



Ella Mitchell  
(1917-2008)



A. Pauli Murray  
(1910-1985)



Prathia Hall  
(1940-2002)

## JESUS AND WOMEN

### CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Sunday, March 8, 2009**

**Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Guest Lectionary Cultural Resource Commentator**

Associate Professor of Ethics and Society, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN

#### I. History

When it comes to biblical symbolism, one can become very confused about women being made in the image of God. Most stories in the Bible that are positive are about men. Women are often portrayed as the problem (Eve), the temptress (Delilah), or the victim (Tamar). Indeed, the picture for women based on those stereotypical scriptures paints a bleak perspective and prospect for women of the faith. But once Jesus steps into the religious story, the Christian story, it becomes apparent that it is through his relationships with women that we can better understand the transformative nature of faith for those women whose faith has touched Jesus and whose lives have been touched by his ministry.

The task for readers of this passage is to recall those stories of women of antiquity, our ancestors, and, yes, our present-day mothers and sisters of the faith whose lives help us better understand the ministry of Jesus and Christian witness, in general, because of the life of faith that these women lead. This life of faith is always radical and often marked by unnamed women. But for many of us who call ourselves “Christian womanists,” we know all too well that, although the women go unnamed, there’s a name for their actions – *womanish*. This black folk expression is a common word hurled at young black girls by their mothers and grandmothers that at once admonishes and affirms the “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior” of women who want “to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for them. They are women who are ‘responsible,’ ‘in charge,’ and ‘serious.’”<sup>1</sup>

Women who ran with Jesus were womanish. And, the women who have carried the gospel of Jesus Christ have continued to embody that same womanish spirit. Women such as:

Sojourner Truth (1799-1883): Born Isabella Baumfree, Sojourner Truth changed her name when she became an itinerant preacher of the gospel and fiery orator. Known as the “Moses of her People,” she led protests for abolition, suffrage, temperance, prison reform. She served as the momentum and foundation of what is understood to be the women’s movement/feminist movement due to her classic question, “And a’n’t I a woman?” which demanded that poor, black women be extended the same rights as her white and male counterparts.

Jarena Lee (1783-date unknown): Celebrated as the first black woman preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, starting in 1820, she preached extensively throughout Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Canada. Inspired by her faith and her call to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, despite Richard Allen’s refusal to ordain her, she risked her freed status and even ventured to the “slave states” of Maryland and Virginia to spread the word of God.

Anna (Pauli) Murray (1910-1985): A crusading human rights attorney, civil rights activist, women’s rights feminist, poet, writer, teacher, and priest Pauli Murray, at the age of sixty-two in 1972, accepted a call to the Episcopal ministry and was consecrated and ordained the first black female priest of the Episcopal Church in 1977.

Ella P. Mitchell (1917-2008): Considered the mother of the womanist preaching movement, Ella Mitchell preached for approximately thirty years prior to being ordained as a Baptist preacher. Celebrated as a strong pulpiteer for more than seventy years, she sojourned through pastoral ministry and the academy, holding posts in more than five colleges and seminaries, and published four volumes of sermons by black women preachers.

Prathia Hall (1940-2002): A renowned civil rights activist, was a student leader in the freedom rides of the 1960s and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a preacher, pastor, professor, and lecturer. Because of the barriers she broke as the first woman to be received into the membership of the Baptist Minister’s Conference of Philadelphia and Vicinity in 1982, new ground was broken in the acceptance of women in ministry in Baptist churches.

Vasthi McKenzie (1947- ): Elected as the first female bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Vasthi McKenzie’s fiercely feminine finesse has aided in breaking the stained glass ceiling of the ordination and promotion of women into denominational and ecclesial hierarchies. She is also the national chaplain of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated and the granddaughter of Delta founder Vashti Turley Murphy.

Renita Weems (1956 - ): A prolific author, bible scholar and an ordained elder in the African Methodist Church, Renita Weems’ scholarly insights into modern faith, biblical texts, and the role of spirituality in everyday lives have made her a much sought-after author, professor, preacher, and lecturer around the nation and world.

## II. Cultural Response to Significant Aspects of the Text

Today's lection writer, Deborah K. Blanks, bases her sermonic testimony on being called to preach on today's scripture. She used it in a sermon in Cleophus LaRue's book, This is My Story: Testimonies and Sermons of Black Women in Ministry. In this text, Blanks makes clear that as womanist, black women are not just black, nor are they just women, but they are the cultural conveyors of our society, and they represent the cultural yearnings of our society. And, as such, she states that we "do not have to dig too deep to understand what the unnamed sister might have been experiencing.... We know what it is like to have people ... work to make our condition worse rather than better." Bleeding! There is bleeding in our society," she exclaims.

- There's bleeding because a black person is murdered in the United States every forty-two minutes.
- There's bleeding because the FBI Uniform Crime Report indicates that blacks, [who make up] 12 percent of the population, account for half of all the murder victims (with 95 percent being killed by others blacks).
- There's bleeding because in some of our communities the destructive dealings that take place are as dangerous as Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network and more deadly than... weapons of mass destruction.

There is a bleeding in our world.

- 840 million people in the world are hungry.
- 34 million people in America, including 12.1 million children [who] live below the poverty line.
- 43 million people in the United States do not have health care coverage.
- 1400 women a year die as a result of domestic violence.
- 2000-plus military members and counting have died in the war in Iraq.
- What should we do to stop the bleeding...the hemorrhage...the hurt?

Blanks' sentiments that, as we seek answers to that which is killing our communities and churches, we should take a note from the modern-day sisters similar to the woman in our scripture, like black women who live at the underside of society, at the crossroads of racism, sexism and classism and have prayed, relied, and persevered in their faith in Jesus Christ to learn from their living examples of survival. In essence, Blanks claims that the woman in today's scripture was womanish for she says:

She did not let the culture confine her.  
She did not let gender ground her.  
She did not let pain paralyze her.  
She did not let the patriarchy pulverize her.  
She did not let the severity of the situation suppress her.  
She did not let the identity question render her invisible.  
*She pressed through the sweat.*  
*She pressed through the smell.*  
*She pressed through the uncleanness.*

*She pressed through the embarrassment....*

When she touched Jesus, a transfusion of power, of healing, and deliverance went out of him to her, and he knew that somebody had “pressed: their way through and received the virtue of God.”<sup>2</sup>

### **III. Creating a Memorable Learning Moment**

According to womanist biblical scholar Renita J. Weems in her text, Showing Mary, it is important that we as women embrace the womanish divinity within each of us. By tapping into the scriptures, not just to read about the faith of biblical women but to inspire and give birth to all of the beautiful things God has planted within us, in an effort to find God’s true purpose for our lives. We are to learn how to trust the womanish voice guiding us from within, to discern godly counsel and advice from the faithful among us, and to move beyond our fears, press through the crowd and break the “shouldas” of girlhood to take the risks of being “womanish.” Offer the following as questions for reflection within the sermon or as a guide for bible study, women’s reading group sessions, or for personal devotion.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Introduction**

Can you recall a time when you tried to satisfy an internal yearning by adjusting your outside circumstances? How did you come to recognize that what you needed had to come from God?

**Read John 4:15-29.**

#### **“Greetings, You Have Found Favor”**

“Just because your background is humble doesn’t mean your future is limited.” In what ways have you allowed your past to dictate your present and future? What hope do you have that the past does not determine the future of those who confess the name of Jesus Christ? **Read Psalms 40:1-5.**

#### **Ready from Within**

“It’s as though everything you’ve pieced together in life has come undone...” What situation in your life has caused you to feel excitement and joy simultaneously? How did the Lord see you through? **Read Matthew 28:8.**

#### **God Is with You**

“Every person God singled out for service may have started out alone, but they did not end up alone.” In what ways, whether through people or circumstances, has God provided you with comfort and strength to help you feel God’s presence? **Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-6.**

#### **“To a Girl Name Mary”**

“God’s got his hands on your life.” How have others revealed God’s desire for your life to you? **Read 1 Samuel 3:6-19.**

#### **Why Now?**

“Not all alarms signal fire.” When has something terrible transformed into something wonderful in your life? How can you discern a fire alarm from a test? **Read Genesis 50:20.**

### **I Have Been Here Before**

“The holy beyond you is reaching out to the holy within you...” How has God reached out to you to bring you further along than you are now? How have you reached out to God in order that you may go further along on the journey? **Read Psalms 42:1-8.**

### **“Let It Be Done According to Your Word”**

“When the angel departed, Mary knew that what was happening to her was part of something larger than herself.” Have you yielded to the Lord in order that you may be part of a work that is larger than yourself? Prayerfully consider the barriers that may be blocking you from being part of a greater work in the Lord. **Read 1 Samuel 15:24.**

### **Even Elizabeth**

“But how can I be sure that this is God?” How has God confirmed that the direction your life is taking is divinely sanctioned? **Read Judges 6:17-22.**

### **Overshadowed**

“Loneliness can be an invitation from God...” When you experience bouts of loneliness, do you seek an external means of fulfillment, or do you turn to the Lord to quell your longing for the presence of another? **Read Genesis 32:24; Psalm 62:1; Luke 5:16.**

### **My Mother, My Self**

“Every mother’s daughter needs a coterie of women friends...” Make a list of the women who have modeled womanhood for you and nurtured you along your own journey of womanhood. Next to each name, list the primary lesson, virtue, or attribute you have learned from each woman. Say a prayer of thanksgiving for the women who have played such an important role in your life. Ask God to guide you in ways that you can help other women on their journeys. **Read Ruth 1.**

### **Shedding the External Girl**

“It’s hard trying to create an inner sacred landscape after years of leaving that part of yourself fallow and undeveloped.” Draw a picture of your inner landscape. Is the picture sparse, barren, and brown? Or is it lush, green, and healthy? After assessing your landscape, write on it some things that need to be planted there in order that you can grow (such as faith, prayer, fasting, meditation, and hope). **Read Luke 2:36-38.**

### **Midwives [Help Others Birth Dreams]**

“You are not the first to wake up one morning to find your soul on the spin cycle.” How has God used the women in your life to minister to you and help you through life’s twists and turns? **Read Ruth 3:1-5.**

### **Late Bloomers**

“Late bloomers are those who finally stop becoming and start being.” Why is it important to understand that all women are not on the same timetable? In what areas of your life are you a late bloomer? What will it take for you to move from becoming to being? **Read Matthew 9:20-22.**

### **Surprised by Passion**

“Passion caused Mary to break out into what has come to be known as the *Magnificat*.” Write your own *Magnificat*, based on your own passions, on what God has done in your life already, and what you hope that God will do in the future. **Read Exodus 15:20-21; Luke 1:46-55.**

### **Getting into the Dance**

“You have to trust God even when you can’t track God.” How are you trusting God today, even though you probably don’t know everything that is going on? Examine your prayer/praise life to determine whether you are dancing even as you wait. Are you willing to risk appearing foolish to others in order to praise the Lord? **Read 2 Samuel 6:16-22; Habakkuk 3:17-19; Acts 16:25.**

## **IV. Songs That Speak to the Moment**

The following songs tell of the burdens (shame, guilt, being talked about) borne by women and of how they are reshaped, reborn, made whole, made bold, and made womanish after they encounter the Divine.

### **He Touched Me**

Shackled by a heavy burden,  
‘Neath a load of guilt and shame.  
Then the hand of Jesus touched me,  
And now I am no longer the same.

He touched me, Oh he touched me,  
And oh the joy that floods my soul!  
Something happened and now I know,  
He touched me and made me whole.

Since I met this blessed Savior,  
Since he cleansed and made me whole,  
I will never cease to praise him,  
I’ll shout it while eternity rolls.

He touched me, Oh he touched me,  
And oh the joy that floods my soul!  
Something happened and now I know  
He touched me and made me whole.<sup>4</sup>

### **I Know I’ve Been Changed**

You can talk about me as much as you please  
The angels in heaven done sign my name  
But the more you talk I’ll bend my knees  
The angels in heaven done sign my name

Oh Lord, I know I been changed  
Lord! I know I been changed.  
Oh Lord, I know I been changed

The angels in heaven done sign my name.<sup>5</sup>

## **V. Audio Visual Aids**

To aid in helping hearers remember the message and womanish spirit of the text, one may want to use any or all of the following:

- Construct a power-point or collage of the aforementioned black women preachers in the ministerial and social activist roles while moments may be heard of their famous sermons.
- Have a speech contest or “Moments in Black Women’s History” event where the youth memorize and recite excerpts from some of the famous sermons of speeches of women like Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, and Prathia Hall Wynn.
- Adorn the sanctuary in the womanist color, purple, and revisit the tenets of womanism as inclusive and/or resonant with the features of black Christian women’s virtues (radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement).

## **VI. Books to Enhance Your Knowledge of Womanist Theology and Thought**

Baker-Fletcher, Karen. Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998.

Brown, Teresa L. Fry. Can A Sistah Get A Little Help?: Encouragement for Black Women in Ministry. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2007.

Cannon, Katie G. Black Womanist Ethics. Atlanta, GA: Scholars’ Press, 1988.

Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006.

Gilkes, Cheryl Townsend. If It Wasn’t for the Women. New York, NY: Orbis Books, 2000.

Grant, Jacquelyn. White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989.

Townes, Emilie M. In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality As Social Witness. Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1995.

Weems, Renita J. Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible. San Diego, CA: Luramedia, 1988.

Weisenfeld, Judith, Ed. This Far by Faith: Readings in African-American Women's Religious Biography. New York, NY: Routledge, 1996.

Williams, Delores. Sisters in the Wilderness. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993.

## Notes

1. For a fuller definition of the words “womanist” and “womanism,” see Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006.
2. Blanks, Deborah K. “Telling God Where It Hurts.” This is My Story: Testimonies and Sermons of Black Women in Ministry. Ed. Cleophus J. LaRue. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2005. pp. 56-57
3. Weems, Renita J. Showing Mary: How Women Can Share Prayers, Wisdom, And the Blessings of God. New York, NY: Warner Books, 2002. pp. 195-201
4. Gaither, William J. “He Touched Me.”
5. “I Know I’ve Been Changed.” Traditional. This is a standard song of the Holiness denomination.