

Cultivating an Ethic of Black Preaching, Part II

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The Task of Christian Social Womanist Ethics

In answering my calling to a vocation steeped within Christian social womanist ethics, I understand it to be my task to divest spiritually bankrupt theological projects of cardinal conspiratorial offenses by decolonizing the spirit of Christian salvation. I could begin this task by exploring – *what it would feel like and how would the gospel of salvation be otherwise experienced if the sermons of Black preachers were not littered with the hatred of women, the love of violence, and the destructiveness of internalized racism, sexual exploitation and economic greed?*

Central to the womanist ethical agenda is to find the moral means by which we, as theological educators, preachers and lay leaders can overcome the various forms of alienation (social, cultural, physical, geographical, etc.) that have invariably kept women like Celie in the *Color Purple* from realizing a true salvation. Put another way, we develop theories and methods that seek to redeem and restore the field of normative theological ethics and Christian social teachings in a practical way. We thus make it possible for the teaching of theological education and preaching of an unadulterated liberating gospel to "race forward and engender a justice" that is responsible, relevant, and embodied in the ultimate concerns of us all.

My work in developing interdisciplinary methods for depicting and resolving crises is ethical formation. In particular, my work seeks to mine those rich and untapped mother lodes of moral wisdom as spoken through the mouths of and seen through the eyes of women like Celie – women whose epistemological privilege provides a redemptive organic view of our world, which otherwise remains a refashioned, manmade world, that can aid us in developing tools that can help generate knowledge designed to describe, analyze and empower all oppressed people in order to change our dismal plights into more positive prospects.

We must realize that the Black family and Black Church are most typically built one Celie at a time and thus it desperately needs to become a liberating enterprise as it was intended by its forebears like Denmark Vesey, Sojourner Truth, Richard Allen, and Jarena Lee.

The Trajectories of Black Preaching

In order to carry out an effective ethical analysis of Black preaching, it is critical that we first define ‘what’ the trajectories of Black preaching have been. In terms of the flow of African American worship and the role of preaching within it there are two broad streams to delineate. The streams represent two distinct forms of liturgical and communal life. The distinction made here is between churches that emerged from the European Reformation as opposed to those churches largely organized within the context of the Great Awakening.

The Rationalist Trajectory

The first we will call the rationalist trajectory which represents African American congregations within traditionally mainline Protestant bodies (i.e. Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, etc.). Rationalism is of course reflected by the suggestion that faith is argued through reasoning or it is not compelling at all. This trajectory upholds modern rationalism and makes itself evident in the sermon by functioning as the keystone to Christian moral philosophy which is carried out in the very form of worship. This argument is the enactment of the salvific narrative or what we call in the Black Baptist church, the Roman’s Road. Basically, the narrative can be summed up as: “We are fallen, God saves us, and then we come into God’s grace.” Those churches that adhere to this rationalist mode find that the preaching moment is locked to this three-fold argument. This narrative enactment reflects itself in the general flow of worship in churches within this trajectory. In adherence to the rationalist trajectory, such congregations hold services that mirror the salvific narrative. They begin with the call to worship which is the gathering of the people before God, a confession of sin, an assurance of pardon, a time of prayer and celebration, and a rhetorical delineation of the salvation experienced by the congregation in order to set up the main event – the sermon. This liturgical flow mirrors the early reformers’ salvific narrative as the conviction of sin, the assurance of God’s acceptance, and the response in love to God’s gift of grace in Christ. Another way of putting this is that it is a rhetorical/liturgical response of a community to what Karl Barth referred to as God’s ‘YES’ to humanity.

The Pietistic Trajectory

In contradistinction to the first, the second trajectory, which we can refer to as the Pietistic traditions evidenced in the Wesleyan/Pentecostal/Holiness traditions, particularly those infused with an African spirituality, does not seek to strictly narrate salvation. Rather the sermon ushers

in the experience of salvation. In this stream, the sermon functions to create a space in which the congregation is “schooled by the Spirit” rather than by reasoning about the Spirit after its presence has been drawn near through the music and prayer preceding the sermon. A characteristic of this worship style is that the placement of the sermon is not so much predetermined as it is extemporaneously placed in response to the movement of the Spirit within the congregation. Here, the preacher is not a narrator mapping out the route of salvation, rather the preacher *becomes* the mediator as well as the medium of the Spirit as it works to bring the immediate experience of the fruits of salvation to the gathered body. Now this experience may take the form of the *padaia*, the *ruah*, or the prophetic. Given the circumstance, the sermon may reflect any or all of these works of the Spirit and the preacher becomes the medium for the Spirit’s enactment.

An Ethic of Preaching?

An ethic of preaching must be appropriate to the character of the distinct trajectory of worship within that community. Consequently, an ethic of preaching looks different in each of these trajectories.

The Ethic of the Rationalist Trajectory

The first ethical moment in the stream that I have identified as the *Rationalist trajectory* is to be true not only to the tripartite salvific narrative but to be accountable to its narration in the language and contextual reality of the community or congregation to which the Word is preached. Therefore, whatever is the particular contextual point being argued—whether it be spiritual and material well-being, the presence of justice and righteousness in the social order, or some other ideal value relevant to the Black condition—the preacher must express the economy of salvation whose parts are: the naming and conviction of sin, the assurance and proclamation of God’s gracious act of forgiveness in Christ, and identification of – as well as invitation to – live in ways which reflect thankfulness for God’s grace. Being true then means that the preacher must coherently outline what this narrative looks like in the given context of a particular congregation. This founding ethic establishes the field of vision in which other ethical considerations and commitments are viewed within the Black preaching rationalist trajectory.

The Ethic of the Pietistic Trajectory

The first ethical moment in the stream that I have identified as the *Pietistic trajectory* is to open a sacred channel between the congregation and the preacher that authentically calls or invokes the Spirit. This sacred space beckons the Spirit in anticipation of *kenotic* (the emptying out of God) visitation in which the experience of salvation is made real in the immediate context of the congregation's time of worship. For this space to be truly sacred it can neither be managed nor contrived. And herein is the ethic -- the sincere invitation of the souls of Black folk being fully open to the movement of the Spirit.

Form and Substance

The second ethical moment is to attend to what the content of salvation is within Black preaching. Whereas both accentuate a homiletic process by which salvation is either rationally recounted or experientially realized, it is the ethical mandate for all preachers to resist losing sight of salvation as the ultimate end due to an over involvement in the process. Over involvement in the process is the mistaken belief that form trumps function or style outshines substance and therefore requires greater attentiveness. When in fact, it is the substance and function of Black preaching to help facilitate the salvation of all of God's people. Inadequate recognition of this reality frequently leads to the two greatest enactments of preaching as false consciousness which await the unwary preacher; namely preaching as fireworks or preaching that narrates the dominant ethos of a profoundly unjust culture and society. Without attending to the content of salvation, both the rationalist and the pietistic trajectories lose their meaning and become no more than noisy clanging symbols. For example, unethical rationalist preaching is indistinguishable from a homogenized, one-size-fits all "purpose in forty days" pre-packaged infomercial that is a constant on TV broadcasts throughout America. While unethical pietistic preaching is little else than preachers mastering state of the art Whoopology 101 courses online or on CD, minus social activism, and without wrestling with the death-dealing issues that are killing their parishioners all the day long. In either case, it must be the substance that lends relevance or depth to the form which in turn, the preacher uses to frame both the understanding and experience of salvation. This is vitally necessary in order to prevent ministry from becoming minstrelsy.

So What? The Why Crisis for Constructing an Ethic of Black Preaching

To be sure, the pitfalls of unethical preaching that I have just outlined are not unique to the Black preaching experience. Whites, Asians, Hispanics, people of every hue have experienced the ravages that occur from the misguided preaching and teaching of sacred rhetoric. In fact, it is my belief that our country is presently suffering from preachers who have altogether abdicated the role of preaching a prophetic, liberating gospel in exchange for political favor, a likely-not-to-be-obtained mega church, and faith-based initiatives. But an ethic of Black preaching that upholds the highest standards of tradition, consciousness, community, struggle, sacrifice, and integrity as key parts of soul salvation is direly needed because, at its best, it has been African American moral preaching and sacred rhetoric that has come closest to redeeming the soul, dream, and deliverance of an America that stands at the doors of damnation. As the Esther of our times, the Black preacher is needed for such a time as this. And like the charge made in Isaiah 61:1-4 and reiterated by the author of Luke 4:18, the contemporary Black preacher must reclaim the mission to which she or he was called, wherein “The Spirit of the Lord was upon them because it was that Spirit that anointed them to preach the gospel to the poor; to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised. To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.” And after recounting that gospel call, it is my unequivocal belief that you’re not a preacher until you’ve become a *Black* preacher. Like James Cone has stated, Blackness is an ontological symbol for all people who participate in the liberation of humanity from oppression.

Since it was Black Theology that was derived from a common experience among Black people in America that elevates a universal liberation that brings humanity to the supreme test of truth, so, too, must Black preaching and the Black preacher illuminate the true salvation and radical immanence of a God who works on behalf of the oppressed, a God who can and will see through the eyes of the Celies of this world. Or put another way, one cannot be a preacher until s/he deals with those stumbling blocks placed by the powers and principalities of this earthly realm between God’s people and their experience of salvation in their given context. It is only the Black preacher that can attest to the double-consciousness of salvation found in the cross and the resurrection. For the privileged, they must experience crucifixion in the depth of their own formation in order to know the power of resurrection and attain the promise of salvation. While, the marginalized people who spend their lives on the cross must be empowered and encouraged

to know the power of the resurrection by coming down from the cross and thereby attain their own place in salvation. In both cases, it is the experience of resurrection to a new life with God in the power of the Spirit which is the content of salvation and the ultimate end of Black preaching. Herein lie the three ethical tenets of Black preaching that will make such an end realizable.

Cultural Centrism

Cultural centrism denotes a commitment to hold a centered and concomitant relationship to the community of the oppressed by allowing the real-lived experience and sentiments of this community to serve not only as testimonies worthy of a hearing but truthful narratives that aid us in knowing more about the reality in which we all live. The ethic of Black preaching should encompass the landscape upon which we all reside not by how well the voice of the majority is heard but by how well voice is given to those who cry out in silence. Noted Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire says this type of leader is a radical committed to human liberation ⁽²⁴⁾. The dialogical relationship between the Black preacher and the Black community for whom liberation is sought is crucial to our present understanding of being grounded in a cultural and historical reality that is critical in order to develop an ethical paradigm for preaching that allows for meeting people where they are and taking them to where they ought to be. This perspective of preaching aids in formulating a cultural template that keeps the preacher attuned to how all of the Black community, particularly the women and children, understand their realities separate and apart from the privilege of the pulpit. It is important to note that this cultural template is one that will help the preacher filter through his or her own preconceived perspective(s) and nuances in order to remain radically involved in the soul strivings of the community. The radical act of a womanist ethical analysis of Black preaching affirms that we should not only believe in but more importantly honor the reality that the voices of particular marginalized people, especially Black women, have validity in themselves and though not claiming to mirror the reality of all people, they do make the overall and majority Black reality more understandable. Cultural centrism, like radical immanence, becomes a different way of understanding what up to now has been called transcendence. So, too, the more specific and particular we are in the voices that we present in our theo-ethical task of preaching salvation through liberation the more we encompass the reality of us all. If we examine what happens when the idea of Blackness is conjoined with preaching, the particular construction or image of a Black preacher almost always has a male connotation.

For instance, when people talk about great Black preachers, instantly we rattle off the names of Gardner Taylor, Samuel Proctor, C. L. Franklin, Martin Luther King, Jr. Seldom, however, except for tokenism or Women's month does the mind even drift to Jarena Lee, Julia Foote, Prathia Hall Wynn, Vashti McKenzie, Pauli Murray, Renita Weems or countless other great women of the cloth which shows not only an innate bias in the way we think about Black preaching but it literally cripples the church's ability to minister in word and deed to every corner and every concern of the Black body of Christ. As Mary McCleod Bethune has said, "a race is measured by the character of its women," "And if it wasn't for the women," as Cheryl Townsend Gilkes has noted, the Black church would not even exist. Shifting the concern and the onus of preaching from the male pulpiteers to the congregations that are majority women – we may reinscribe what we mean by who is Black and what is blackness and thereby seeing these women as the female body of Christ rather than as the "gateway to hell," "the incarnation of Eves, Jezebels, or Delilahs" or as those whose role are to be submissive and silent in the presence of men. To be culturally centered is to see Black women in particular as the uplift and promise of the church rather than its downfall.

It is this very issue of seeing the world through the eyes of the exigent experiences of women like Celie that should be the starting point and impetus for sacred rhetoric that claims to attend the least of these among us. I do not dare to assume that Black women's spirituality is directly synonymous with the spiritual strivings or social stations of everyone, but neither are Black men's. However, I do believe as womanist homiletician and A.M.E. preacher, Teresa Fry Brown tells us that there is truth and wisdom that can be gleaned from the specific context of Black women which is for the good of all. In other words, the knowledge that we can generate from the testimonies of Black women inevitably leads to a positive impact on the life chances of all Black people and society in general. As womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant argues, "If the people who are the most dispossessed in our society - namely Black women - are liberated and lifted up than surely everyone else will be." Simply put, it is time to stop dismembering the body of Christ simply for the sake of preserving fragile Black male ego or lack of self-esteem.

Critical Analysis

In the hopes of cultivating an ethic of Black preaching, a second ethical tenet that must be ascribed to is critical analysis. Implementing a critical analysis that will examine both the

subjective worldview of Black people as well as the normative gaze through which our community is seen is vital to this process. Too few Black preachers have honed their intellectual and inspirational gifts in order to forge a coherent, cohesive, and comprehensive Black theology necessary for living in the modern world. There has not been an adequate suitable update of Black liberation or womanist theology for practical living that has been claimed by the Black church community since the 1980s. A dedicated and systematic theology of Black Christianity is sorely lacking and desperately needed and we can't wait another quarter of a century for one to be developed.

As James Cone states, "Profound soul-searching and vigorous intellectual reflection are necessary if [preachers] are to continue to grow in an understanding of our faith and [their] calling....." And we are called to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind which is the first and great commandment. However, Cone reminds that it is not because of a dearth in desiring to learn *per se* that we refrain from growing intellectually in order to produce prophetic and liberating preaching of the gospel. Rather we study hard to "develop great rhetorical skills, create effective programs of stewardship, discover ingenious schemes for church growth and management, and find creative ways to mobilize and fight for justice in society. But if we don't have a clear understanding of what the gospel means, we are lost and all the other things we do are meaningless. We cannot stay on the right track without a critical and prophetic theology as an essential guide [for Black preaching]." (Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, 4)

Now, preachers is it worth it given what brings in the big crowds and the big bucks today? Unequivocally YES! because to not do it once you're called would be to deny the larger portion that you have been given and to ultimately lead the least of these astray and thus you would trade in a liberating promise for a most miserable fate. If you are the first, last, and/or only face of God's truth, love, grace, and mercy to the Black church and unchurched alike (which Black preachers often are), teaching and preaching a flawed or ill-informed theology can literally kill someone in mind, body, and spirit. A critical analysis that is inextricably linked to cultural centrism helps us to look beyond the surface of so-called historical and biblical "facts" that have long justified the dehumanization and heathenization of Black people. If through our own education we become the answer that we seek, to use Ghandi's words, rather than relying upon the goodwill of the dominant culture, we confront openly the ideological fallacies and agendas of

those academic discourses, biblical preaching and theological musings that rob Black people of their humanity and divinity.

Spiritual Empowerment

Spiritual empowerment, our last step in cultivating an ethic of Black preaching is the process of enhancing the life chances for the Celies of the world and their successors by accentuating an understanding of the Spirit as that which is woven intricately into the very fabric of existence itself. Herein, Black people are written into the story of God's salvation in a way that they are written out of not only the American dream but also written out of American Christianity altogether. Renita Weems tells us that the writer of the book of Hebrews begins to exegete the Old Testament by surveying the Hebrew genealogy of faith or more simply put, "what the ancestors believed." In order to win back the lost tribes, the writer makes four points in the first ten chapters of Hebrews. According to Weems, the writer explains that first, the ancestors believed that Jesus Christ was superior to angels, secondly Jesus was superior to all the prophets even Moses, the utmost of them all, thirdly, Christ's priesthood was superior to the Levite priesthood, and finally that Christ was now the ultimate sacrifice, thus, dismissing the need for animal sacrifices. If we want to know what we believe, there's no need to go back to consult angels, prophets, priests, or make sacrifice but instead we should reach back and get our OWN faith. And it is for that reason in Hebrews 11:1, after having attended to being culturally centered to the traditions of the Hebrews, and then critically analytical enough to exegete the tenets of the Hebrew faith tradition, he says, "Now faith!"... "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." In other words, it's not the form of one's faith tradition but the substance of that self-same faith which ultimately carries us onward to salvation.

To embrace fully and articulate such an understanding of the sacred can only serve to enhance the kinship of all people rather than the claim of a chosen few. Spiritual empowerment is a theo-ethical task that, as womanist ethicist Emile Townes asserts, "explores[s] the profundity of the parenthood of God with its promise-evoking images of birthing and nurturing whole peoples into freedom and wholeness."⁽⁹⁵⁾ Such clinging to the liberation of the gospel of the historical Jesus and the compassion of the cross by dispelling Augustinian notions of embodied feminized sin, the illusory menacing of Hamitic curses and enslaved discipleship. Herein, the

reclaimed and reassuring faith in an liberating, relevant, and actual Christian gospel, transforms Black preaching into a humanizing vocation ontologically calling the preacher as both the narrator of salvation and the mediator of the Spirit into a rational and pietistic action which seeks to transform the world -- moving beyond the dehumanizing projections of an oppressive worldview and entering into a fuller and richer understanding of salvation. Such an authentic empowerment for change, squarely spells out the true conception of the Divine as a god who is neither male nor female, Gentile nor Jew but an omnipresent, omniscient advocator of justice and liberator of the oppressed. A God, as Shug tells Celie in *The Color Purple*: that

God is inside of you and inside of everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even when you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. ⁽¹⁷⁷⁾.

It is in that search for God for which we parishioners yearn as we listen to the Word of God through your lips. And when Black preaching attends to our yearnings for cultural centrism, informed by critical analysis which will lead to our spiritual empowerment we know that God hears the cries of our world and the voices of the Celies among us. It is my contention that, if Black preaching measured its success by this yardstick then preachers really could become instruments of God by decolonizing a spirit of salvation that presently has us talking to strange and remote gods. But most importantly, if all preachers would consider deeply this weightier matter of “cultivating an ethic of Black preaching” such a liberating gospel may provide evidence of some miracles at work in our own lives wherein we will realize that the lives we save may be our very own.