



MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT SUNDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction

For the African American Christian community, marriage is something that historically has been held in high esteem. We take seriously the creation stories written in Genesis 1–2. The African American church teaches that God created humankind in God’s own image and gave them dominion and authority over all living creatures. We believe that in climactic fashion, God declared this creation and this system as “very good.” Black churches throughout the United States preached that the LORD God came to the conclusion of man needing a “helper as his partner” and that subsequently woman was created out of the rib of the man. Man then leaves his father and mother, clings to his wife, and the two become one flesh. This union has been the foundation for our families and one of the keys to our survival through the valleys of segregation, inequality, and perpetual disenfranchisement. In fact, we can confidently say that marriage was embraced from the 1890s through the 1940s.¹

There has been discussion regarding a decline in African American marriages after the 1950s, but optimism exists because African American marriages can reclaim this tradition of survival and success when both spouses exist to complement one another. As the writer of Ecclesiastes stated, “Two are better than one” (Ecclesiastes 4:9). One is not greater than the other and one does not seek to have authority over the other. All roads lead to solidarity and sustainability. Two individuals coming together to enhance one another is the picture the Scriptures want us to have. Douglas D. Webster can assist us in understanding the power of what he calls “Mutual Submission.” He describes Paul’s understanding of marriage in Ephesians as “carefully balanced and nuanced.”² True mutual submission requires both spouses to reverence Christ and to humble themselves towards one another.

II. Historical Perspective and Mutual Benefits

Historically, African Americans have not been granted the same rights and privileges as our white brothers and sisters. This is true regarding citizenship (African Americans were considered three-fifths of a human being), voting rights (voter discrimination continued even after the Civil Rights of 1964), and even equal access to basic institutions (“Separate but equal” was once the prevailing theme of the day). Segregation was paramount and evident in public places and institutions including schools, stores, hospitals, and public transportation. African Americans were not welcomed in predominantly white educational institutions, and the desegregation of many of these institutions, such as Central High School in Little Rock and the University of Mississippi, brought hateful and harmful responses.

Although these particular institutional inequities are the most noteworthy in our history books, there was another area of African American life where equal rights and privileges were not granted—marriage. Most slaves were not allowed to legally marry and were not granted marriage licenses. Whites did not recognize most of the marital relationships slaves established. However, it must also be noted that this legal discrimination did not prevent the enslaved from symbolically marrying and conducting their own marital ceremonies including jumping the broom. Both the husband and wife in these relationships committed to one another and worked together to build families in the midst of unbearable conditions. They complemented each other, and successful families were the result.

How does this occur in such a horrific context? Is it just love that produces enduring relationships such as these even in the most difficult conditions? Well, love most likely played a critical role in these relationships. In addition, I believe mutual benefit also played a critical role. Both husbands and wives believed they were stronger together than separate. The male benefitted from the nurturing and industrious presence of the woman, and the woman benefitted from the industrious and protective presence of the male. Contemporary marriages can be strengthened as well when the relationship is mutually beneficial for both spouses.

Robert Franklin is helpful in this discussion. In his book Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities, he has a section entitled “Marriage Benefits.” The section is based on a 2001 article in *Jet Magazine* entitled “Who Benefits More from Marriage—Men or Women?” Franklin suggests that nearly all of the scholars that commented in the article indicated that men are the winners in marriage.³ Married men tend to avoid risky behavior, survive better financially, and perform better at work. However, Franklin balances his commentary by acknowledging that both men and women benefit from marriage. He quotes Dr. Joyce A. Ladner who says, “Men and women need companionship; they need to be loved, to have someone to care about them and someone who is there for them.”⁴ Franklin then cites Orlando Patterson, who suggests that women and men benefit in different ways. Men tend to value companionship more while women value what he terms as “instrumental aspects of

marriage” like “financial security.”⁵

This mutual beneficial relationship makes marriage worthwhile for both husband and wife. Mutual benefits are reflective of the marriages of our forefathers and foremothers. Both parties benefit because both parties complement each other. Both parties are successful because both parties support one another and contribute to the other person’s progress and prosperity. Both parties benefit when they are mutually submissive and mutually concerned with the well-being of the other.

III. Personal Testimonies

Many of my personal friends were not raised in two-parent households. In fact, growing up, when I would spend the night at a friend’s house or they would spend the night at mine, my family was typically the only household with both mother and father in the same home. As a child, I did not notice this reality. However, as an adult I began to reflect on many of the intricacies of my mother and father’s relationship. I admit, my mother and father did not have a perfect marriage. I witnessed their disagreements. I recognized my mother’s frustration when my father was more content with circumstances than she was. My father’s frustration was evident when my mother moved hastily on various matters. Nonetheless, my parents were married for 34 years until my father passed away in 2003.

I believe that the reason my parents were able to maintain their marriage for 34 years is because they complemented one another. My father was a very quiet and unassuming man. My mother, on the other hand, is talkative and outgoing. My father was very frugal, but my mother is more of a “free spender.” My father was a homebody, but my mother enjoyed being away from the house. In almost every way they were opposites, but they determined where mutual agreement and understanding was needed in a way that was productive for the entire family. If my mother drove me to school, my father picked me up. If my mother paid for the groceries, my father paid when the family ate out. If my mother vacuumed the house and dusted, my father mowed the lawn and took out the trash. This division of duties and their opposite personalities reflected my mother and father’s view of marriage. One person’s strength covered the other’s weakness. In the case of my mother and father, two became one.

I have served in congregations with older members. We frequently celebrated marriage anniversaries of 60 or more years. The love and complementary relationships I have been exposed to are phenomenal. One such representative couple is in the twilight years of their lives. Yet, their love remains clear. For more than 60 years they have taken care of each other. He worked hard for her and in return she took care of him. They lived a modest life and supported their children through school. Now in their eighties, her weakness has become his strength. She has Alzheimer’s disease. Although her decline is a sad thing to watch, it is beautiful to observe how their marriage has evolved. He walks with her and holds her hand. He takes her to her doctor’s appointments. He holds her at night when her condition causes her to be scared. True complementary relationships stand the test of time and allow both husband and wife to grow closer together.

IV. Marriage Ministry Ideas

Many churches have some form of a marriage ministry. Marriage ministry sessions led by experts on how husbands and wives can complement one another can be very effective. Here is an idea of how a marriage ministry session on this topic can be facilitated:

- Open the session in prayer. Also, reflect on various Scriptures that support complementary marriage relationships such as the stories of Genesis 1–2.
- Play games that include wives and husbands teaming up. There are several games that work well in achieving this goal, such as Taboo, Gestures, or Spades, etc.
- Create various scenarios that husbands and wives must act out in front of the group. When creating the scenarios, please ensure that there is a teachable moment in each one. This provides discussion topics following the scene. Also, acting out the scenes requires the husband and wife to work together for a successful production.
- Provide prizes such as gift cards and date night dinners for those couples that do the best job of acting out the scenes. Judges can determine the winner or the couples in the room can vote on it.

V. A Couple That Complements Each Other Preaches Together

The word of God presented in a powerful fashion is a wonderful scene to behold. It is even more wonderful when a couple whose gifts are unique and effective individually come together to complement one another in the presentation of God’s word. As they shared at the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Cory and Courtney Jenkins preached a sermon directed to married couples. (That sermon, “He Said, She Said, God Said,” appears on YouTube—see below—in five parts.) The sermon is appropriate for this moment not only because of its message to married couples to keep what God says at the forefront of their marriage but also because the couple complement each other well during the preaching moment. Consider the gift of husband and wife complementing one another in the sermonic presentation as well as the words shared to bless married couples.

Part 1: YouTube:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&feature=endscreen&v=E_YrsM8XnE0

Part 2: YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRMtlzGaZOY>

Part 3: YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5QtiyFLfYQ&feature=endscreen&NR=1>

Part 4: YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&feature=endscreen&v=OBiusv7Yiyg>

Part 5: YouTube

: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=Cl-_JmnsFCo

VI. Songs That Speak to the Moment

This complementary relationship between spouses is enhanced when both parties are able to see the value and beauty in the other. In order to complement each other, spouses must view each other as gifts from God. Furthermore, when the mirror image of God's light in one spouse reflects in the other, an unstoppable union is formed. Neo Soul artist India Arie wonderfully describes this in her song "The Truth."

The Truth

Let me tell you why I love him

'Cause he is the truth, said he is so real
And I love the way that he makes me feel
And if I am a reflection of him then I must be fly
Because his light it shines so bright, I wouldn't lie

I remember the very first day that I saw him
I found myself immediately intrigued by him
It's almost like I knew this man from another life
Like back then maybe I was his husband maybe he was my wife

And even things I don't like about him are fine with me
'Cause it's not hard for me to understand him 'cause he's so much like me
And it's truly my pleasure to share his company
And I know that it's God's gift to breathe the air he breathes⁶

The complementary relationship is further developed in the idea that in marriage each person views the other as an integral ingredient to his or her success and the piece that makes him or her complete and strong. It is reflective of the African proverb "I am because we are." Soul artist Kem says this in the song "You Are."

You Are

When you are standing here with me
I can see everything in you
You are the light that feeds the soul oh yeah
Girl you are everything divine
In your love I will learn my wings to fly
In your heart I will make my home

Day or night I will come to you
Here's to our love
I do oh yeah oh girl I do
You are half that makes me whole
Girl you are marigolds in bloom
Baby you are the air I breathe oh yeah
Girl you are everything in me
In your love I will bring my dreams to life oh
From your heart I will never roam oh no
Until now my weakness is all I've known
But with your love
I am strong oh baby girl
I am stronger yeah
Oh yeah
I'm stronger⁷

Ultimately, the crux of successful African American Christian marriages is Jesus Christ. Husbands and wives complement one another best when Christ is at the center. There can be no subservient or dictatorial attitudes with Christ at the center of the marriage. Richard Smallwood says this in his song "Jesus, You're the Center of My Joy."

Jesus, You're the Center of My Joy

Jesus, You're the center of my joy
All that's good and perfect comes from You
You're the heart of my contentment
Hope for all I do
Jesus, You're the center of my joy.⁸

Notes

1. Franklin, Robert M. Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. p. 66.
2. Webster, Douglas D. A Theology of Ministry: Living in Tension. N.d. TS. Collection of Douglas D. Webster, Birmingham. p. 306.
3. Crisis in the Village. p. 75.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., pp. 75–76.
6. Arie, India. "The Truth." Metro lyrics online location: <http://www.metrolyrics.com/the-truth-lyrics-india-arie.html> accessed 27 October 2012

7. Kem. "You Are." Metro lyrics online location: <http://www.metrolyrics.com/you-are-lyrics-kem.html> accessed 27 October 2012

8. Smallwood, Richard. "Jesus, You're the Center of My Joy." Metro lyrics online location: <http://www.metrolyrics.com/jesus-youre-the-center-of-my-joy-lyrics-richard-smallwood.html> accessed 27 October 2012