



## KINSHIP AND SINGLES SUNDAY

### CULTURAL RESOURCES

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#### **I. A Story about Singles**

A couple of years ago, my wife and I were blessed to participate in the founding of a new marriage ministry at a local church in Ft. Worth, Texas. When the ministry began, it was a small group of married African American couples of different ages and backgrounds that met once a month to have prayer, food, fellowship, bible study, and other activities in order to strengthen the bonds between spouses, as well as fellow members, in spiritual ways.

After the marriage ministry coordinated a series of these monthly gatherings, an interesting development ensued. A number of single and/or divorced church members

wanted to participate in marriage ministry events so that, as they argued, “they could see what they were missing.”

This request to the marriage ministry leaders seemed odd at first glance. Even though the members of the marriage ministry were not isolating themselves from the rest of the congregation, the reality was that there were certain issues and interests which were important to married folks specifically. But, our single counter-parts also wanted to know how they could find the key elements of a good relationship—whether that meant with a friend, family, or future spouse—in ways that were meaningful and Christ-centered. And what was most interesting about their argument was that many of the single or divorced folks simply wanted to know how to think about and create better, happier relationships.

The aforementioned debate opened my eyes to the great significance of paying attention to issues of kinship and singles within the black church tradition. In a time when the vast majority of African American households are headed by single parents (typically women) and roughly two-thirds of all marriages in the United States result in divorce, it is crucial for African American clergy and congregations to find ways to celebrate the varieties of relationships that sustain and nurture African American women, men, and children in positive ways.

Black churches and black families are the twin institutions that have reaffirmed the humanity and dignity of black folk since the era of slavery in the United States. By that example, it is in the best interest of both the church and the family to work together to guarantee the survival of the entire black community: as churches make families stronger, families will also make churches stronger. While an endorsement of marriage, monogamous relationships, and committed family life ought to be a central focus of ministerial efforts within the historic black church tradition, being single, divorced, or widowed should not be stigmatized as an abnormal situation within the black community. The primary emphasis for the black church and the black community should focus upon black love and helping persons find healthy and hopeful ways to celebrate the fact that, regardless of our particular relationship status, we are all part of the black family and God’s family.

## **II. Imagine No Walls of Singleness, by Ralph Wheeler**

Imagine this, in an ideal world, our religious institutions would celebrate everyone, nurture the growth of the individual, and create bridges, opportunities and pathways to enhance the human spirit that lies in each of us. In an ideal world, God could be seen in the faces of the elderly and feeble, dreams and hopes of growing children, colors and ethnicities of all races, needs and concerns of all genders, and the goals and aspirations of the married and the single. In an ideal world, there would be no degrees of separation; instead, the connectedness of all humans would be an accepted norm. Imagine that.

### **No Ideal World**

Unfortunately, we do not live in an ideal world. At least, in the black church, that has not been my experience. In fact, I have seen few, if any, churches, mosques or synagogues

that have served as true centers of hope, real sanctuaries of change, or actual bottomless wells of love and forgiveness for single people. In particular, the black church, in my experience, has managed to create and maintain a church calendar and church structure that celebrates, nurtures, and promotes everybody else but its single members. In fact, from a cultural and structural standpoint, there are so few days, events and occasions for single people to be highlighted, celebrated, nurtured or promoted in the black church that the entire church calendar should be revamped if the church is to be intentionally affirming and inclusive. Imagine that.

In the black church, Mothers are celebrated on Mother's Day, fathers on Father's Day, and children on Children's Day. Men, women and youth have their special days. Mothers and deacons have their boards, of course, but these are not safe harbors for single persons, unless they are widows or widowers. Pastors and First Ladies have their anniversaries, missionaries have Mission Sunday. Even the choirs and usher boards have their celebratory days in the black church. Moreover, the church has special times to celebrate itself and its corporate body, past and present (church anniversaries and homecoming celebrations). All of these have been forged into the structure, life and memory of the church.

In contrast, we singles have no such special place in the life of our church. We are left to find our own way and to create our own corners and pockets of happiness -- filching a little recognition here and there on someone else's day. Often, this is done in hostile atmospheres. For some reason, our single status is frequently viewed as a holding or waiting pattern -- one not worthy of recognition, nurturance or support. Instead, we are encouraged and expected to marry, regardless of personal desires or intentions. There is an attempt to force us into a "one size fits all" church garment. If we do not marry as expected, our sexuality often becomes suspect. In addition, we are frequently called upon to spend endless hours working on church committees and implementing church programs. We are told: "you don't have a family, so you should be to able handle this." Imagine that.

### **Living as One**

I believe it should and can be different. I will continue to dream and hope for the change I want to see. In the words of John Lennon: "You may say I'm a dreamer. But I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us. And the world will be as one."<sup>1</sup>

As the world rallies for change, it is time for the black church to elevate single people from second class citizenship to full membership in the church family. Can you imagine all the people living as one -- no degrees of separation? I can; but, I'm a dreamer.

### **III. Single in the Black Church, by Martha Simmons**

The American black church, from its brush harbor infancy to its mega church maturity, has functioned as a guiding safe harbor for its members. During these times, the black church's focus and care of its followers has stretched from the womb to the tomb.

Although the black church may have been slow to embrace some controversial issues such as AIDS, spousal abuse, or child molestation, no one can seriously accuse it of not reaching out to its members and the black community on most other significant issues. It has been a place where the enslaved, misused, wounded and seldom-heard have been able to drop anchor and find sure footing on a solid rock -- a place of retreat from the storms of life.

Thus, it is unusual that the modern black church, especially those located in urban and suburban communities, are not organizing more and operating programs and projects aimed at meeting the needs of black singles. This move by the modern black church would be part of an overall strategy to address some of the most difficult cultural, economic, educational, social and spiritual issues faced by the average single congregant.

### **One Size Does Not Fit All**

As the black church draws upon its historical roots of leadership and self-help and, as it focuses its lens on the single members of the church and community, there are some basic truths that are to be accepted and followed if its singles ministries are expected to achieve real success.

First, as a foundational matter, each church needs to understand singles are neither uniform in their needs nor do they fall neatly into similar age groups, life experience categories, or spiritual growth cells or birth month clubs. Consequently, a “one-size-fits-all” approach is almost sure to fail. Initially, numerous singles may show up at a single’s ministry meeting, but their numbers will steadily and quickly decline, once it becomes clear everyone is expected to conform to the one size, one way to act mentality proffered by the church’s leadership.

### **Varied Needs**

The needs of singles are varied and are dictated by numerous factors: (a) age; (b) gender; (c) financial standing; (d) personal support systems; (e) life experiences; (f) level of faith; (g) self view; and, (h) personal goals, to name a few. As such, it is unwise to assume that a sixty-five year-old widow has the same interests or needs as a thirty year-old single mother or father. It is also unreasonable to assume that every single participant is either looking for companionship or an opportunity to snag a husband or wife. This one-dimensional thinking has sunk many well-intended singles ministries.

### **Focused Respect and Research**

Further, no matter how great are the intentions of churches, the needs, desires and wishes of the individual (the single participant) must always be respected. This basic truth does not require any transgression of any biblical principles. Instead, it can lead to the employment of some of Christianity’s most treasured laws: (a) exhibiting a spirit of love; (b) becoming our brother’s and sister’s keeper; and, (c) leaning not unto our own understandings. The focused lens of respect will enable the church to build a singles ministry that encompasses the actual needs, desires and wishes of singles -- not the undefined and sometimes archaic or unrealistic desires of the institutional church. For

some, this might be a novel concept. This will likely also require some basic research, at the least, a simple demographic survey.

The successful church singles ministry must also avoid the traditional act of totally designing the program before the needs of the participants are identified. Singles know their interests and needs better than anyone else. Why not let them help design the activities, projects and programs?

Also, solicit, through research, focus groups, computer responses, polls and other information gathering tools, the actual needs of participating or potentially participating singles. Then, this information can be translated into realistic programs that are built around the actual interests and needs of singles. Once interest and needs are known, creative programming will be able to overcome age, gender and life experience differences.

### **Simplicity and Patience**

Finally, a rule that is fundamental to any singles program is: “keep it simple.” Remember, Rome was not built in a day, and Jesus’ ministry, miracles and all, took thirty-three years to complete. So, do not expect to resolve every problem over night. Growth and healing occurs over time -- it is not all surge based. The seeds of patience should be an integral part of any singles program.

## **IV. Preaching Black Love in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved***

Just as the early Christians separated their religious observances from those of the Jews, polytheists, and other nonbelievers who refused to accept them as part of God’s beloved people, African Americans—both freed and enslaved—created their own worship services separate from white society generally and the mainline white Christian church particularly. In her award-winning novel *Beloved*, Nobel laureate Toni Morrison depicts the earliest formation of the historic black church tradition taking place in a “hush harbor,” a secret religious service held by enslaved blacks who met in a forest clearing on the outskirts of town. Significantly, the leader of this impromptu church is Baby Suggs, an enslaved black woman who is the mother-in-law of Sethe, the novel’s main character. Standing in stark contrast to the powerful men who head the mainline black churches, Baby Suggs is described as “an unchurched preacher,” an indication that she and her followers are not envisioned as part of the traditional church.<sup>2</sup>

Morrison places Baby Suggs in front of a “huge flat-sided rock” as Suggs speaks to the crowd, which offers a suggestion that, even though they exist beyond the bounds of mainline American Christianity, she maintains a direct bond to Christ as “the rock of our salvation.” From that place of divine privilege, Baby Suggs recognizes and identifies white Christian society’s hypocrisy to the enthusiastic crowd of black women, men, and children who gathered as her congregation. In that concealed gathering, she preached, “Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it.... You got to love it, you!”<sup>3</sup>

Central to the novel, Morrison illustrates that freedom—both in terms of a ideal way of being as well as a geographic locale north of the Mason-Dixon line -- is the “place” where black love is possible and palpable to all those who desperately seek it. That realization serves as the all-consuming inspiration for Baby Suggs’s call to preach. Moreover, although she ultimately accepts her call to preach later in life, her preaching in the hush harbor goes directly against “her same old ways.” Once Baby Suggs gives her life over to God and begins preaching, she is able to recover her family relationships, reclaim her relationship to God, and restore her place as elder within the slave community. Most importantly, Baby Suggs serves as both a maternal figure and stabilizing force for Sethe and Denver, her daughter-in-law and granddaughter respectively. She was enslaved for most of her life until her son, Halle (Sethe's husband), managed to buy her freedom. With her newly gained freedom, Baby Suggs learned what it meant to own every part of her body and began to call to the other Black folks to "love yourself." A self-proclaimed preacher standing in the hush harbor, Baby Suggs draws upon the beauty of nature to make the community of freed and enslaved Blacks alike to recognize the beauty in them. She provides a nurturing and healing presence for those scarred by slavery, including Sethe. Even though she has been dead eight years by the time of the novel’s plot takes place, Baby Suggs’s influence is so vital that her presence is felt long after her death—not in a haunting way, but in a reaffirming way in which her words and attitudes linger in the minds of those who loved her.

## **V. Kinship and Faith as Safe Havens in *A Raisin in the Sun***

In 1959, African American playwright Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* debuted on Broadway. Telling the story of a black family’s experiences growing up in Chicago’s Woodlawn neighborhood, *A Raisin in the Sun* was the first play written by a black woman to be produced on Broadway, as well as the first play with a black male director, Lloyd Richards, on Broadway. The play’s title comes from the opening lines of “Harlem,” a classic poem by Langston Hughes: “What happens to a dream deferred?/ Does it dry up/like a raisin in the sun?” Emerging within the context of the Civil Rights Movement, the idea of “a dream deferred” is a prominent theme throughout the play as each member of the Younger family attempts to find his or her place amidst a number of difficult situations.

Set in the 1950s, the play is about an African American family, the Youngers. Recently widowed, Lena Younger (also known as Mama) is the mother of Beneatha and Walter and is the maternal hub of the Youngers. She shares her daughter-in-law Ruth’s dreams of buying a house with money from her late husband’s insurance policy. They dream of leaving behind the two room apartment in the ugly, run-down tenement where they have lived since Ruth and Walter Lee were married. His wife, Ruth, wanting to provide more space and better opportunities for their son, Travis, agrees with Mama. Walter Lee would rather use the money to invest in a liquor store, believing the income would put an end to the family’s financial woes. Walter Lee’s big dream of making a fortune goes awry when he foolishly gives his money to a con artist who vanishes with his family’s windfall. His sister, Beneatha, a college student, tries to find her identity and embraces the Pan-African philosophy of Joseph Asagai, a Nigerian friend and graduate student. Beneatha would

like to use the money to pay her medical school tuition. Another crisis ensues because the dream home they finally do purchase is in Clybourne Park, an all-white neighborhood. Their racist prospective neighbors form the Clybourne Park Improvement Association and decide to send one of their members, Karl Lindner, in order to try to buy out the family in order to prevent the move. Having been swindled, Walter Lee initially contemplates taking the money, but ultimately refuses to be intimidated or bought out once his mother challenges him to be like his father; Walter Lee finally has a change of heart when confronted with the shameful error of his ways.

A Raisin in the Sun emphasizes black familial relations in truthfully complex ways that no theatrical production before (and few since) ever had. Just like any family, regardless of racial or cultural background, the Youngers have stressful issues and painful concerns that affect their relationships as a family. For instance, although Ruth and Travis have an intimate mother-son relationship, Walter Lee has a father-son relationship with Travis that has its own particular idiosyncrasies. Walter loves his mother, but in a heated moment, Walter Lee tells Mama that he acts like a child because she seizes all the responsibility. She never allows him to be a man and to be the head of the household. He wants to be in charge of the family, but needs the opportunity to illustrate his responsibility and strength. However, when she does allow him the chance to take charge of the family's finances, he trusts the wrong people and makes the worst decision, possible thereby jeopardizing the family's prospects for a financially stable future.

Walter's wife Ruth gets pregnant and eventually reveals her pregnancy and possible option for abortion. Mama is appalled that her son would allow his wife to terminate a life. She lectures him that her family is about loving children and giving life, not taking life away. Sadly, while the Youngers appear to possibly be growing, it also seems that the family is also on the verge of falling apart.

As the play hits its climax, Walter Lee sinks low enough to beg Lindner to come to their apartment with money in exchange for his dignity. The women of the Younger household—Beneatha, Ruth, and Mama—are shocked and outraged. They do not know how to react to either his words or actions, yet Mama tells them once more that family is the most important thing in the world, and no matter what events or circumstances may conspire against them, they must always love one another. Family is needed the most when people are down. As the play concludes, Walter Lee finally grows into a mature and confident black man by telling Lindner that the Youngers will still move to Clybourne Park. Ruth and Mama feel their family bond grow even stronger as they move out of the old living room and into their new home.

Throughout the play, Mama Younger recalls her late husband's words with all the hope and integrity he was able to muster during his life. He would talk about dreams and living them for and through children. Family was the most important thing to him, and she hoped it would be for her children, as well. Mama remembers her late husband's hard work and love. He did everything for his family, for his children, so that they could have a better life. Moreover, it is her Christian faith and hope that enables her to envision a way through all of life's problems and pitfalls. Even as Mama comes to rather agonizing

and disturbing confrontations with the various members of her family, she is guided by a godly spirit of love, strength, and wisdom that allows her to see all the family members for who and what they are while also envisioning their greater potential as part of God's creation. Above all, the Youngers are prompted by the Christian love and faith of Mama Younger; the family holds fast to their faith in God, family, and themselves. Therefore, Mama Younger is able to guide her children's affairs as an expressed commitment to black life and love.

## **VI. Songs Celebrating Black Kinship and Singles**

The cultural resources musical component of this Kinship and Singles Sunday celebrates the many dimensions of relationships, life, and love in a sacred fashion. Gospel music has been central to the spiritual uplift and betterment of the black community but has not been able to aptly address the issue of human love in real ways. In recent years, there have been a few songs such as "I Need You Now" and "Love" as examples of how to address loving relationships—human and divine, romantic and platonic, sexual and non-sexual—in a beautifully lyrical and passionate manner. To hear these songs, especially in the context of Kinship and Singles Sunday, is to realize the truth of the old saying that love is "a many splendored thing" that should always revolve around God's presence in our lives individually or collectively.

### **I Need You Now**

Not a second or another minute  
Not an hour of another day  
But at this moment with my arms outstretched  
I need you to make a way  
Lord as you've done so many times before  
Through a window or an opened door  
I stretch my hands to thee  
Come rescue me, I need you right away.

I need you now, I need you now  
I need you now, I need you now  
Not another second or another minute  
Not an hour of another day  
But, Lord, I need you right away.

If I've never needed you before  
To show up and restore  
All of the faith that I let slip  
While I was yet searching the world for more  
The truest friend I have indeed  
You're my best friend I know I need  
I stretch my hands to thee  
Come rescue me, I need you right away.



The agony of being alone  
The fear of doing things on my own  
The tests and trials that come to make me strong  
The feelings of guilt, hurt, shame and defeat  
The waves of trials that beat upon me  
But to know Lord, in you I've got victory.<sup>5</sup>

### Love

Love  
A word that comes and goes  
But few people really know  
What it means to really love somebody

Love  
Though the tears may fade away  
I'm so glad your love will stay  
Cause I love you  
And you showed me Jesus  
What it really means to love

(Repeat Intro )

Love  
A word that comes and goes  
But few people really know  
What it means to really love somebody

Love  
Though the tears may fade away  
I'm so glad your love will stay  
Cause I love you  
And you showed me Jesus  
What it really means to love...

The nights that I cried you loved me  
When I should have died you loved me  
I'll never know why you loved me  
It's a mystery to me now I'm glad to see Jesus

When all hope was gone you loved me  
You gave me a song that you loved me  
Now I can go on cause you loved me  
It's a mystery to me now I'm glad to see Jesus

The nights that I've cried you loved me  
When I should have died you loved me

I'll never know why you loved me  
It's a mystery to me now I'm glad to see Jesus

When all hope was gone you loved me  
You gave me a song that you loved me  
Now I can go on cause you loved me  
It's a mystery to me now I'm glad to see Jesus

What it really means  
To love....  
Patient, patient, kind,  
That's love (repeat till end) <sup>6</sup>

### Notes

1. "Imagine." By John Lennon. Imagine. UK: Parlophone Records, 1971.
2. Morrison, Toni. Beloved. New York: Plume/New American Library, 1987. p.87
3. *Ibid.*, 88.
4. *Ibid.*, 146.
5. "I Need You Now." By Smokie Norful. I Need You Now. Brentwood, TN: Chordant Distribution, 2002.
6. "Love." By Kirk Franklin. Kirk Franklin and the Family Christmas. Inglewood, CA: Gospocentric, 1995.