



KWANZAA

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Monday, December 26, 2011–Sunday, January 1, 2012

(See the Cultural Resource unit and the Worship unit for great ideas for Kwanzaa celebrations.)

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Lection – Colossians 3:13-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v.13) Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (v. 14) Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Umoja is the Kiswahili word for *unity*. Umoja is the first principle of the annual Kwanzaa celebration. As those who conceived Kwanzaa examined historic African values they discerned that the principle of Umoja or unity stood at the center of African communal life. Contrary to the dominant myths about Africa in general and African peoples in particular, our elders and ancestors possessed the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional power needed to create and maintain excellent social, political, economic, and military institutions. They organized and maintained some of the world's most successful and long-lasting civilizations in part through a steadied and studied practice of the principle of Umoja.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Colossians 3:13-14

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Umoja (unity) is a key to our collective success. Umoja is a principle we need to understand, internalize, and practice. Indeed, it is safe to say that had Umoja not been a consistent practice among a good number of our elders and ancestors we'd still be stuck in an Antebellum Jim and Jane Crow reality.

It is a mistake to think of Umoja—unity—in terms of uniformity. Unity does not always indicate uniformity. Africa is one of the most diverse continents on the planet. African peoples are as diverse as their geographic mother. Africa's children speak hundreds of languages and thousands of dialects. Africa's peoples range in color from mocha to white chocolate. Africa's religious values run the gamut of human spiritual experience and engagement. Africa's geography is as diverse as the earth's itself. Africa's weather is cold and hot, arid and humid, mild and predictable, violent and unpredictable depending on which country you visit and during what time of the year. Africa is not a uniform continent and her people are as diverse as the land on which they reside. Yet there is and there has historically been a cultural unity within African tribes and villages and sometimes nations. There has been Umoja, unity, but not uniformity.

Nor does the fact that African peoples have historically practiced the cultural principle of Umoja mean that they have avoided fighting each other. African peoples have struggled and fought one another for power just as other peoples on the planet. Africans have murdered and assassinated their leaders as have non-Africans. African people have practiced homicide and genocide and fratricide as have non-Africans. We are not trying to wrap Africa and her children in a romantic shroud. But we are asserting that Umoja, which Maulana Karenga defined as “principled and harmonious togetherness,” was practiced by African peoples everywhere and remains a highly embraced value for many African Americans.

Many of us who are over age 50 remember when childrearing was a shared responsibility; when sharing food and shelter with family and neighbors in need was an honored value and consistent practice; when there was no need for burglar bars, house alarms, or car alarms, even in the poorest of neighborhoods; when there were no drive-bys and forced entries; when education was a common goal and cordiality was a common

custom. Some of us remember when “principled and harmonious togetherness” was the ethos of the Black community.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Umoja is “principled and harmonious togetherness.” This is the goal the apostle Paul, the writer of Colossians, sought in the lives of those to whom he wrote this epistle. He wants the people who are chosen and set apart and loved by God in Colossae to internalize godly values so deeply that divine love clothes and binds them together in “perfect harmony” (v 14). He wants them to know Umoja, unity, as a part of their collective experience.

Umoja does not come as a consequence of meeting together in the fellowship hall for a church dinner, or working together on a church project, or worshiping together on a Sunday or two a month. If Paul is right, it takes laborious effort to attain unity. It takes determination to get Umoja.

The recipients of Paul’s epistle are believers in God through the Christ. As such they are assigned designations common to the descendants of Jacob/Israel—“chosen ones,” “holy,” “beloved.” Their faith in God is no accident, nor is it happenstance or even the consequence of a choice. They are chosen ones, ones chosen by God. They are holy ones, people set aside by God for God’s glory. They are beloved, people loved by God. The designations in the twelfth verse say to me that God staked a prior claim on the recipients of this epistle. Those designations tell me that before these citizens of Asia Minor claimed God, God claimed them in Christ. That’s the way it always is with family. We say we came to Jesus. The truth is that God came to us through Jesus. Long before we were open to the possibility of walking right with God, God was walking right with us in Christ. Somebody said, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:8). I believe it was that same author who said, “In Christ God was reconciling the world to God’s Self” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

The recipients of this epistle were people of faith in God through Christ. As people of faith in God and redeemed by Christ they are expected to exemplify attitudes of spirit and conduct consistent with the character and nature of God. Conduct is the child of attitude. External behavior is born of the ethereal qualities of spirit. A mean and calloused spirit will without fail manifest in a biting tongue and a balled-up fist. Conversely a warm and gentle disposition will yield the pleasant fruits of compassionate speech and an open hand. Paul therefore commands the Colossians and subsequently the church to “clothe” ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

The idea of “clothing” one’s self is intended to convey the notion of transformation. If indeed one’s previous way of being in the world was more in line with the characteristics identified in verse 5—fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed—“clothing” one’s self as a believer in God through Christ means a radical departure from previous attitudes.

There is a sense in which one must be clothed with what I'll call "divine consciousness"—a consciousness of God so deep and profound that it transforms both one's view of the world and behavior in the world, when clothed with "divine consciousness" one is capable of "bearing with" and "forgiving" another. The capacity to possess and to live "principled and harmonious togetherness" is grounded in a transformed mentality. Unity, Umoja, is a fruit of divine consciousness. We cannot expect everyone we meet in the world, or in the church for that matter, to embody a divine consciousness. We cannot presume that those drunk on the cheap wine of what C. Eric Lincoln calls "Americanity," by which he meant civil religion, will exhibit the attitudes and dispositions necessary to transform the social status quo of the church or the community. We should not even imagine that those drunk on ecclesial success—those who are constantly boasting about "my church" and "my members" and "my budget" and who are in hot pursuit of increasingly high sounding titles (Bishop, Archbishop, Cardinal)—will soon possess the meekness or humility needed to forebear and to forgive; to put on those attitudes of mind and heart needed to actualize unity, Umoja, in the public square or even in the pew-filled sanctuary.

I aver that one is more likely to find the dispositions and attitudes Paul is advocating here among the pain-filled, broken masses; among those whose lives have been or are being crushed by the grinding wheels of a sinful and sin-sick world; and by those who are constantly being exploited by the greed and money-lust lodged in the hearts of leaders in both religious and secular institutions.

Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, but don't stop there. Go on to clothe your selves with love that binds everything together in perfect harmony.

The kind of love Paul advocates in this passage has little to do with the love we most frequently mean when we use the language of love in our relationships with one another. Paul is very intentional here. He uses the word *agape* to indicate a love born, not of emotions, but of intellect. It is love manifested in active, intentional, decisive action interested only in the welfare of the one to whom it is given. It is love void of ego. It is love that is kind and humble and compassionate and patient and sacrificial (1 Corinthians 13). It is love already composed of the dispositions articulated earlier, which is why it is the perfecting agent. Perfect harmony, unity, Umoja, is born of a deep, transformative and transforming spirituality. It is mature religion focused on the welfare of others, the good of the community, the health of our families, the well-being of our institutions, the strength of our businesses, and the condition of our relationships with one another. Perfect harmony, unity, Umoja, is the will of God for the people of God; it is the only way out of the mess we are in as persons and as people. We must strive for perfect harmony through the power of God's transforming Spirit.

Challenge

Thank God for the unity that brought us over. Let us pray for Umoja as we face the days ahead, some difficult and some even dark. For if we are united we can all get through

whatever we must go through. If we are united no one will be unduly burdened. If we are united our children will benefit, our families will be healed, our communities will be served, and God will be pleased.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: People with complaints against each other; people forgiving each other; faces clothed in love; actions of unity; people working in unity for the poor; people working in unity for children; people working in unity for the Kingdom;

Sounds: People complaining; people forgiving; people celebrating victories gained; and

Colors: **Red, Black, and Green**