economically. Oakland, where Imani is located, is predominately African American, has many pockets of poverty, and has long had a high crime rate. Piedmont, California is predominately white, small, and one of the wealthiest cities in America. Both ministers have expressed how much their people have grown because of the experience. Cummings states, “The people who grew up in Oakland, in particular, have been surprised by the openness of the Piedmont church family to be in relationship. I think they have an idea, grown out of their historical experience, that ‘those’ people didn’t really want to know black people.”¹⁸ McNabb says of the experience, “Jesus came to break down the barriers of people—gender, race and ethnicity. And yet, over the years, we’ve recreated them. This is just an effort to make things how Jesus said things were supposed to be.”¹⁹

(C) A Hurricane Unites Churches of Different Races

The choir of the First Grace United Methodist Church in New Orleans is thoroughly mixed with blacks and whites and a sprinkling of Hispanics. The congregation represents the same diversity. This racially diverse congregation was created in the marriage of predominately black Grace United Methodist Church and predominately white First United Methodist Church. According to an article by Times–Picayune reporter, Bruce Nolan, “Before Hurricane Katrina they worshipped one mile—and a universe—apart.”²⁰ Also, according to Nolan, the hurricane forced several historically black and historically white churches in the same denominations that were destroyed or hurt by the hurricane to worship together until they worked out their futures or churches were merged. Nolan also points out that black and white Southern Baptist churches in eastern New Orleans merged after the hurricane, and so did black and white Catholic parishes.²¹

Referring to First Grace, a choir member said, “Now this church looks like the city.”²² Former Grace United Methodist Church and First United Methodist Church are old Methodist churches, 155 and 184 years respectively. Both had seen their memberships drop down to fewer than a hundred before hurricane Katrina, and were meeting in damaged churches without full-time clergy leadership. Their merger has not so much been a matter of a black and white churches coming together, but churches merging while being joined by a third constituency—“new post Katrina members, many of them young, some with children, and some Hispanic.”²³ The United Methodist Bishop for New Orleans was central to getting the two churches to consider the merger. Time will tell how First Grace will evolve over the next decade.

VII. Books to Help Different Ethnic Communities Worship Together

1. Diverse Worship African-American, Caribbean & Hispanic Perspectives by Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid. InterVarsity Press, 2000. This book explores the multiethnic dimensions of worship by looking at three cultural contexts for worship--African-American, Caribbean and Hispanic. After surveying worship and culture throughout history, the author devotes a section to each of these three cultural contexts.
2. Worship Across Culture by Kathy Black. Abingdon Press, 1998. In this practical guide to worship in many types of cultural settings, Kathy Black provides a roadmap to the basic worship practices of the major ethnic and cultural groups present in North American Protestantism.
3. Culturally Conscious Worship by Kathy Black. Chalice Press, 2000. As society and churches become more ethnically and racially diverse, pastors will need to design services that address a wide range of differing needs and expectations. Black, a white woman, offers help for congregations that are consciously trying to embrace diversity. She explores types of multicultural worship situations, addresses questions with which worship planners must start, and offers models for building a new congregational culture in the midst of diversity.

4. Toward Liturgies that Reconcile by William Scott Haldeman. This book is a reflection on Christian worship as it has been shaped or disfigured by racism.

5. One Bread, One Body: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Worship by C. Michael Hawn. Alban Institute, 2003. Hawn and four colleagues from Perkins School of Theology in Dallas formed a diverse team in ethnicity, gender, academic field of study, and denominational affiliation to study four United Methodist congregations in the Dallas area that are grappling with cross-cultural ministry. Their four case studies illustrate both the pain and the possibilities encountered in attempting culturally diverse worship. The book also offers an extensive bibliography for implementing “culturally conscious worship.”

Notes

1. “Reconciliation.” The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary. Rev. Ed. Achtemeier, Paul, Ed. 1996. Print.
2. Reagon, Bernice Johnson. “There is More Love Somewhere.” River of Life: Harmony One. Flying Fish Records, 1971.
3. McCullough, Ashley. “Richard Allen Biography.” Pennsylvania State University. Online location: http://www.pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/bios/Allen_Richard.html accessed 10 July 2009
4. Clinton, Catherine. Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom. New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 2004. p. 35
5. Logan, Shirley. We Are Coming: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999. p. 44
6. “We Shall Walk Thru the Valley in Peace.” Online location: http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/we_shall_walk_through_the_valley.htm accessed 10 July 2009
7. “We Shall Overcome.” Online location: http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/we_shall_overcome.htm accessed 10 June 2009
8. According to Wikipedia, “The First Great Awakening led to changes in American colonial society. In New England, the Great Awakening was influential among many Congregationalists. In the Middle and Southern colonies, especially in the ‘Backcountry’ regions, the Awakening was influential among Presbyterians. In the southern Tidewater and Low Country, northern Baptist and Methodist preachers converted both whites and blacks, enslaved and free. The Baptists especially welcomed blacks into active roles in congregations, including as preachers. Although the idea of a ‘great awakening’ is contested, it is clear that the period was a time of increased religious activity, particularly in New England.” “First Great Awakening.” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 16 Aug 2009. Online location: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=First_Great_Awakening&oldid=308317617 accessed 18 August 2009
9. Stetson, Erlene, and Linda David. Glorying in Tribulation: The Lifework of Sojourner Truth. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1994. pp. 97-98
10. “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize.” This song was derived from a traditional hymn called “Gospel Plow.” Both songs allude at length to Biblical passages, with the former borrowing several verses from the original. Recorded famously by well known singers

such as Pete Seeger and Mahalia Jackson, the song quickly became part of the soundtrack of the modern civil rights movement.

11. Emerson, Michael. People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States. Princeton: NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.

12. Emerson, Michael. Interview. Religion and Ethics News Weekly. PBS. WNET, New York, NY. 31 July 2009. Online location:

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/july-31-2009/interview-with-michael-emerson/1736/> accessed 1 August 2009

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States. pp. 158-173

16. Harris, Allen V. "All God's Children Video Review." 4 Nov 1996. Online location:

<http://www.qrd.org/qrd/www/culture/black/discussion/allchildren.html> accessed 10 July 2009

17. "Come and Go With Me (Where I'm Bound)." Traditional.

18. Kuruvila, Matthai. "Black, White East Bay Churches Meld in Worship." San Francisco Chronicle. 23 May 2009: B-1. Online location: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/23/BA0317MPAQ.DTL&type=printable> accessed 10 July 2009

19. Ibid.

20. Nolan, Bruce. "Black, White Methodist Congregations Unite." The Time-Picayune.

17 Feb. 2008. Online location:

http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2008/02/black_white_methodist_congrega.html accessed 10 July 2009

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.