



LGBT SUNDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, June 23, 2013

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I. Historical Section

Despite the growing amount of openness and acceptability in the wider society, it is not a surprise that homosexuality is still a controversial topic in the black church in 2013. Issues of both sexuality and homosexuality have been and continue to be sensitive areas where the Black Church is concerned.¹ Issues of sex and the body are often ignored or approached with reticence not only in our churches but in our communities and families as well. One reason for this is that sex was used as a tool of power and control over blacks. The majority power group denigrated the black body in many ways in an effort to help in the suppression of the black race.

Black sexuality has been and continues to be defined and controlled through the normative gaze of a white patriarchal power structure. The seemingly peculiar curves of the black body were

made a spectacle of and the black body was subsequently ridiculed and violated in a very brutal manner. One such example of this is the dehumanizing display of Sarah “Saartjie” Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman who was displayed in a freak show during the 19th century because of her voluptuous breasts and buttocks. Behavior such as this has set a precedence that has recapitulated itself over and over again. Add to this the contentiousness that comes along with homosexuality and we find ourselves dealing with a double whammy.

Since the emerging of the Western Enlightenment in the 1770s, whiteness is the standard by which everything, including positive physical attributes, is measured against. Thus, whiteness is considered the norm and anything else inferior. In this sense, whiteness is not limited to physical attributes such as skin color. Whiteness in America goes beyond individual attributes and culture and includes a power dynamic that comes along with setting standards and norms. In her book Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective, Kelly Brown Douglas quotes the late political theorist Manning Marable by saying, “To be white in the United States says nothing direct about an individual culture, ethnic heritage, or biological background. A society created to preserve ‘white culture’ either would be very confused or tremendously disappointed. White culture does not exist. White power, privileges, and prerogatives within capitalist society do exist.”²

It’s important to look deeply and reflectively at the ways in which black people experience issues such as sex and sexuality. It is imperative to understand the brutal history that has fed many of the ill feelings that are often displayed toward homosexuality and the LGBT community. Moreover, the Bible is seen as the ultimate rulebook and guide to life for most African American Christians and because there are Scriptures that superficially speak against same sex relationships, many hold fast to the words printed on the pages of the book without taking context, author, and intent of the writing into consideration. For many, whatever the Bible says goes, even if the reader has little or no understanding of what the Bible says. Therefore, texts such as those that comprise Levitical Law and the relationship of Adam and Eve as found in the book of Genesis are seen as guideposts for how relationships should look. Anything that contradicts this is sinful, out of order, and strange.

Sexuality in white culture contributes to the power and privileges included in the aforementioned quote by Marable. When properly examined, a better understanding can be gained about the ways in which black sexuality is regarded.

Douglas’s groundbreaking work on this topic is a call to the contemporary black church to move into a space of healing and reconciliation with the LGBT community. Her writing helps readers understand by providing words, history, and images beyond the limited information we usually get, and she does it from a black perspective. Her work along with others, such as Patrick Cheng’s From Sin to Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ, call into question literalist interpretations of Scripture that have been used to dehumanize and denigrate the LGBT community. Both works help us to think both critically and lovingly about the complexities of the human condition as broken but still divinely created in the *imago dei*.

In order to become the beloved community that the Black Church has historically labeled itself, we must acknowledge all who makes up the Church, and that includes those who cause fear in

our hearts. More importantly, the least of these whom have been cast out, talked about, and labeled less than should be attended to as explicated by the life of Jesus.

LGBT Sunday is not about what happens in the bedroom between two persons of the same sex. Rather, it is about celebrating the love of God for all people among us who have historically been denied God's love because of fear, hate, and ignorance. Yes, it is time to educate others and ourselves so that we all stand on the side of justice and love for all people in the name of the Divine Creator of the universe.

II. Autobiographical or Biographical Stories/Personal Testimonies

Oftentimes pastors, preachers, and even laity choose to speak against the LGBT community because they believe that by doing so they are living out Christianity as outlined in Scripture. Moreover, typically without their own investigation or research, they misquote, misjudge, and grossly mishandle people who have different interpretations of both the world and God than them. Along with the fear of going against biblical instruction, there is also an overarching fear of openly discussing controversial topics such as sexuality. This fear is exacerbated when coupled with issues of homosexuality. Consequently, there is a need for space to be created so that conversations can take place in a safe environment free of the need for one party to be right and the other to be wrong.

In May 2012, the President of the United States, President Barak Obama, made history by being the first president to publicly support same-sex marriage in an interview on ABC news while serving his first term.³ Essentially, it was his Christian values that lead him to his decision. In his interview, he asserted that, "In the end, it is important to treat others the way you would want to be treated. We need to recognize that people are going to have differing views on marriage and those views, even if we disagree strongly, they should be respected." When responding to the question of the greatest commandment Jesus said, "love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself."

In spite of what was at stake for President Obama during his most recent race to be re-elected—the timing of his response and the risk of losing supporters—he allowed his Christian values to lead his decision. He chose to follow the greatest commandment of all, which is to love. Some people believe that the Bible is the standard for all that they do. However, the Bible is just one manifestation of the guides that God gives us to teach us how to love. The Bible is not the standard. If it was, all of my ancestors who died without being able to read would have automatically been eliminated from having a relationship with God based just on the Bible. Thankfully, our African ancestors, who were brought to these shores against their will, were wise enough to have brought with them a love for one who was GREATER THAN THEMSELVES. They based their hopes and dreams on the Divine, not a book they could be killed for reading. So, love is the standard. In the words of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, "Love is not a virtue. Love is the standard by which we measure and obtain all virtues."

There is a church in the Washington DC area that operates in this love. A few years ago, they took a bold stance on same-sex marriage in an effort to transform their congregation and the community beyond into to a kind of fellowship that fully evokes the presence of God in the name

of love. Covenant Baptist United Church of Christ made the choice to become an affirming, inclusive, Bible-believing Church that takes a risk each time they open their doors to invite the LGBT community in to participate in worship. This Church family wholeheartedly believes in the equality of marriage for everyone. Moreover, they are supportive of the particularities of each person's divine call in this life and the full manifestation of that call. Drs. Dennis and Christine Wiley lead this congregation with love and justice interwoven into their theology. These shepherds of God's holy people are trailblazers that chose love over hate when representing the Kingdom of God.⁴

Another church that supports the LGBT community is Trinity United Church of Christ of Chicago, pastored by the Reverend Otis Moss III. Below is a letter that Moss wrote in response to black clergy who wanted to abandon President Obama after the president announced his support for same-sex marriage.⁵

My Brother:

Tell your brethren who are part of your ministerial coalition to “live their faith and not legislate their faith” for the Constitution is designed to protect the rights of all. We must learn to be more than a one-issue community and seek the beloved community where we may not all agree, but we all recognize the fingerprint of the Divine upon all of humanity. There is no doubt people who are same-gender-loving who occupy prominent places in the body of Christ. For the clergy to hide from true dialogue with quick dismissive claims devised from poor biblical scholarship is as sinful as un-thoughtful acceptance of a theological position. When we make biblical claims without sound interpretation we run the risk of adopting a doctrinal position of deep conviction but devoid of love. Deep faith may resonate in our position, but it is the ethic of love that forces us to prayerfully reexamine our position.

The question I believe we should pose to our congregations is, “Should all Americans have the same civil rights?” This is a radically different question than the one you raised with the ministers, “Does the church have the right to perform or not perform certain religious rites?” There is difference between rights and rites. We should never misconstrue rights designed to protect diverse individuals in a pluralistic society versus religious rites designed by faith communities to communicate a theological or doctrinal perspective. These two questions are answered in two fundamentally different arenas. One is answered in the arena of civic debate where the Constitution is the document of authority. The other is answered in the realm of ecclesiastical councils where theology, conscience and biblical mandates are the guiding ethos. I do not believe ecclesiastical councils are equipped to shape civic legislation nor are civic representatives equipped to shape religious rituals and doctrine.

The institution of marriage is not under attack as a result of the President's words. Marriage was under attack years ago by men who viewed women as property and children as trophies of sexual prowess. Marriage is under attack by low wages, high incarceration, unfair tax policy, unemployment, and lack of education. Marriage is under attack by clergy who proclaim monogamy yet think nothing of stepping outside the bonds of marriage to have multiple affairs with "preaching groupies." Same-gender couples did not cause the high divorce rate, but our adolescent views of relationships and our inability as a community to come to grips with the ethic of love and commitment did. We still confuse sex with love and romance with commitment.

My father, who is a veteran of the civil rights movement and retired pastor, eloquently stated the critical nature of this election when speaking to ministers this past week who claim they will pull support from the President as a result of his position. He stated, "Our Ancestors prayed for 389 years to place a person of color in the White House. They led over 200 slave revolts, fought in 11 wars, one being a civil war where over 600,000 people died. Our mothers fought and were killed for women's suffrage, our grandparents were lynched for the civil rights bill of 1964 and the voting rights act of 1965...my father never had the opportunity to vote and I believe it is my sacred duty to pull the lever for every member of my family who was denied the right to vote. I will not allow narrow-minded ministers or regressive politicians the satisfaction of keeping me from my sacred right to vote to shape the future for my grandchildren."

Gay and lesbian citizens did not cause the economic crash, foreclosures, and attack upon health care. Poor underfunded schools were not created because people desire equal protection under the law. We have much work to do as a community, and to claim the President of the United States must hold your theological position is absurd. He is President of the United States of America not the President of the Baptist convention or Bishop of the Sanctified or Holiness Church. He is called to protect the rights of Jew and Gentile, male and female, young and old, Gay and straight, black and white, Atheist and Agnostic. It should be noted the President offered no legislation, or executive order, or present an argument before the Supreme Court. He simply stated his personal conviction. If we dare steal away from the noise of this debate, we will realize as a Church we are called to "Do justice, live mercy and walk humbly with God." Gay people have never been the enemy; and when we use rhetoric to suggest they are the source of our problems we lie on God and cause tears to flow from the eyes of Christ.

I am not asking you to change your position, but I am stating we must stay in dialogue and not allow our own personal emotional prejudices or doctrines to prevent us from seeing the possibilities of a beloved community.

November is fast approaching, and the spirits of Ella Baker, Septima Clarke, Fannie Lou Hammer, Rosa Parks, A. Phillip Randolph, James Orange, Medgar Evers and Martin Luther, King Jr. stand in the balcony of heaven raising the question, “Will you do justice, live mercy and walk humbly with our God?” Emmitt Till and the four little girls who were assassinated in Alabama during worship did not die for a Sunday sermon sound bite to show disdain for one group of God’s people. They were killed by an evil act enacted by men who believed in doctrine over love. We serve in ministry this day because of a man who believed in love over doctrine and died on a hill called Calvary in a dusty Palestinian community 2,000 years ago. Do not let the rhetoric of this debate keep you from the polls, my friend.

Asking you to imagine a beloved community, your brother and friend,

Otis Moss, III

Senior Pastor

Trinity UCC

III. Making It a Memorable Learning Moment

What does church have to do with the world? What does the world have to do with church? In this post-post modern society where more and more people claim to be spiritual but not religious and unabashedly renounce their denominational and institutional religious roots, it can be quite hard to answer either or both questions. Moreover, if the world and church are supposed to be connected, how do members of the ecclesial system actualize that in a way that reorient the world’s view towards Christianity?

At one time, it seemed as if the purpose of the Church was to provide the social and moral parameters for the everyday happenings of the social structure in which it existed. This was especially true of the African American community in the segregated South. During this time, the central life force of the African American community was the Church. Not only did it oversee the spiritual health and well-being of our people, but it also stirred the pots of government and many other aspects of life. While there may have been some attention given to the effects of society on the individual, there was a greater emphasis placed on how the community was affected because of issues of the time. Essentially, the Church stood in the gap for those who could not stand for themselves and was an advocate for the oppressed.

Today, this typology of church can and should be used to provide care to all marginalized groups of people that suffer various –isms, especially the LGBT community. This suffering often occurs

through the use of ill-fated exegesis of the sacred text. The Church, the primary keepers of the sacred text, should be intentional about explicating what it means to imitate the healing, liberative, praxis of the gospel. This is most evidenced in the life and actions of Christ as he attended to those who were put down and cast to the margins of the larger social structure because they failed to meet the standards of normative behavior and living.

Just as African Americans have been ignored and deemed unworthy of being named as members of the Beloved Community, so are those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, queer, or inter-sexed. Often, they are subjected to the hurtful thoughts and ill feelings of others that are antithetical to the words found in the 139th Psalm, which exclaims of God's great works in creating us all. Moreover, it boasts of the worthiness of God's love and grace that each and every one of us possesses as a part of God's divine creation.

As Christians, we are called to imitate the life of Christ and therefore should attend to the socially unnamed and unclaimed. Just as Christ attended to the least, the lost, and the socially less than, so should the Church of today put its arms around those who have been deemed subpar by the larger secular social structure. One of the best ways this can be done is through Sunday morning worship. Sunday worship is largely seen as a time where Christians can gather together in fellowship and love. At this time, they come together to celebrate the redeeming and saving of love of Christ. This is also a time where those who have been left by the wayside and deemed unworthy can be brought back into fellowship with the beloved community.

One way this can be done is through a ritual of naming. This can take place in the form of a litany, an entire service of prayer, or perhaps even an altar call. The following example of a naming ritual is done during communion.

As a common sacrament that takes place in some shape form or fashion in most Christian traditions, the sacred table is a gathering place where the broken body of Christ is celebrated because of its saving and redeeming power. Not only is the brokenness of Christ's humanity celebrated but also the resurrection and simultaneous divinity embodied in his being. Celebrating the body of Christ at the sacred table is a great way to explore how those who have been violated because they are deemed as "other" can find a healthy connection to God and stake a claim into the beloved community.

A Communion Ritual of Naming

Leader: It is during this time that we gather at this sacred table to remember the broken body of Christ. However, his brokenness on the cross is not the end; it is only the beginning. We are thankful for the time he spent on earth showing us how to love those who were spiritually maimed by society and outcast.

Let us pray.

God of love, we are thankful for the broken body of Christ and this table. For it is here that we can see that through the life of Christ those who are broken in their bodies and deemed unworthy to be named and claimed through hurts, pain,

oppression, and rejection **are** worthy of Your love and have every right to claim membership into Your everlasting kingdom. Therefore, we lift up and name those who need to be reclaimed and those who have and continue to harm them.

Leader: God our Advocate, let justice roll down let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream! We lift those up to You who do not know that they have been named by You. As we partake of this manna which represents Your body, and the wine which represents Your blood, we pray for new life for those who are living, yet do not live because they know not that Your love is greatest of all.

At this time, congregants call the names of those who have been unnamed in this way.

Leader: On the night that Jesus was to be betrayed, he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” Take and eat.

All: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

Leader: God our Healer, we are thankful for new life found in You. Help us to be a guiding light to those who are in need of healing from emotional injury caused by bigotry and prejudices from others. Help us to be peace in a time of war and agents of healing in times of sorrow.

At this time, congregants will call out their own names to indicate that they will be agents of help and healing.

All: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

Leader: In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” Take and drink.

All: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

Leader: For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

All: God our Inspiration, may we have the mind of Christ as we relate to one another. Let love be our guide, and reconciliation our desire. May people of every color and class, age and ability, sexual and gender orientation be truly welcomed and valued among us. Help us to keep in mind that we are all fearfully and wonderfully made by You. Regardless of the particulars that compromise our being, we belong to You. Amen.⁶

There are many modifications that can be made to this service. For instance, a basket can be placed at the foot of the pulpit, altar, or table (depending on church set up) containing names of those who congregants feel moved to pray for. The cards can be placed in the basket during altar prayer as members come to the front for prayer. Candles can also be lit in memory of those who struggle to be healed from social stigmatization and oppression because of their sexual orientation.

This service can be followed by a community project that focuses on the LGBT community to conclude the day or to celebrate a project that was just completed.

IV. Songs That Speak to the Moment

The relationship between sin and grace are often used to alienate members of the LGBT community from biological and church family members. Sin is seen as separation from God, whereas grace is seen as the unmerited gift to all who have not done anything to warrant it.

The first line of the song “Amazing Grace” is perhaps the strongest of all its verses. It sets the tone of the living dichotomy that exists in us as humans. While we are all imperfect and broken in some way as humans, we are still created in the *imago dei* and as such have access to the free gift of God’s grace and perfect love regardless of our sexual and gender orientation. The bread that represents the body of Jesus Christ is the ultimate gift of grace and all are welcome to partake in this free gift. Likewise, the cup contains that which represents his blood and is a covenant of new life for all.

Amazing Grace

by John Newton

Amazing Grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now, I see.

’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear.
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.

The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
’Twas Grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Then when we've first begun.

Amazing Grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now, I see.⁷

Marginalized communities often lose a sense of self-worth as a result of the prejudices they experience from others, including the Church. As opposed to developing positive self-images and a healthy sense of love for self and others, members of such communities develop what some might call a type of social leprosy.

Just as African Americans have been historically demonized because of their bodies, so have members of the LGBT community. This song acknowledges that although we are battered, as a divine creation of God, we are never broken. As someone created in the *imago dei*, we are all vessels full of power with a treasure from the Lord. Gathering at the sacred table to partake in the sacrament of communion is an example of the parallel of the power found in the broken body of Christ.

The Corinthian Song

by Micah Stampley

I am troubled, yet not distressed. Perplexed, but not in despair. 'Cause I'm a vessel full of power, with a treasure, none can compare.

Persecuted, but not forsaken. Cast down, but not destroyed. I'm a vessel full of power, with a treasure, from the Lord.

I'm a vessel full of power with a treasure from the Lord.

So, thank you, Father, for your power. It has resurrected me.
Oh, the painful circumstances that my poor soul could not flee.

Bruised and battered but not broken. Brought my sin back, from sin I am free,
'Cause I am a vessel, got a whole lot of power with a treasure, delivered me.

Thank you, Father, for your power, it has resurrected me.
Oh, the painful circumstances that my poor soul could not flee.
Oh, oh, oh, oh,

I'm the vessel full of power, with a treasure from the Lord.

I'm the vessel full of power with a treasure from the Lord.

I'm a vessel, you're a vessel full of power, you've got power from the Lord.

I'm a vessel, full of power with a treasure from the Lord⁸

The first verse of “Behold a Broken World” seems to best illustrate the redeeming power emanating from Christ’s crucified, human body. His body was beaten, bruised, and broken by the larger social structure because he did not fit the mold of what was deemed normal and acceptable. His behavior was deemed socially unacceptable and his refusal to conform exacerbated the fears of others causing them to act against him. There was a broken world that caused a body to be broken. Yet, even in his brokenness, Jesus was able to hone his power and be a peace-bearer in the midst of a broken, chaotic world.

We, the Christian church, can act as peace-bringers and heart-healers by walking in the way Christ loving those who would otherwise go unloved. This song serves as a reminder that Jesus brought peace and healing to a broken world, and as agents of care, we called to imitate Jesus’ life on earth. Therefore, as Christians, we are called to place the broken at the feet of God through not only our actions but through our words. Gathering together at the sacred table to celebrate those who would lack peace in their broken heart because of the demonization of their sexual orientation is a great way to start this healing process.

Behold a Broken World

by Max Miller

O Prince of peace, who died to save
a lost world to redeem,
and rose in triumph from the grave,
behold our waking dream.

Behold a broken world, we pray,
where want and war increase,
and grant us, Lord, in this our day,
the ancient dream of peace:

A dream of swords to sickles bent,
of spears to scythe and spade,
the weapons of our warfare spent,
a world of peace remade;

Where every battle flag is furled
and every trumpet stilled,
where wars shall cease in all the world,
a waking dream fulfilled.

No force of arms shall there prevail
nor justice cease its sway;
nor shall their loftiest visions fail
the dreamers of the day.

O Prince of peace, who died to save,
a lost world to redeem,
and rose in triumph from the grave,
behold our waking dream.

Bring, Lord, your better world to birth,
your kingdom, love's domain;
where peace with God, and peace on earth,
and peace eternal reign.⁹

V. Audio Visual Aids

- Adinkra Symbols of West Africa can be used in bulletins or as props around the sanctuary. Pictures of the following symbols along with descriptions can be found at http://www.ancient-symbols.com/african_symbols.html:
 - o Dono the drum is a symbol of goodwill and diplomacy, which we should always display goodwill in the church welcoming all that seek to be united with the Divine. We should never turn away anyone because of a perceived imperfection, as we are all flawed in some way.
 - o The Sankofa symbol means to “take back.” As the conscience of the world we are called to help those who have become unnamed take back their God given name and place in the Beloved Community.
 - o Bin Nka Bi- means to “Bite not one another.” We should refrain from provoking others through negative behaviors including abusive interpretations of the text.
- A small font of water with marbles in it can be set up at the front or at the doors of the church. All who attend can be invited to wash their hand in the water (which represents life and cleansing) and take a marble to keep as a reminder to name those who cannot name themselves by acting as agents of healing.
- Show a video clip of a Missouri pastor’s speech against the lack of equal rights for Homosexuals. Online location: <http://gawker.com/5953357/>
- Use various images of the cross as illustrated in the book The Cross and the Lynching Tree by James Cone in prayers or in the sermon.

Notes

1. Comstock, Gary David. A Whosoever Church: Welcoming Lesbians and Gay Men into African American Churches. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
2. Douglas, Kelly Brown. Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999.
3. Online location: www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2012/5/10/obama-support-same-marriage.
4. Online location: covenantbaptistucc.org.
5. The open letter can be found at <http://theobamadiary.com/2012/06/07/an-open-letter-from-rev-otis-moss-iii-to-the-black-clergy/>. Article can be found at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/spiegel-online-interview-with-obama-s-pastor-otis-moss-iii-a-836236.html>.
6. Taken from “A Place in God’s Heart... A Place at Christ’s Table.” Online location: <http://welcomingresources.org/litanies.htm>.
7. “Amazing Grace.” By John Newton; stanza 4 attributed to John Rees. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #271
8. “The Corinthian Song.” By Micah Stampley. Soulful Sounds Gospel. Hendersonville, TN: Daywind Records, 2008.
9. “Behold a Broken World.” By Max Miller. The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship. Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989.