



RESURRECTION REMIX: STRENGTHENING THE FAMILY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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Bernice Johnson Reagon, Lectionary Team Cultural Resource Commentator

The Ephesians text for this lectionary moment (Ephesians 5:21-33 and 6:1-9), provides a rich range of opportunities to explore the complex ways in which African Americans struggled to form and hold family in that journey in this place that began with slavery.

Historical Background and Documents

I. The Auction Block and the African American Family

Reverend Pearlie Brown was born in Americus, GA. He was born blind and he and his brother Early were raised by their grandmother. A great slide guitarist, Reverend Brown made his living as a street singer in Macon and Americus, Georgia. I met him during the late 1960s and he told me about his grandmother who had been a slave and was sold as a child from Virginia to Americus Georgia. The spirituals he sang and played were the

ones he grew up hearing her sing. One of his songs was about the dreaded auction block and the text captures the image of families being torn apart:

Goodbye, goodbye
If I never ever see you anymore
Goodbye, goodbye,
I will meet you on that other shore

Other lines:

Pray hard..., Live the life...¹

I grew up in Southwest Georgia and one of the songs we learned was also about the auction block.

No more auction block for me
No more, no more
No more auction block for me
Many thousands gone
No more pint of salt for me...
No more Jim Crow lash for me...²

American slavery as a system was hostile to family formation. And the auction block where members could be sold at the decision of the owner as property was the most feared aspect of that system.

How does one experience family during slavery? How does the African American family survive the auction block? What kind of redefining occurred as Africans enslaved in America treaded our way through the cauterizing fires of slavery to create a way to support and extend life in this new land we were creating via forced labor?

What did it feel like to get off the boat and find yourself alive after the Middle Passage journey? How did the eternal life force of the universe succeed in pulling so many of us to continuance and extension of life? In spite of being inside of a structure that tore us apart, during slavery, we redefined family in a stripped down way to understand what and how to build flexible changing core human units that could then be the components of a fragile, always under fire community. We also, in our survival living and dying, wove into being the hybrid culture that held everything we did and were and could become and wanted never to see again.

How does one come to know that she or he is evolving within a family unit? Initially, it is really about protection, not being too cold or too hot, not being hungry, being able to sleep, being held and surrounded by people who looked at you and smiled and rocked you, before you knew you were her or him. And it is about being called and pushed to move forward when you never get all of the former things at the same time. **There is the sense of being led to know and use your capacity**, with whispered hopes that there would come a time when things for us would be less wrong. One was surrounded by

those who taught us what and who we were, calling the child to come into his or her growing self. Your teachers who took care of your needs as best they could, introduced you into the world and moved you quickly as fast as you could learn how to be in this larger place, run by those who did not acknowledge you as a living, spiritual, being in need of a family. Jennie Hill a former slave described the way our family, parents and children were viewed within the system of slavery:

Some people think that slaves had no feeling—that they bore their children as animals bear their young and that there was no heart-break when the children were torn from their parents or the mother taken from her brood to toil for a master in another state. But that isn't so. The slaves loved their families even as the Negroes love their own today and the happiest time of their lives was when they could sit at their cabin doors when the day's work was done and sang the old slave songs, "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground," and "Nobody Know What Trouble I've Seen." Children learned these songs and sang them only as a Negro child could. That was the slave's only happiness, a happiness that for many of them did not last.³

And another ex-slave, Savilla Burrell, remembered the heartache this way: "They sell one of Mother's chillun once, and when she take on and cry about it, Marster say, 'Stop that sniffing there if you don't want to get a whipping.' She grieve and cry at night about it."⁴

Michael Tadman in his study, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South*, estimates that one out of every five marriages was prematurely terminated by sale and that if other interventions are added, the number rises to one in three. In addition, slave trading tore from the family one in every two slave children under the age of 14.⁵

How do a family and a community combat the destructive experience of slavery? How is love expressed? Frederick Douglass wrote of not developing a mother son relationship with his birth mother for he was separated from her before he was 12 months old as was the treatment of slave children, and raised by an older woman who took care of the younger children on the plantation. However, he also writes of having had minor contact with his birth mother who was on a plantation some distance from him. She would slip away after a hard days labor in the field, would walk miles to his cabin and lie down next to him a few hours only to have to get up in the dark to toil another day in the fields.⁶ For this to happen, she had to have the need to be with her child, she had to have people on both plantations who did not give her away as she determined that she, with all of her being, would snatch this space to hold and nurture and be held and nurtured.

II. Family Is What Family Does

Hambone hambone where you been?
Round the world and I'm going again...

This hambone rhythm verse refers to someone in the kitchen of the plantation securing a hambone and using it to favor the pot in the slave cabin and then passing it on its journey from one cabin to another so that each day another pot would be flavored until it was no more. And this passing sustenance in silence created an invisible joining where we knew we were connected... and responsible for each other. And who put the salve in the wounds when the one lashed lay upon the ground? Who extended the knowledge of healing? Was it biological? Sometimes, but sometimes not. **Family is what family does**.... Albert Murray's novel, Train Whistle Guitar⁷ is an excellent literary example about the African American extended family. Murray's novel chronicles the coming of age of Scooter, a pre-adolescent African American boy, in Gasoline, Alabama. During the course of the novel, Scooter is given protection and is nurtured— is raised, in addition to his grandparents, by myriad members of this down-home community, such as Luzana Cholly, the community's itinerant bluesman and Blue Eula Bacote, the sorrowful school teacher. These persons are all members of Scooter's extended family. At one point Scooter reflects that you can choose your own relatives, i.e. "play" brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins, et al, while growing up in Gasoline Point.

III. The African American Church and the Family

As we moved through the Civil War, fashioning freedom in hostile territory, the African American church was a powerful influence in calling its members to be conscious of forming and strengthening family units. The African American church created rituals where families could come together and draw from our prayers, our songs, testimonies and sermons which would provide sustenance for the next day until another coming together.

The African American church put before us the idea that it was important for families to stay together, and that systemic organized learning was sacred and so important that our first schools were in our churches and then our churches built the first schools on church grounds. It was important that all be engaged in learning, adults and children. As soon as a lesson was learned, that lesson was taught to someone in your family. When resources were too low to send all of the children, then often one was selected to go. In the case of Tuskegee founder, Booker T. Washington, he left his home in West Virginia to attend Hampton and was aided by his older brother who stayed and worked in the coal mines. After Washington graduated, he was able to assist his brother who also completed the Hampton course.⁸ Mary McLeod Bethune, born in 1875, was the fifteenth of seventeen children in the family of Samuel and Patsy McLeod. Her parents and older siblings were born into slavery. Of her large family she was selected to go to school. Her family's meager resources were focused to make it possible for her to attend the Methodist Mission school and she returned home each day to try and to teach what she had learned to her family members.⁹ School and church were partners in supporting families.

Remix: Migration

Probably nowhere is the "remix" concept stronger than in looking at the multi-decade searching that led families to leave the South and its racist repression to seek new opportunities in other regions of the country. Sometimes the African American migration

that stretched across much of the 20th century occurred with one member moving north and sending for other members as soon as a foothold was achieved. This leaving the South after the end of slavery followed the strategy of escape during slavery and the leavings and relocation during the period immediately following slavery. When Charles Albert Tindley left Eastern shore Maryland for Philadelphia in 1875 at 17, he was sent by one maternal aunt to her sister who already had a home there. During the early years of the 20th century, by the hundreds of thousands, movement to urban centers increased as Jim and Jane Crow terrorism intensified. Black men especially bore the direct brunt of brutality with the ever-present threat of chain gangs and lynchings. Often, they were the ones to leave, but also one finds entire core family units making the journey in search of a place where they could raise their families and expand the possibilities of advancement. Almost never, did the entire extended family make the migration. In fact, in a wondrous ‘remix’ the Southern base of families as a support for the new transported families was exercised through various means of downhome-coming. Here the region that drove them to move forward also remained a source of strength and renewal because of those who stayed behind.

IV. The Black Family Now

Today, we need these early images of family to remind us that the contemporary idea of a family as father, mother and one or two children is alright as far as it goes. That the family unit always needs that grandparent/aunt/uncle/cousins/nieces and nephews and the family members who are not related to you by blood but help you find your way just the same. Church congregations provide rich opportunities for parent-absent children, and grandparent-absent children to sit within the energy of parent and grandparent generations. Children do better growing under the shadow and shade of grandparents. The church must continue creating experiences where families are the focus, Family Nights, church outings where the focus is all members of the family being within the embrace of the congregation.

African Americans have many families that fit the norm in what is a contemporary family—both parents, few children, access and relationship to the grandparent generation.... However, desperately needed is the acknowledgement that a substantial percentage of our families have non-traditional formations. The African American church has to find a way to embrace and acknowledge and affirm these nurturing unions.

Allowing families to define themselves and accepting single parenting as a valid strategy for raising a child is crucial. If you read the story of gifted pediatric neurosurgeon, Dr. Ben Carson, you find a mother, Sonya Carson with a third grade education, who worked not only to house and feed her children, but battled challenging pulls within their community to keep them under her wing. She struggled to make sure they understood that they were expected to be supportive members of their family and supportive citizens in the larger world.¹⁰ This was the home-church-school at its best. The home-church-school has been a crucial bond for our various configurations of family building.

Support Networks for the Black Family

There is a growing contemporary application of support network for families. Increasingly, church expanded ministries have moved to a place where again they take on the burden of being a vital element in the transformation of their communities as safety zones. These congregations are building housing for those without shelter, they run food and clothing pantries, they are building schools for the children; they are a major source of grounding and nurturance for families. The most aggressive expressions of these in urban communities, take their children as they come. One minister in Philadelphia said that, “if a child gets to our door after school, we are a place of safety and nourishment, a place where one gets assistance for homework... a place where the child feels they belong, they are wanted, that they are a gift and our only chance for a tomorrow.” The image here is of a safety zone, a place within a region full of danger, that works to be sure that once inside, the family, the child, is safe and will not experience disrespect nor abuse.

The early Christian communities suggested that within their circle, one could find the family and community one needed to build and model a spirit-centered life. And collectively, this circle moves as a beckoning light.

Come home, come home
Ye who are weary, come home.¹¹

And as we enter a new century, we find a reverse migration as the children and grandchildren consider the South as a place to return with opportunities created by advances of the Civil Rights Movement. And, as was the case with my oldest sister, we were instructed to return her remains to the family plot to rest in the soul of the place now transformed in Southwest Georgia where our core family was formed. This is much akin to the Methodists turning the term “Methodists,” which was one of derision into the revered name of their denomination, or early Christians transforming the Cross, an instrument of “suffering and shame” into a universal symbol of hope and faith, or African Americans reclaiming—embracing “black” as a symbol of beauty and elegance. So, too, in this place where Black lives were once governed by the auction block, the African American family still rises and flourishes reaching for support from church and community to face the ever evolving challenges and dangers of these times.

Notes

1. African American spiritual
2. African American spiritual
3. Slave narrative at South Carolina's Information HighWAY. Online location: www.sciway.net/afam/slavery/firstperson.html accessed 4 January 2008
4. Ibid.
5. Tadman, Michael. Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders and Slaves in the Old South. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.

6. Douglas, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. Boston, MA: Published at the Anti-Slavery Office, 1845. Download at no cost at the Berkeley Digital Library SunSite: Online location: <http://sunsiteberkeley.edu/Literature/Douglass/Autobiography/> accessed 4 January 2008
7. Murray, Albert. Train Whistle Guitar. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1974.
8. Washington, Booker T. Up From Slavery. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1901. Download at no cost at www.bartleby.com/1004. Last update April 2000. accessed 4 January 2008
9. Reagon, Bernice Johnson. Mary McLeod Bethune. unpublished paper.
10. Carson, Ben, and Cecil B. Murphey. Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story. 1990 Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996.
11. Thompson, Will. "Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling." Hymn