



## “WHO SO EVER WILL” SUNDAY

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Sunday, August 28, 2011**

**(Please visit the archive section of the Lectionary Dialogue Corner for articles on this topic. Scroll to the bottom of the page.)**

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**Lection – Hebrews 13:2** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 2) Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

African American churches have developed a reputation over the years of welcoming strangers, of providing support and encouragement, and for fostering a sense of community and connection. While there is something to this reputation with respect to economic and social difference, we tend to under report and in too many cases ignore the ways in which sexual orientation marks a barrier to full participation in too many churches. That is to say, hospitality in the African American church tradition does not always extend to gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender Christians.

Scripture and social customs become ways to exclude from full participation those whose sexuality threatens more conservative elements of church leadership and membership. As a result, **the mantra “who so ever will, let them come” is qualified—“let them come” . . . as long as they are heterosexual, or willing to hide their sexuality.** When this qualification for inclusion is in place, Christianity as a way of life, as an ethical and moral compass for movement through the world, loses its claim to “high ground.” And instead of being a welcoming community, churches easily become institutions that simply mimic the worst behaviors and phobias of the larger society.

Some scholars and religious leaders argue that this stance against gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender Christians by many African American churches is meant to save black families, to maintain the integrity of black communities. However, it is more likely that

this lack of hospitality has embraced social exclusion and given this vicious maltreatment religious (e.g., scriptural) authority and justification. African American churches during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and the 19<sup>th</sup> century attempted to gain greater public opportunities and greater civil rights and liberties for African Americans by attempting to copy what they understood to be the basic look, framing, and conversation concerning individual and collective life. Yet, this approach did not end racism and classism. And our continuation of this practice in the form of homophobia and heterosexism has fractured African American communities by stigmatizing members of these communities and writing (and preaching) them out of the ‘beloved community.’

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Hebrews 13:2**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

Reverend Tommie Lee Watkins is General Manager of the Watkins Group, LLC, and the founder of Ministry of Reconciliation. The latter seeks to rethink the Church’s relationship to gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender individuals by offering education and worship opportunities in a welcoming and affirming manner.

Rev. Watkins came to this work based on his frustrations with black denominations and their homophobia. He was ordained a Baptist minister in the early 1990s, prior to his entering the US Naval Academy. However, he left the Naval Academy as opposed to being dismissed as a gay male. This decision received media attention when he was told to repay the cost of his education up to that point. After leaving the Naval Academy, Rev. Watkins completed a degree at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and held a variety of jobs before seeking ordination in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in 2000. Yet, because he is gay, the church denied him ordination. Nonetheless, he continued his ministry, and he has made major strides in helping African American Christians re-think and move beyond their homophobia. But more than this, his ministry also provides gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender African American Christians opportunity and resources by which to gain greater opportunity for open and affirming connections to the Black Church.

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

It is through the work and personal testimony of leaders such as Rev. Watkins that some African American churches are making amends and maximizing their potential as affirming places of community and fellowship. The challenge, however, is for churches to not simply depend on gay ministers and activists, but rather to see the ending of homophobia and heterosexism as problems that all concerned and dedicated Christians must undertake as part of their moral and ethical commitments to the best of the Gospel message. This is what Hebrews 13:2 calls for—all Christians to live out their commitment to embracing the best of the Gospel—in this case, embracing those who are strangers. As we well know, those who are strangers to us include more than those whom we meet for the first time without having any prior intelligence about them. Unfortunately, we can live, shop, and have our being in communities, seeing the same

people over and over again, and yet they remain strangers to us. Often even those who live right next door to us are strangers to us.

We cannot be certain which group was intended in Hebrews—those we meet for the first time—or those we have never taken the time to get to know. However, we can be certain that the embrace of the stranger, those who may look different than we do, those who may have different social opinions, those who may have different sexual orientations than we do, are to be embraced, not excluded.

What a wonderful and provocative entry in Scripture: “Do **not** neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” The mention of angels is inclusive in Scripture. Depending on the Bible translation searched, these celestial beings are referred to from 294 to 305 times in the Bible. These many references are found from the very earliest books (whether Job or Genesis) to the last book of the Bible (Revelation).

The Gospel is apparently quite serious about the need for the people of God to show hospitality to strangers. Why else would it mention angels as possible strangers whom we might encounter? Because believers would not want to miss an angelic encounter. Angels in this text represent a type of impetus for those in the early Church and us to never neglect showing hospitality to strangers, for we all were once strangers. We were strangers and then the sacrifice of Christ made us sons and daughters of God.

Because of our beginning (our creation) and our destiny (our glorious end) we must live even better than holy angels. One of the highest privileges (and highest costs) of being reborn into the heavenly family is to live on a much higher level in our treatment of others, so that we reflect the sheer goodness of our God. But being hospitable to strangers is possible only if we remember God’s kindness to us.

### **Challenge**

“Who So Ever Will” Sunday provides churches a chance to repent for injustice and a lack of hospitality, and to truly welcome all into the community of believers. It is an opportunity for real conversation and exchange, to better understand and celebrate each other, and in this way to recognize and champion our humanity in its full array of expression.

On this Sunday, churches should take time to re-commit themselves to more genuine and far-reaching hospitality as they acknowledge their limitations and seek to move beyond them in ways that promote our diversity, our differences, as important, vital, and life-giving.

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details in this passage can include:

**Sights:** Angels in bright garments; strangers approaching in need of assistance; strangers we do not recognize as angels;

**Sounds:** Strangers walking towards us; our embracing strangers with words of welcome; our failing to embrace strangers by words that exclude; and

**Colors:** Angels in white garments; the rainbow colors in the LGBT flag.

### **III. Information That Preachers and Educators Can Use**

#### Video

- Riggs, Marlon. "Tongues Untied," Strand Releasing, 2008.

#### Websites

- BlackandChristian.com: <http://www.blackandchristian.com/>
- Operation: Rebirth: <http://www.operationrebirth.com/aboutus.html>
- The Watkins Group: <http://www.twgllc.biz/pages/tommie.htm>

#### Articles

- See the 2011 articles on Sexuality in the Dialogue Corner of The African American Lectionary for a wide range of views on the subject of sexuality including articles about homosexuality.

#### Books

- Angelique Harris. AIDS, Sexuality and the Black Church. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2010.
- Gary David Comstock. A Whosoever Church: Welcoming Lesbians and Gay Men into African American Congregations. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- Kelly Brown Douglas. Sexuality and the Black Church. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999.
- Robert Michael Franklin. Another Day's Journey: Black Churches Confronting the American Crisis. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997.
- Horace Griffin. Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010.

- Gerald Palmer. The Church Has AIDS: Essays on Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, Taboos, and the Black Church. Raleigh, NC: lulu.com, 2010.
- Peter Paris. The Social Teaching of the Black Church. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998.
- Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight Hopkins. Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

## Songs

- We All Can Do Good

Our lives, we are told, are but fleeting at best,  
 Like roses they fade and decay;  
 Then let us do good while the present is ours,  
 Be useful as long as we stay.

Refrain

Do good unto others, do good while we can,  
 Our moments how quickly they fly;  
 Remember the proverb, remember it now,  
 We all can do good if we try.

A look or a smile, that in kindness we give,  
 May comfort a desolate heart;  
 May sweeten a life that is lonely and sad,  
 And hope to the weary impart.

Refrain

How many around us are strangers to God,  
 How many poor children we see;  
 If such we could bring to the foot of the cross,  
 How grateful and glad we should be.

Refrain

We all can do good, and we all can bestow  
 Some gift for the sake of the Lord;  
 If only a cup of cold water we give,  
 Our souls will not lose their reward.

Refrain<sup>1</sup>

- Together We Stand

Our opinions might not be the same  
There are so many things that are  
Hand in hand we can form a chain  
That never can be torn apart

Chorus

Together we stand  
Divided we fall  
Let's build a bridge  
Tear down the wall  
Let us respond  
To our brother's call  
Together we stand  
Divided we fall

In life there are times we'll disagree  
Doesn't mean that I don't care  
I need you and you need me  
Love has made that very clear

Chorus

Oh, how we need one another, oh  
We can't live without each other, oh  
You're my sister, you're my brother  
I need you, every day of my life  
I need you  
Oh, how I hurt when you're hurting, oh  
And I cry when you're burdened, oh  
So the lesson I'm learning, oh how  
I need you, oh

Chorus

Stand with me  
I need you  
I need you every day  
Right by my side  
(Can you stand...)  
Stand with me  
I need you

Stand with me  
I need you

Oh thank you Jesus  
Would you help your children  
Would you look down upon us  
Get us to love one another  
To forgive one another, oh  
Help every black man, white man,  
Red man, yellow man,  
Rich man, poor man  
Sick man, every man  
Look down upon us  
Smile.<sup>2</sup>

### Notes

1. "We Can All Do Good." Online location: [http://www.music-lyrics-gospel.com/gospel\\_music\\_lyrics/we\\_all\\_can\\_do\\_good\\_397.asp](http://www.music-lyrics-gospel.com/gospel_music_lyrics/we_all_can_do_good_397.asp) accessed 19 March 2011

2. The Winans. "Together We Stand." Return. Online location: <http://www.allgospellyrics.com/index.php?sec=listing&id=12468> accessed 19 March 2011