



## KINSHIP AND SINGLES SUNDAY

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Sunday, November 16, 2008**

**Morine A. Bowen, Guest Lectionary Commentator**

Program Coordinator for Foster Parent Support, Concord Family Services, Inc.,  
Brooklyn, NY

**Lection - I Corinthians 7: 32-34** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 32) I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; (v.33) but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, (v.34) and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband.

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

The black church and the black family are historically the bedrock institutions of the black community. These two institutions working in tandem have supported, sustained, given hope amidst hopeless situations and empowered African Americans throughout their experience in the United States. The first of these institutions, the black church, emerged from slavery and its aftermath. Slavery systematically and methodically attempted to destroy the second institution, the black family. Enslaved Africans were considered property. As property, their owners did with them what they chose. What they often chose to do was separate blood relatives and split marriages by selling children and parents or husbands and wives to different buyers. What the whites did not know was that for many Africans, the family structure was not based on the ideal of one mother and one father with several children. Those considered “family” was larger than the context of household. In many African cultures, the tribe or clan was the “family.” The clan, the enlarged family, was composed of all the families that claimed a common ancestor.<sup>1</sup>

To help endure the selling off of relatives, blacks continued to embrace the concept of “family” with a different configuration than what whites considered normative. **If it were not for kinship bonds, black men and women could have not survived the physical and psychic atrocities of slavery, as well as the hardships of the Reconstruction and Depression eras.**<sup>2</sup> Even when slave masters separated mothers and fathers from their children, and children from parents and siblings, we survived because of kinship bonds and our ability to create new forms of family. Even today, the concept of who is considered kin has as much to do with relationship as it does blood connection. There is a need for the church to recognize, affirm, and celebrate the distinct configurations of family that exist in our community and churches.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: I Corinthians 7:32-34**

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

As a single female, I have found a drastic difference between the ideal life to which we have been socialized to aspire and reality. In the public arena, marriage is presented as the ideal, and most single, never married, persons with whom I come into contact desire it, even if the consideration is for some future point in their lives. The church also perpetuates this ideal, often unknowingly, when it has “family” celebrations, events and activities that target heterosexual married couples with children and, in more progressive places, include grandparents raising grandchildren.

The reality is that the rate of marriage for everyone, particularly African Americans, has declined. In 1970, 43% of black men and 46% of black women were not married (including those who were divorced, separated or widowed); by 2000, these figures had increased to 57% and 64%, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Another reality is that the structure of families in the church has changed. The number of children being raised by relatives other than their parents continues to grow. In the U.S., over 500,000 children are in the foster care system. Many of the families with whom these children are placed attend church. As laws change, more gay and lesbians couple are raising children or caring for elderly relatives.

And although many of these couples have been hurt by the church, blacks who identify as gay and lesbian still see faith and religious involvement as essential components of their lives.<sup>4</sup> Many single adults form family-like relationships with friends. All of these configurations of “family” are present in the black church today and continue to grow rather than decrease. In most churches, these new family forms outnumber the traditional nuclear family units.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

The city of Corinth, because of its location between the Ionian and Aegean Seas, was a center for trade and commerce. As a result, it was a place of great wealth and where many divergent cultures, philosophies and religions came into contact with each other. Scholars often present Corinth as a place of great debauchery, immorality, sorcery and idolatry. It was thought to be one of the places where the church would “least likely take root.”<sup>5</sup> Despite all that, the diligence of Paul bore “much fruit” in Corinth (John 15:16). The church was planted and grew. This is yet another reminder of a belief essential for black Christians, particularly in light of the institution of slavery that, with God, anything is possible.

The Church at Corinth, being a new church, was riddled with problems and concerns regarding their newfound religion. They had disputes concerning many things including practices, principles that should be followed, and who was in charge. Paul wrote this letter in response to a correspondence he received from the church itself (7:1) and to things he had heard from others about some of the happenings in the church (1:1 and 5:1). These verses, 7:32-34, are part of a longer conversation in chapter seven on marriage and singleness. Paul appears, from his words, to have a higher regard for living the single life than marriage. You get the impression that he only recommends marriage for those who do not feel that they can control their fleshly desires (v.8-9).

While society and the church often present marriage as the ideal, Paul, perhaps because of his own state, presents the single life as his preferred station, for it is in this station that one has only oneself about which to be concerned and is, therefore, more available to God and to do the work of the church. Paul recognizes that once a person is married they have more than themselves to consider, even as regards how they serve the Lord. Like Paul, the church often recognizes this, uses it to advantage, but does not celebrate singleness in the same way it (the Church) celebrates marriage. It is the unmarried ministers who are often expected to be at every service and event. It is often those single adults of all ages that are involved in the time consuming ministries geared towards youth, children, and the community.

Families of all configurations are able to do the Lord’s work, but in different ways. The married person is to work for the Lord in a way that one’s spouse, children and the surrounding community are considered (v. 33). The married person’s work for the Lord cannot be done at the expense or neglect of one’s first “ministry”-- one’s family. Likewise, the church is to recognize that singles and those in kinship relationships are

also “families” working for the Lord, who also have commitments to children, parents and community.

Paul, even though unmarried, had some of these familial relationships much like those present in the African American community! At the beginning of the letters to Timothy (I Tim 1:2 and II Tim. 1:2) and Titus (1:4) he refers to both of them as “my loyal child...” or “my beloved child...” These relationships did not hinder or prevent Paul from the Lord’s work, but actually supported, assisted in, and encouraged the work he was doing. Single persons, while having other obligations, often are the ones who support, assist, and encourage the pastor of a church as they do the Lord’s work. God recognizes and respects the gifts of all members of the family. The black church is to do the same, knowing that we are all “in the family.”

### **Celebration**

Singleness is not a curse. It is a gift to be embraced. There are benefits to being single as well as married. We thank God for all members of each church family and the families that comprise our communities. We are all kin folk. Some single, some married, some widowed, some divorced. We celebrate each other. We thank God that in any configuration, we are all kin folk who strengthen each other, and we are all wonderfully and marvelously made in the image of God and valued equally by God.

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: The face of a person with anxiety and one free from anxiety; one freely doing the Lord’s work; one gladly serving their family; the look on the countenance of persons who are overwhelmed by family and church work; and the faces of families of all types around a table sharing a meal and conversation.

### **III. Additional Material for the Sermonic Moment**

#### **Quotations**

Sometimes you struggle so hard to feed your family one way, you forget to feed them the other way, with spiritual nourishment. Everybody needs that.

--James Brown

If we lose love and self respect for each other, this is how we finally die.

--Maya Angelou

For every one of us that succeeds, it’s because there’s somebody there to show you the way out. The light doesn’t always necessarily have to be in your family; for me it was teachers and school.

--Oprah Winfrey

Friends are relatives you make for yourself.

-- Eustache Deschamps

The bond that links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other's life. Rarely do all members of one family grow up under the same roof.

--Richard Bach

### **Websites**

Purposeful Singleness. Online location: [www.singleness.org](http://www.singleness.org) accessed 5 August 2008  
"Keeping the Family Tree Intact Through Kinship Care." Online location: Adoption.com  
<http://library.adoption.com/Relative-Adoption/Keeping-the-Family-Tree-Intact-Through-Kinship-Care/article/34/1.html> accessed 5 August 2008

See [Child Welfare Information Gateway](http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/types/families/kinship.cfm) for information on the adoption by someone related to the child by family ties or prior relationship. Online location:  
<http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/types/families/kinship.cfm> accessed 5 August 2008

"Kinship Care." [National Association of Black Social Workers](http://nabsw.org/mserver/KinshipCare.aspx). Online location:  
<http://nabsw.org/mserver/KinshipCare.aspx> accessed 5 August 2008

### **Film/DVD**

Wiley, Andrea, Marilyn Beaubien, Danita Patterson, Anna Fuson, Joan Van Horn, Desiree Jellerette, Cynthia Hale, Michelle McKinney Hammond, Sherri Shepherd, and Kenneth C. Ulmer. [Soul Mate a Film](#). United States: Clean Heart Production, 2008.

### **Notes**

1. Franklin, John Hope. [From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans](#). 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1980. p. 20.
2. Johnson, Leonor Boulton and Robert Staples. [Black Families at the Crossroads: Challenges and Prospects](#). Rev. ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005. p. 245.
3. Tucker, M. Belinda, and Angela D. James. "New Families, New Functions: Postmodern African American Families in Context." [African American Family Life: Ecological and Cultural Diversity](#). Duke series in child development and public policy. Ed. Vonnie C. McLoyd, Nancy E. Hill, and Kenneth A. Dodge. New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2005. p. 91.
4. Griffin, Horace L. [Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbian and Gays in Black Churches](#). Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006. pp. 111-116.
5. Yancey, Philip, and Tim Stafford. [The Student Bible](#). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1996. p. 1182.