

## **Cultivating an Ethic of Black Preaching, Part I**

**By Stacey Floyd Thomas**

Stacey Floyd Thomas is Associate Professor of Ethics and Society at Vanderbilt Divinity School, Nashville, TN and a member of The African American Lectionary Team.

At an early age I developed an interest in the complex relationship between norms and actions. Although I had neither the scholarly language of ethics nor the axiological framework of homiletics necessary to structure my observations at that time, I was always intrigued to find that the relationship between the theological, quasi-spiritual preaching of many ministers and church leaders -- those who arguably had been 'called' by God -- and the actual practices of those selfsame purveyors of the Word of God were not in perfect accord.

Thus, as a child, I reasoned that if Jesus was the perfect expression of the absolute truths of the universe, then my spiritual guides in their love of Jesus and thereby their quest to please God by preaching God's word, would also live according to the life that Jesus led. Herein lay the fallacy of my moral reasoning at that time – I had assumed, as a child would, that preaching would dictate practice and thoughts dictated action. And it was that theo-ethical wrestling that marked the beginning of my quest to seek the answer to the ethicist's supreme query, "Why do people do what they do?"

I realized that what I saw differed fundamentally from the precepts with which I had been inculcated. What I saw throughout my childhood in Corpus Christi, Texas (a.k.a. "the body of Christ") was the perpetuation of sexist stereotypes. I saw the oppression of disadvantaged people by the dominant privileged class. At an early age, I also saw people of one so-called "minority" group turn against other oppressed people disavowing any commonalities, any shared history yet claiming the same spiritual strivings. As a youth, I also remember being disappointed by my local congregation's refusal to include persons who did not fit the community's norms of being religious, while at the same time fully professing Christianity, which I understood to be an inclusive gospel. I bore witness to the rejection of the unwed mothers, the unchurched sinner, and the uneducated fool—all who were rejected because they could not be comfortably

assimilated into my middle-class Black Baptist environment by the normative standards of that institution.

What I saw as perhaps the most single damning thing in my youthful eyes – was the tragedy of internalized oppression among Black folk by those who did not embody the archetype, or the 'norm'. Thus, from early on, I was plagued by these contradictions. My childhood interrogation of “How could so-called Christians, behave as if God never existed?” became further problematized in my intellectual and theological formation as I turned over and over in my mind, the questions: *Is there a qualitative nature to oppression? How can those who have been most oppressed preach hate or fear and loathing of others? Where is the love of God in the suffering facing “the least of these”?* And how ought my living be as one who finds herself among the oppressed and oppressors?

Illuminated by preaching that prided itself on ‘rightly dividing the word of truth’ from sacred texts and about social practices, this notion of ethical contradiction was a warning signal to me of a thinking-being-doing dichotomy. This is a situation in which the marginalized – namely, Black people who wrestle with notions of theodicy while being imprisoned by a “colonizing religion”—find themselves. Many liberation theologians and womanist ethicists alike have noted that unlike Isis, the Goddess of Africa or the “Black and Beautiful” beloved denoted in the biblical Song of Songs, Black women’s real life experiences in particular illustrate an American nightmare caused by such a “colonizing religion.” A salient example of this colonization can be found in Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*. Here Celie – “the confused Christian who was taught to worship a god that’s a big, white, old, bearded, barefooted man with bluish gray eyes” - finds herself wanting more and ends up disavowing a god to whom she once bared her soul. In a letter to her sister, Nettie, she writes:

I don't write to God no more, I write you.

*What happen to God? ast Shug.*

Who that? I say.

*She look at me serious.*

Big a devil as you is, I say, you not worried bout no God, surely.

*She say, "Wait a minute. Hold jus a minute here. Just because us I don't harass it like some people us know don't mean I ain't got religion."*

What God do for me? I ast.

*She say, Celie! Like she shock. He gave you life, good health...*

Yeah, I say, and he gave me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown.

*She say. Miss Celie You better hush. God might hear you.*

Let 'im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place.....

### **Decolonizing the Spirit of Salvation**

The world of difference that exists between Celie and her perception of a Eurocentric, anthropomorphic, and sexist image of God is made all the more injurious because he is found to be not only alien in nature but more importantly alienating by disposition. And we know all too well how and why this alien and alienating God came into her consciousness to forever separate her from a liberating salvation. This god she came to know was most probably manifested through an oppressive Black theology and demonizing preaching or, (as Renita Weems puts it) through the hard work of preachers who stand vigilantly silent in the face of death-dealing social oppression. Within Celie's poignant depiction of colonizing religion there is a moment when, for the first time in her life, Celie is able to articulate her experience of cognitive dissonance regarding her lifelong relationship with God; during the course of this intimate disclosure to her sister, Celie professes the abundant faith she has always demonstrated, the miserable return which has met her spiritual investment, and her realization that the world would be a better place if God could see it through her eyes.

Here, the voice of Celie represents a story that is well-known but never told – the moral wisdom yet spiritual angst of those who have been rendered silent and invisible by the lack of ethics in preaching. Preaching, as many of you know, is the major, if not, the sole vehicles through which many Black people have come to imagine God. For those of us who are descendants of enslaved Africans, it was the spoken word that enslaved and liberated us. And it is the spoken word today, that still enslaves and/or liberates those like Celie who are triply cursed because of her race, gender, and class. You can imagine her as a modern day Eve, Ham, and Hagar rolled up into one. Those like Celie who are deemed little more than 3/5 human, are never afforded the status of being a *responsible self* in the normative ethical gazes of H. Richard Niebuhr. Niebuhr, you may recall presumes the responsible self to be a moral agent who has the

power and autonomy to exercise freedom in relating to God and neighbor. This, of course, represents a type of agency unavailable to Celie because she has neither the power nor social regard with which she can engage “man” or God. Her experience of what it means to be human is thus denied. Celie’s experience of what it means to be an embodied human exposes John Rawls’ classic theory of justice as an absurdity because it disregards envisioning a justice for human beings who are actually embodied people. This moral reflective weakness is not exclusive to scholars alone. Even those like Celie are mystified by everyday well-intentioned and God-fearing preaching men who claim to see the humanity in everyone ignore or are still befuddled by the interlocking nature of gender, class, and race. So – *What do we do with the Celies of our world who we either see in our pews, have run out of our churches, or who would never enter into our unwelcoming gates? How can we decenter ourselves from our privileged positions of preacherly comfort while simultaneously placing at the center of our sermons, teachings, thoughts and actions the constructive envisioning offered to us by the most marginalized amongst us?*

Herein lies the crux of my paramount concern as a Christian scholar-pastoral activist and I hope these are urgent questions for those of us who dare to imagine that cultivating an ethic of Black preaching should be the most urgent concern facing the Church today. But the heart of the problem that we face in this regard is not preaching about an aesthetic or ideal image of God *per se* – making God a raced, sexed, embodied entity but rather seeing in those to whom we preach regardless of their race, gender, and class, a voice and presence of God that needs to be understood and felt. The moral crisis of identity within both the church and society, occasioned by the unending violence, discrimination, poverty, hatred, and terror, is expressed by the fear that it is we, as religious leaders, who have not merely carved out but may have embodied through our preaching a strange god who is blind to gender, class, and color and neither shares nor sees our interests, concerns, and thoughts. Religion scholars and religious folk have come to realize that within the written and preached word, in the words of Rev. Dr. Renita J. Weems, that the face of God is truly “just a sister away,” if you were ready, willing, and able to look for it.

