



MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, March 22, 2009

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Lection - Genesis 2:18-25 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 18) Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” (v. 19) So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. (v. 20) The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field, but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. (v. 21) So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. (v. 22) And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman brought her to the man. (v. 23) Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” (v. 24) Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. (v. 25) And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

This special day marks the eighth year of “Black Marriage Day,” a marriage education initiative promoting the benefits of marriage in the black community. According to its founder, Nisa Isola Muhammad, all over the country on the last Sunday in March, African American marriage activists commit to changing the black community by proclaiming that marriage matters to the black community. Through marriage awareness seminars, enrichment activities, and re-commitment ceremonies marriage activists work to reclaim the marriage partnership as part of the legacy and future of black empowerment.¹ This day was born in an effort to mobilize couples to demonstrate their support for marriage. By renewing their marriage vows during a national celebration of marriage, their actions focus attention on the institution of marriage as a key building block of family, community, churches, country, and civilization. But this day is not only to celebrate an institution within the black community but to highlight the benefits of this institution. Research shows that married people live longer, maintain better health, succeed more in careers and income, feel more fulfilled in their lives, report satisfying sexual relations, and have happier, better disciplined, and more successful children. Making a special day to observe the benefits of an institution based on black love has the potential to revitalize the black

community that is suffering from poverty, bad health, depression, poor relationships and much more. For the black church, this day is a sacred day wherein the true benefits of marriage, which seem to be a well-kept secret from the black community, is shared as good news to those who have either invested in or those who desire happy and successful marriages.

Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Genesis 2:18-25

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As two African American thirty-something professors who have been happily married for eleven years, people of all races and ages often meet us with bewilderment. This is not because we're young black professionals with Ph.D.s, but more often than not it is due to the fact we are all those things and we're also married. To be black and in love, as comedian Chris Rock has joked on numerous occasions, is seemingly one of the world's greatest wonders and an unlikely happening within modern American society.

And so, it's no wonder that as amazed as America is in celebrating it's first black President of the United States, what's even more curious and intriguing for many Americans is that he is obviously in love with his wife of sixteen years, Michelle Obama. Without a doubt, the force and drive behind the presidency is not just his wife, the equally intelligent, committed, and loving soul mate Michelle Obama, but their model of a healthy working relationship, loving partnership, and apparently romantic marriage. One news report noted that "Michelle and Barack do something we've never seen before in a presidential couple: they actually look directly at each other when they're speaking to each other. They also laugh at each other's humor, and they allow their sexual attraction for each other to be visible. Michelle and Barack talk openly about their feelings for each other. They're real!"² Asked for his advice on how to maintain a successful and loving marriage, President Obama stated that besides placing God first in your marriage, as he and Michelle did for the entire length of their marriage as faithful Christians and church attendees, it is essential to have equal doses of a sense of humor, good listening skills and the ability to 'never get so mad that you forget why you love them'.³

Black Marriage Sunday is an occasion to recall that marriage is part of creation—an act that God created and blessed and one that we as husbands and wives must maintain, honor, and cherish as we nurture the blessing and creation of black love in our participation in creation with God. As Jada Pinkett Smith stated when she and her husband, Will Smith, were interviewed as one of Hollywood's most beloved couples, "Creation is a godly act. When man and woman come together, it's all about creation. That's our purpose in being together. We've created love, we've created a family, we create power and unity."⁴

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

While this passage represents the foundation upon which the entire Christian philosophy of marriage and the family is built, one can easily note that so too does this passage represent the first creation of an institution within civilization as a whole. Whether one reads this most traditional passage as the creation of humankind, or the other creation story (Genesis 1:27 wherein “humankind” was made, male and female simultaneously), one thing that cannot be argued is that in the beginning of creation, the first institution that God created was the conjugal bond between a man and a woman. Although other living beings were created, none were considered sufficient to be counterparts for mankind (v. 19-20). In fact, amidst what seemingly must have been animal paradise, God discerned that even though Adam had his creator and other creatures in his company, without a woman, mankind was alone, and that was not good (v. 18). So God sought to fashion a peer, a suitable helper, for him (v. 19-20). The word ‘helper,’ the African Bible Commentary reaffirms, does not mean that God sought to make women the servants, parents, nor keepers of men, but rather women and men are to be peers and complements to each other. And so, as Adam was in a deep sleep, God did as planned and formed a suitable companion for him and brought her to him in what was surely the first wedding ceremony (vv. 21-22).⁵ Acknowledging that the creation of what his soul longed for was formed by God from that which was closest to his heart (his rib) and for his good (to establish an intimate connection between flesh, spirit, and creation), Adam declared in amazement of such a divine act: ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken’ (v. 23). In this ideal union, men and women, although distinct from each other, were to consider each other as part of the other’s very being and the earthly form of the help they need, without which they are incomplete. In this way, marriage is to be considered God’s gift of companionship and unity.

On the basis of this confession, the writer of Genesis offers a commentary, “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (vv. 24-25). According to Soro Soungalo, marriage requires “autonomy, working at a relationship, full responsibility, and maturity. The new husband and wife must then become one flesh. They are no longer two individuals, existing side by side, but must become one entity, sharing each other’s lives. This new type of union is very different and very much stronger than that of parents and children. It also requires the work of God...so that in speaking of this text in Genesis, Jesus says, ‘Therefore what God has joined, let [no one] separate’ (Matthew 19:6).”⁶ And so, amidst all of the other forms of family, marriage was considered to be the first family—the sacred institution that was first formed, first blessed, and the first fruit of God’s human harvest.

Celebration

On this sacred day, we celebrate the beauty of black love as that which was created and blessed by God. Black marriage is the union that has formed the foundation of our faith and families and fortitude. It was made sacred by the jumping of brooms by our enslaved ancestors who were

forbidden to join holy unions with each other. We acknowledge, affirm and stand in awe of the way God has made black marriage an institution that has made ordinary people rise to the calling of doing extraordinary things because of the love and partnership that helped shape, inspire, and strengthen them. We have witnessed this in the unions of Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King, Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz, Ozzie Davis and Ruby Dee, and Barack and Michelle Obama and so many others. We know that only a holy union can make such great people greater together than they could ever be alone. And so on this day, Marriage Enrichment Day, we remember that God so loved us, that God created men and women for each other as helpers, lovers, companions, and partners, and in recognition of this we will love each other and never be ashamed.

III. Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: A man standing in the midst of the wonders of creation – sun, sky, water, foliage, and animals (v. 20); a man fast asleep with a woman dancing into being (v. 22); a man amazed at the form of a woman (v. 23); the two embracing together (v. 25);

Smells: The aroma of flowers blooming, dew on trees, sea mist, and ripening fruit (v. 18-20); romantic, sensual fragrances (v. 21-25); and

Sounds: The sounds of birds in the air, fish swimming, the rush of water from an ocean, animals frolicking in fields (v. 20-21); a woman awaking with “Aahs” and a man awaking with amazement and pronouncements of love, and loving, melodious music (v. 25).

Notes

1. “Black Marriage Day.” Wedded Bliss Foundation. Online location: <http://www.blackmarriageday.com/> accessed 9 January 2008
2. See “The Obamas' Greatest PDA Moments (SLIDESHOW),” online location: <http://marriage.about.com> accessed 9 January 2008, and Walters, Barbara. Interview. A Barbara Walters Special: Barack and Michelle Obama. ABC News. 26 November 2008.
3. Robertson, Regina R. “The Story of Us: Will and Jada, Black Hollywood’s Power Couple.” Essence Dec. 2008: 143.
4. Adeyemo, Tokunboh. Ed. Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006. p. 13
5. Soungalo, Soro. “New Family Relationships.” Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars. Ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006. p. 12