



MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT SUNDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. The History Section

What does black wedded bliss look like? What does it sound like to be a black married couple? How does it genuinely feel to be in a committed, healthy, and godly relationship as an African American man and woman in the state of holy matrimony? These are not just rhetorical questions, but actual concerns related to the current state and future prospects for the state of marriage in the black community. What is most alarming is that there is a stunning absence of positive and affirming depictions of black married women and men on public display and in American popular culture. Besides glimpses of black married couples on television sitcoms such as Good Times, The Jeffersons, The Cosby Show, and My Wife and Kids, there are few legitimate examples in popular culture of African Americans who are happily married and emotionally balanced. More often than not, married black women and men are depicted as something abnormal rather than something to be honored and respected. To make matters worse, given the fact that the "M" word is tantamount to profanity in some circles, most marriages are in trouble for one reason or another.

Whereas the church was foremost amongst the many institutions that provided a safety net for couples once upon a time, there has been a sense in recent years that there is a growing perception, in young and old alike, that marriage does not matter anymore. Therefore, the idea behind Marriage Enrichment Sunday within black churches across the country is to correct this negative and ultimately fatalistic perspective that black committed love between a man and a woman is impossible.

We often receive puzzled questions about what makes our marriage work. At some point in time, we will be asked how we met or why we decided to hyphenate our last names, but there always seems to be a greater, more pressing question that lurks unstated by the inquirer: "Can a black woman and man who are professionals, successful, and saved truly be in love with one another?" While we certainly do not pretend to be perfect or profess to have any great wisdom about being married, we allow our actions to speak for us. Apart from whatever the current debate about marriage as the natural ideal for human beings might be, it is important to emphasize that the Bible depicts marriage as a source

of personal fulfillment and divine blessing to the man and woman. With the first creation story in the Hebrew Bible, the assertions that “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him” (Gen 2:18) and “A man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24) imply that marriage is equal parts commitment and consecration. On a personal note, the happiest realization of our lives together is that, through the good and bad times alike, we are best friends, lovers, life partners, and companions, but we are also soul mates in the truest sense brought into each other’s life by God. Although it is treated as old-fashioned, finding the person that God has ordained as the right pick for you is better than life itself. The challenge in today’s world is not just about trying to keep the romantic spark alive or maintaining open lines of communication (although both of those are important), but it is making certain that God is at the center of our shared destiny as a couple. Before anyone can argue that they represent and support marriage as being chief amongst so-called “family values,” it is important to know that it is God that places that value in the dual institutions of marriage and family in the first place.



The Wedding (1948) by Jacob Lawrence

II. Songs that Speak to the Moment

“One in a Million” and “Here and Now”

Choosing songs for Marriage Enrichment Sunday often happens to spark considerable nostalgia for couples. Simply listening to these well-known wedding songs, such as “One in a Million” by Larry Graham, “Here and Now” by Luther Vandross, and other love songs remind married couples of their wedding celebration. Meanwhile, we can also take this opportunity to acquaint younger members of the church congregation with a style of

songwriting that focuses squarely upon lyricism and melody that upholds a genuinely romantic ideal that is sorely missing in a sizable segment of the black community today.

One in a Million

Love had played its game on me so long.
I started to believe I'd never find anyone.
Doubt had tried to convince me to give in,
Said you can't win.

But one day the sun it came a shinin' through.
The rain had stopped, and the skies were blue.
And oh, what a revelation to see.
Someone was saying "I love you" to me.

Chorus:

A one in a million, chance of a lifetime.
And life showed compassion.
And sent to me a stroke of love called you.
A one in a million you.

I was a lonely man with empty arms to fill.
Then I found a piece of happiness to call my own.
And life is worth living again.
For to love you to me is to live.

(Chorus 2x).¹

“Here and Now”

When I look in your eyes
there I see
Just what you mean to me
Here in my heart I believe
Your love is all I'll ever need
Holdin' you close through the night
I need you, yeah

I look in your eyes and there I see
What happiness really means
The love that we share makes life so sweet
Together we'll always be
This pledge of love feels so right
And, ooh, I need you

Here and now
I promise to love faithfully [Faithfully]
You're all I need

Here and now
I vow to be one with thee [You and me], hey
Your love is all [I need] I need

Say, yeah, yeah...

When I look in your eyes, there I'll see
All that a love should really be
And I need you more and more each day
Nothin' can take your love away
More than I dare to dream
I need you

Here and now
I promise to love faithfully [Faithfully]
You're all I need
Here and now
I vow to be one with thee [You and me], yeah
Your love is all I need

[Starting here] Ooh, and I'm starting now
I believe [I believe in love], I believe
[Starting here] I'm starting right here
[Starting now] Right now because I believe in your love
So I'm glad to take the vow

Here and now, oh
I promise to love faithfully [Faithfully]
You're all I need
Here and now, yeah
I vow to be one with thee [You and me], yeah
Your love is all I need.²

III. Cultural Response to Significant Aspects of the Text

Historical Lesson

In recent years, there have been celebrations of African American marriages in keeping with Marriage Enrichment Sunday (also known as Black Marriage Sunday) in more than two hundred cities nationwide. There are numerous festivities in conjunction with Marriage Enrichment Sunday, such as a community march for marriage, inductions into the marriage “hall of fame,” dinners, prayer retreats for married couples, marriage workshops and conferences, people jumping the broom in marriage, and even “Tom Thumb” weddings for children. Given all the social crises that keep African Americans afraid of and alienated from one another, how wonderful and in the interest of the entire black community it would be to celebrate the joy of marriage by hosting a Black Marriage Day event. A particularly powerful ritual on Marriage Enrichment Sunday is to

organize married couples within a congregation to stand up in the front of the sanctuary and renew their vows. This can be done in a way so that they are actually repeating vows along with other couples around the country or at least in churches in your city. The goal of Marriage Enrichment Sunday is to change the hearts and minds of the black community so that they will celebrate and cherish the marriages that currently exist while also encouraging other women and men in increasing numbers to commit themselves to marriage.

We as a community need guidance and direction not only to make marriage successful but also to make it healthier and more desirable.

IV. Audio Visual Aids

To aid in helping hearers remember the morning sermon and the message of the text, one may want to put in the bulletin/order of service or use on screens in the church:

- Scenes of African American wedding ceremonies to set the focus on the occasion.
- Celebrate couples who have reached milestone marriage anniversaries (25, 40, or 50, etc.). This can be taken to another level by establishing a Marriage Hall of Fame for those married for twenty five years or more by posting their pictures and their tips for marital success in a prominent public place in the church as well as on your church website.
- Show images of brooms on screens with a brief explanation. The "jumping of the broom" is famous as an African American wedding custom; the ritual is a symbolic remembrance of slave marriage during the antebellum era.

V. Stories and Illustrations

One of the more puzzling aspects of President Barack Obama's historic win has been the extent to which people have argued that the symbolism of his presidency will remove some huge psychic encumbrance from the souls of black people and compel African Americans to "do better" in their interpersonal relationships, especially romantic ones. Cynthia Tucker of the [Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#) asserts that, as the Obamas prepare to take their rightful place in the White House, they could make marriage for African Americans a more attractive and viable option.³ In short, black people are not jumping the broom but are actually running away from it. For a variety of reasons, it is evident that the various benefits of married life are neither immediately apparent nor readily available to countless women and men. Contrary to this trend, the image of the Obamas still carrying on like newlyweds after more than sixteen years of wedlock goes a long way toward transforming our notion of marriage in all the best ways. By themselves, Michelle and Barack Obama's resemblance to a chocolate-covered Norman Rockwell painting of domestic bliss might just be compelling enough to help some people choose marriage and, ultimately, be more amenable to married life.

It is safe to say that there are cultural structural reasons for the incredibly low rates of marriage among black women and men, especially when African Americans are generally churched and socially conservative in nature. More importantly, Barack and Michelle Obama should never to be confused with the fictional Huxtables, of [The Cosby](#)

Show fame. As Ta-Nehisi Coates indicates in his recent Time essay, there should not be the presumption that the President can be viewed in messianic terms.⁴ What is most significant about the Obamas does not reside in some superhuman ability to save the nation and even the planet but, rather, the symbolism of seeing photos of Barack and Michelle Obama as a young, vibrant, attractive, and brilliant power couple who are both black and in love. What seems most stunning about the Obamas' presence in the national spotlight is how solid, stable, and easygoing they are within their marriage. In other words, it is absolutely wonderful to see a loving and lively black couple that is clearly on one accord. As Allison Samuels of Newsweek notes, an awesome by-product of the Obamas' arrival to the White House is the sight of a brown-skinned woman being loved and adored by her husband, the leader of the free world.⁵ Keeping this in mind, we can rejoice to God that these individuals found their way to one another and became a fantastic example of what black love can look like in the twenty-first century and beyond.

VI. Making It a Memorable Learning Moment

Reimagining the Eucharist Feast

In her groundbreaking book, Plenty Good Room: Women Versus Male Power in the Black Church, womanist ethicist Marcia Riggs provides a ritual revision of the Holy Communion feast that has been adapted and modified for the purposes of Marriage Enrichment Sunday. As part of the rededication of spouses to one another, the pastor and ministerial staff should extend an invitation to Holy Communion in which married couples come forth before the church. As they stand before the congregation, the pastor asks the married congregants to recite prayers of confession to be found printed in the bulletin. The instructions, as well as the prayers of confession printed in the church bulletin, can read as follows:

Men to women:

If I or any other man has ever done anything to hurt or offend you, and for the many wrongs done against women, you and every other, I apologize. Please forgive me.

If you have ever felt demeaned, not cherished, belittled, or felt your womanhood betrayed in any way, I am so sorry.

If I have failed to see the full light of your being as a black woman and the brilliance of your feminine spirit burning bright within you on behalf of all of us, I am sorry.

May the beauty, power, and vision of the woman I love now burst forth in our world and our consciousness.

May the mind of men be healed.

May the heart of women be repaired.

I commit to you and to God that I am, and shall be, the man who sees your full value and precious light in this world.

God bless you, my beloved wife, as God's greatest gift to me.

From this day forward, I shall teach my brothers, sons, and all men to honor and respect you.

May we never go back.

Amen.

Women to men:

If I or any other woman has ever done anything to hurt or offend you, and for the many wrongs done against men, you and every other, I apologize. Please forgive me.

If you have ever felt thwarted or stunted and felt your manhood diminished in any way, I apologize on behalf of myself and all women.

If I have failed to see your strength as a black man and the vitality of your masculine spirit burning bright within you on behalf of all of us, I am so sorry.

May God give us a healed and healing vision of what it means to be a black man and may men receive this healing.

May women receive this healing.

May we honor your resolve and respect your mind.

May we never emasculate you.

May your past be healed and your future be made new and strong.

From this day forward, I shall teach my sisters, daughters, and all women to honor and respect you.

Go forth, with my love, and the love of all women, forever.

Amen.⁶

Having spoken these words of Christ's forgiveness, signs of peace and love can be exchanged. As Riggs suggests, this revision of the Eucharist "seeks to re-socialize church members by honoring the traditional practice while at the same time creating dissonance with the traditional."⁷ Facing a member of the opposite sex and saying that which has been left unsaid too long has the great potential of transforming many of the broken and wounded relationships that African American men and women have within the Black community.

Books to Enhance Your Understanding of Marriage Enrichment Sunday

- Staples, Robert. Exploring Black Sexuality. New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006.
- Bassett, Angela and Courtney Vance with Hilary Beard. Friends: A Love Story. New York, NY: Harlequin, 2007.
- Wimberly, Edward P. Counseling African American Marriages and Families. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997.

Notes

1. "One in a Million." By Larry Graham
2. "Here and Now." By Luther Vandross
3. Tucker, Cynthia. "The Obamas Can Be Model for Marriage." The Atlanta Journal Constitution. 16 Nov. 2008. Online location: http://www.ajc.com/opinion/content/opinion/tucker/stories/2008/11/16/tucked_1116.html accessed 4 January 2009
4. Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "Obama and the Myth of the Black Messiah." Time. 13 Nov. 2008. Online location: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1858897,00.html> accessed 4 January 2009
5. Samuels, Allison. "What Michelle Means to Us." Newsweek. 1 Dec. 2008. Online location: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/170383/page/1> accessed 12 December 2008
6. Riggs, Marcia. Plenty Good Room: Women Versus Male Power in the Black Church. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003. p. 113-115.
7. Ibid., p. 115.