



## MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT SUNDAY

### CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Sunday, March 21, 2010**

**F. Douglas Powe, Jr., Guest Cultural Resource Commentator**

E. Stanley Jones Associate Professor of Evangelism, Saint Paul School of Theology, Kansas City, MO

#### **I. Historical Background**

We are constantly bombarded with statistics indicating a decline in African American marriage. For most of us, this reality sets in when we consider divorce, separation and single run households in our own extended families. The roots of struggling African American families are embedded in slavery and its intentional dismantling of African families. I believe the hope for a renewed perspective on marriage is also rooted in slavery. For example, reclaiming “jumpin’ over the broom” as a symbolic practice and not simply a ceremonial practice is a step toward a renewed perspective of marriage. Thinking about jumpin’ over the broom as a ceremonial

practice can connect us to our foreparents, but understanding it as a symbolic practice can help us to embody a different reality.

During slavery, the reality was that marriage was illegal for those in bondage. Slaves could not legally marry so those who wanted to indicate a committed life to one another often jumped over a broom to symbolize a new beginning. Marriage was not about big ceremonies, important guest lists, or gaining upward mobility. It was about fidelity to God and one's spouse. This commitment was made with the knowledge that one's spouse could be sold and even taken to another state at any time.

While jumpin' over a broom was part of a ceremony, it was more than a ceremonial gesture. It symbolized a deep commitment to God, black marriage and black family, all of which was counter to the culture being promoted by slave owners. Slave owners did not want healthy African support systems to be constructed familial attachments developed. Jumpin' over the broom not only symbolized a new beginning for the couple, but undermined the culture of the time which devalued relationships between African couples.

The question is, "Are we perpetuating the culture of the slave owners or that of our African foreparents?" Too many marriages and families are falling apart today because we are buying into a culture that promotes infidelity. Not only infidelity in the strictest sense of defiling the relationship, but infidelity in the way we have capitulated to the culture of our day that often values individuality and materialism over relationships. Reclaiming a perspective on marriage that renews the idea of fidelity to God and one's spouse is critical today as we attempt to strengthen African American families.

## **II. Songs that Speak to the Moment**

Beyoncé Knowle's version of "Ave Maria" is introducing younger generations to a classic wedding song. The lyrics of "Ave Maria" are especially important because they point to a future where the African American family experiences life in heaven here on earth. By placing this song in the Marriage Enrichment Sunday unit, it reminds couples of that they are to participate with God in making heaven on earth a reality not only for African American couples, but the entire African American community.

### **Ave Maria**

She was lost in so many different ways  
Out in the darkness with no guide  
I know the cost of a losing hand  
But there by the grace of God go I

I found heaven on earth  
You were my last, my first  
And then I hear this voice inside  
Ave Maria

I've been alone  
When I'm surrounded by friends  
How could the silence be so loud  
But I still go on knowing that I've got you  
There's us when the lights go down

You are my heaven on earth  
You are my hunger, my thirst  
I always hear this voice inside  
Singing Ave Maria

Sometimes love can come and pass you by  
While you're busy making plans  
Suddenly hit you and then you realize  
It's out of your hands, baby you got to understand

You are my heaven on earth  
You are my last, my first  
And then I hear this voice inside  
Ave Maria  
Ave Maria  
Ave Maria<sup>1</sup>

“Endless Love” is an old school song that was sung by Lionel Richie and Diana Ross. Some may find this song naïve today because it suggests we can love our spouse forever. As two truly become one, the love between them continues to blossom. It is a song that often reminds us of how we felt when we first fell in love.

### **Endless Love**

My love,  
There's only you in my life  
The only thing that's bright

My first love,  
You're every breath that I take  
You're every step I make

And I (i-i-i-i)  
I want to share  
All my love with you  
No one else will do...

And your eyes  
Your eyes, your eyes  
They tell me how much you care  
Ooh yes, you will always be  
My endless love

Two hearts,  
Two hearts that beat as one  
Our lives have just begun

Forever (ohhhhhh)  
I'll hold you close in my arms  
I can't resist your charms

And love  
Oh, love  
I'll be a fool  
for you,  
I'm sure  
You know I don't mind  
Oh, you know I don't mind

cause you,  
You mean the world to me  
Oh  
I know  
I know  
I've found in you  
My endless love

Oooh-woow  
Boom, boom  
Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom  
Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom

Oooh, and love  
Oh, love  
I'll be that fool  
For you,  
I'm sure  
You know I don't mind  
Oh you know-  
I don't mind

And, yes  
You'll be the only one  
cause no one can deny  
This love I have inside  
And I'll give it all to you  
My love  
My love, my love  
My endless love.<sup>2</sup>

“Ribbon in the Sky” by Stevie Wonder is a secular song that has strong religious overtures and points to the importance of God being a part of loving relationships. This song tells us that finding that special someone is not by chance and that prayer is the reason for two becoming one. This song translates the ideal of love into everyday language that speaks to the desires of old and new school African American couples.

### **Ribbon in the Sky**

Oh so long for this night I prayed  
That a star would guide you my way  
To share with me this special day  
There's a ribbon's in the sky for our love  
If allowed may I touch your hand  
And if pleased may I once again  
So that you too will understand  
There's a ribbon in the sky for our love

Do...Do...  
Do Do Do Do Do...  
HMM HMM...

This is not a coincidence  
And far more than a lucky chance  
But what is that was always meant  
Is our ribbon in the sky for our love, love

We can't lose with God on our side  
We'll find strength in each tear we cry  
From now on it will be you and I  
And our ribbon in the sky  
Ribbon in the sky  
A ribbon in the sky for our love

Do...Do...  
Do Do Do Do Do...  
HMM. HMM

[Musical Break]

There's a ribbon in the sky for our love<sup>3</sup>

### **III. Cultural Response to Significant Aspects of the Text**

It is easy to read and interpret the Hebrew 13:4 text as referring solely to physical sexual fidelity to one's partner, and this is critical. But, I think it is important for us to broaden this interpretation so that fidelity includes the well-being of the relationship and family as a whole. When our son was born, it became clear to me and my spouse that we had to make difficult

decisions related to the family versus careers. If we were going to raise our child and not depend on someone else to raise him, then it meant rethinking pursuing things that detracted from family time. For me, it is easy to get trapped into focusing on projects, research and conferences not realizing that I am not being faithful to my commitment to my family. Fidelity is about the relationship itself, but it is also about the life couples and families create together.

My understanding of fidelity has been broadened through small group studies with other couples. This may be a helpful approach for congregations looking for ways to strengthen marriages and relationships in their community. Starting small study groups that focus on a holistic perspective of marriage and family life can help individuals deepen their faith and build healthier relationships. These groups can meet at a church, but it may be more beneficial for them to meet in the homes of sponsors. The groups meeting in homes can invite those from their community who may not be part of their congregation or any congregation to participate in dialogue about developing and maintaining healthy African American marriages and relationships. The hope is to transform not only relationships in the church, but relationships in the community at large. By doing this, Marriage Enrichment Sunday becomes more than a ceremony and symbolizes a commitment to developing healthier relationships for the entire African American community.

#### **IV. Audio Visual Aid**



Developing a wedding album that depicts couples from various generations can be a powerful visual for congregations. One of the advantages of doing a wedding album is the variety of media now available.

Congregations can create an actual album that is physically accessible to everyone in the congregation. Or, those with the capacity to do so, can place the album online or project it on screen during a worship service or church event. Often, pictures help us develop questions or a different vision for what life can become. Some in your congregation may be encouraged to engage those depicted in the album in conversation as a means of learning the stories behind the faces. Be sure to include basic information with each picture in your wedding album such as the full names of couples not just Mr. and Mrs. .... their wedding date and one fun fact about the couple such as where they met or where they became engaged. Imagine seeing a wedding picture of a deacon and his or her spouse who have been married thirty years, with their names and then the words: Met in Publix Supermarket in 1975. Or, he proposed to her on the front steps of her dad's home. Make the exercise fun.

#### **V. Stories and Illustrations**

Prayer helps us share our hearts with God. In 1929, Lewis Jordan wrote "A Marriage Prayer," articulating what so many of us desire when we get married. Below are a few lines from the prayer expressing the thoughts many of us had when we were married:

...we pray Thee, graciously to regard Thy servant and handmaiden, who have thus solemnly pledged themselves to each other, and sworn unto Thee; that, through Thy

good care and guidance, they may evermore remember and keep these their vows; be kept themselves in unbroken concord and sympathy all the days of their earthly life...<sup>4</sup>

In Jordan's prayer we clearly see the importance of fidelity to God and one's spouse. It is a reinterpretation of the love of God and love of neighbor theme. Our faithfulness to our spouse is a means of living out faithfulness to God. As Jordan points out, it is only by the grace of God we are able to live faithful lives.

Jordan's prayer about marriage is now eighty years old, but his point about God's grace helping us to live faithful lives is a word we need to hear today. Marriage in the United States is a legal action. Even if one marries in a church, it is still necessary to get a marriage license from the state for the marriage to be considered "legal." As Christians, we recognize that for marriage to truly be a union it has to include a spiritual component. Praying for God to guide us and help us to live out our vows moves marriage from a legal transaction toward reclaiming the spiritual and cultural significance of jumpin' over the broom, making marriage a commitment to living counter-culturally. Marriage is no longer simply defined by a certificate. Marriage is defined by how we create an existence of fidelity to God, one another, families and ultimately the African American community.

### Notes

1. Dench, Ian, Mikkel S. Eriksen, Amanda Louisa Gosein, Tor Erik Hermansen, Beyoncé Gisselle Knowles, and Makeba Riddick. "Ave Maria." I Am -- Sasha Fierce. New York, NY: Sony BMG, 2008.
2. Richie, Lionel. "Endless Love." Lionel Richie. Detroit, MI: Motown Records, 1981.
3. Wonder, Stevie. "Ribbon in the Sky." Ribbon in the Sky. Detroit, MI: Motown Records, 1982.
4. Jordan, Lewis. "A Marriage Prayer." Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans. James Melvin Washington. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994.