



SINGLES' SUNDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, November 15, 2009

Sheridan Todd Yeary, Guest Cultural Resource Commentator

Senior Pastor, Douglas Memorial Community Church, Baltimore, MD, and Associate Director, Center for Black Studies at Northern Illinois University

Lecture - Matthew 19:10-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 10) His disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” (v. 11) But he said to them, “Not everyone can accept this teaching but only those to whom it is given. (v. 12) For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”

I. Introduction

The television sitcom, “Living Single,” was a humorous and enlightening view of the lives of six successful African American singles living in an often comical network of mutual support and relationship. While I often laughed at the awkward ways in which the characters dealt with their singleness, I was also touched by the ways in which their being single provided opportunities for them to enjoy the beauty and benefit of family and community. The marital status of my favorite

characters seemed not to matter as I watched how they dealt with family, relationships, grief, hope and career success. Their lives demonstrated the power of community in the absence of marriage. These were educated, professional, successful, eccentric, idealistic and hopeful women and men who exemplified the power of true relationship within a committed and supportive network of mutuality and care.

II. Historical/Cultural Context

Throughout history, singleness has often been viewed as a less-than-ideal state of living. The association of divine judgment for the unwed, widowed or divorced has often reinforced a climate of exclusion for singles, rather than creating an environment that is affirming of the beauty and value of living single. The belief that singles cannot find wholeness within the context of their spirituality and religious experience is often inferred due to the relative absence of inclusive church ministries, programs and worship opportunities that acknowledge and value the personhood of singles. Taylor and Chatters noted the disparity in religious participation between married persons and singles.¹ In many instances, the church's silence on the value of singles has served as a deterrent to the participation of singles in local church ministries. Additionally, the stigma that is often assigned to single status is one that does not lend itself to religious participation. Whether the single is divorced, widowed, or never married, the assumption is often that there is a defect or deficiency in the personality or character of the single person.

Statistics vary when it comes to enhancing our understanding of the realities of single living. Some point out that for every married couple there is one single person in our society. Hence, we know that singles represent a significant demographic socially, as well as within our congregations. Additionally, the stereotypes associated with African American singleness become a significant area of concern. For example, the constant association of black manhood with incarceration instead of education serves as a significant constraint on self-image and potential. Additionally, the oft-promoted social view that African American women are promiscuous "loose" baby factories devalues these members of our communities and churches.

The issue from a cultural perspective is how do we affirm the value of singles, regardless of their desire for marriage or their marital status while, at the same time, transforming the community's perception of the value of single people? The value and perspectives that singles bring to the local church extend far beyond using the religious experience as a means to finding a mate. This selected text for Singles Sunday suggests that Jesus is promoting singleness as an alternative to marital failure. We must be careful not to address singleness as a deviant or defective relationship status compared to the status of married members of our community. We should: 1) treat singles as we treat married church employees relative to compensation. This is especially true for hierarchical denominations who often establish or help establish pay rates; 2) have church leadership and denominational leadership that reflect a healthy mixture of single and married individuals; and, 3) ensure that those we reward and honor during typical Annual Days in the African American Church (Men's Day, Women's Day, etc.) include singles and not just singles who are widowed or divorced.

III. Songs That Speak to the Moment

The selected hymns for this moment -- “Great is Thy Faithfulness” and “In the Garden” -- speak to the beauty of intimacy with God. They express the unwavering love and benefit of God’s favor while, at the same time, indicating that the divine-human relationship is built on the universal principle of love and commitment. The primary intimate relationship that brings ultimate fulfillment is with God. Faithfulness, support, commitment, compassion, and communion are found in the divine-human relationship.

The final song by India Arie, “I Choose,” offers lyrics that encourage self-affirmation and self-determination. The “I-ness” sung about is anyone who is willing to affirm their own right to be who they are, regardless of their historical journey or current circumstance. These three songs, when taken together, help shape and re-frame the self-identity of persons and communities.

Great is Thy Faithfulness

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
There is no shadow of turning with thee.
Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not,
As thou has been Thou forever wilt be.

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon and stars in their courses of above,
Join with all nature in manifold witness,
To thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

CHORUS

Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed thy hand hath provided,
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!²

In the Garden

I come to the garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses;
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses.

He speaks, and the sound of his voice is so sweet,
The birds hush their singing;
And the melody that he gave to me,
Within my heart is ringing.

I'd stay in the garden with him,
Though the night around me be falling;
But he bids me go – through the voice of woe,
His voice to me is calling.

REFRAIN

And he walks with me, and he talks with me,
And he tells me I am his own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.³

I Choose

Because you never know where life is gonna take you
and you can't change where you've been.
But today, I have the opportunity to choose.

(Verse 1)

Here am I now looking at 30 and I got so much to say.
I gotta get this off of my chest, I gotta let it go today.
I was always too concerned about what everybody would think.
But I can't live for everybody, I gotta live my life for me.(yeah)
I pitched a fork in the road of my life and ain't nothing gonna happen unless I decide.

(Chorus)

(And I choose) to be the best that I can be.
(I choose) to be authentic in everything I do.
My past don't dictate who I am. I choose. (yeah)

(Verse 2)

I done been through some painful things I thought that I would never make it through.
Filled up with shame, from the top of my head to the soles of my shoes.
I put myself in so many chaotic circumstances, but by the grace of God I've been given so many
second chances.
But today I decided to let it all go. I'm dropping these bags, I'm making room for my joy.

(Chorus)

(And I choose) to be the best that I can be.
(I choose) to be authentic in everything I do.
My past don't dictate who I am. I choose.

(Bridge)

Because you never know where life is gonna take you and you can't change where you've been.
But today, I have the opportunity to choose. (hey ey)
I used to have guilt about why things happen the way they did cuz life is gonna do what it do.

And every day, I have the opportunity to choose.

(Verse 3)

From this day forward I'm going to be exactly who I am.

I don't need to change the way that I live just to get a man. (no!)

I even had a talk with my mama and I told her the day I'm grown,

"From this day forward, every decision I make will be my own." And hey!

(Chorus)

(And I choose) to be the best that I can be.

(I choose) to be courageous in everything I do.

My past don't dictate who I am. I choose.

(And I choose) to be the best that I can be.

(I choose) to be authentic in everything I do.

My past don't dictate who I am. I choose.

(Bridge)

Because you never know where life is gonna take you and you can't change where you've been.

But today, I have the opportunity to choose. (hey ey)

I used to have guilt about why things happened the way they did cuz life is gone do what it do.

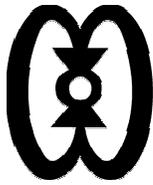
And every day, I have the opportunity to choose.⁴

IV. Visual Aids: Symbols and Singleness



“GYE NYAME”

Gye Nyame is an Adinkra symbol from Ghana, West Africa.⁵ Its literal translation is “except for God.” The cultural understanding is that nothing exists except through God. The cultural translation has significant theological meaning for the African American context because it forces us to move beyond dichotomous thinking. In essence, our cultural reality is, at the same time, theological; our theological reflection is embodied in our cultural expression. There is no good distinction that might be accomplished in separating the two. For singles in our congregations and community, *Gye Nyame* gives symbolic affirmation of the connectedness we all share with the divine being. The life, hope and value of single persons rest in the existence of God not in their marital status. Hence, the identity of single parishioners is exemplified fully in the person, power and presence of God. The single person and God are one.



“WO NSA DA MU A”

Wo Nsa Da Mu A is the Adinkra symbol that encourages participation and engagement. It means “if your hand is in the dish.” The proverb attached to the symbol is one that says if your hands are in the dish others can’t take everything and leave you with nothing. Essentially, the symbol pushes us to be bold in our participation in the life of the community. For the single person, it is a symbol of value and validation that says one’s worth is established by participating in the life of the community, not in the social status ascribed.

Singles should be encouraged to embrace their own sense of value and worth to the community. They should not be timid in deciding to fully participate in the life of the community, family or Church. To the contrary, singles should constantly be encouraged to keep their hands in the bowl and demonstrate their value through presence and participation in all aspects of communal life.

Whether we explore the lives of singles through a situation comedy or through the reality of life, we come away with the importance of the village to the single man or woman. For many, the Church becomes the existential reality of the village. According to the traditions of Mother Africa, the village provides support, safety, affirmation and intimacy. To a similar extent, our congregations must become the village for singles who are a part of our Church family, and our rituals must be reflective of the values of all the members of the village community. Janet Jacobs argues, “religious ceremonies play a significant role in reducing anxiety and isolation as emotions are acknowledged, expressed, and resolved within a social milieu of attachment and connection to significant others...The psychological benefits of ritual thus emerge out of the relational aspects of ceremonial acts that validate and give expression to the emotional reality of human experience.”⁷

The rituals that affirm singles should be inclusive of members of the village who desire to embrace and affirm the value of singles for the community-at-large. The elders, adults and youth can all be included in the ritual affirmation of singles. Litanies and other spoken affirmations by the members of the community emphasize solidarity and genuine concern as a core value of the village.

Ritual affirmations can promote two components essential for spiritual care of our congregations—liberation and empowerment. Liberation confronts the constraints to full personhood, while empowerment focuses on the strengthening of the identities of individuals and communities, such that they are better equipped to overcome the constant oppressive social forces that attempt to inhibit effective living. Emmanuel Lartey defines the pastoral care function of liberation as “the raising of awareness about the sources and causes of oppression and domination in society.” He further defines the empowering function as “the process of re-valuing self and personal characteristics together with finding and using available resources outside oneself, in such a way

as to enable and motivate persons and groups to think and act in ways that will result in greater freedom and participation in the life of the societies of which they are a part.”⁸

Addressing these dynamics of spiritual care with singles becomes increasingly critical because the demography of singles is complex to analyze, often reaching across lines of socio-economic status, age, etc. As a result, attending to the needs of singles will often lead to other opportunities for spiritual, psychological and emotional support within our congregations and communities, such as support for divorced singles, widowed singles, unmarried singles, etc. Furthermore, being sensitive to the needs of singles creates opportunities to express a commitment to social justice, as singles are often more oppressed in key areas than their married counterparts. By calling the village together in affirmation and connectedness with singles, the energy and soul force of the community can be channeled in ways that enhance the health and vitality of all members of the village, regardless of relationship status or demographic.

Notes

1. Taylor, Robert Joseph, Linda M. Chatters, and James S. Jackson. Family Life in Black America. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1991.
2. Chisoholm, Thomas. “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA, 2001. #158
3. Miles, C. Austin. “In the Garden.” African American Heritage Hymnal. #494
4. “I Choose.” Elyrics.net. Online location: <http://www.elyrics.net/read/i/india.Arie-lyrics/i-choose-lyrics.html> accessed 12 July 2009
5. “GYE NYAME.” Adinkra.org. Online location: <http://www.adinkra.org/htmls/adinkra/gyen.htm> accessed 12 July 2009
6. “WO NSA DA MU A.” Adinkra.org. Online location: <http://www.adinkra.org/htmls/adinkra/wonsa.htm> accessed 12 July 2009
7. Jacobs, Janet L. “Religious Ritual and Mental Health.” Ed. John F. Schumaker. Religion and Mental Health. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1992. p. 298.
8. Lartey, Emmanuel Y. In Living Colour: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling. Herndon, VA: Cassell, 1997. p. 41.