



FAMILY ENRICHMENT/KINSHIP SUNDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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Lection - Joshua 24:14-18 (NRSV)

I. Introduction

Much has been written about the African American Church and the African American family. Many over the age of fifty will remember the requirement and obligation to go to church and the meaning of family rituals and gatherings. The nexus is strong and clear from a historical, cultural, and religious standpoint. Some would argue that in recent years the strength of the family and church has waned; that is not true. Who we are and how we are shaped have come from the intertwining of these two institutions and these institutions must continue to intertwine

for the ability of the African American household to be strong and stay strong. Kinship Sunday provides families some of the tools to become stronger through a renewed and sustained relationship with God.

II. The Role of the Family

John H. Scanzoni, in The Black Family in Modern Society, articulates that it is in the family that *who we are* is established (personality, identity and ability to respond to a larger group).¹ It is also where our basic values and norms are formed. Those values include hard work, familial sharing, unconditional love, accountability, discipline and spirituality.

Robert Hill states in The Strengths of Black Families that we evidence five major strengths: “strong kinship bonds; strong work orientation; adaptability of family roles; strong achievement orientation and strong religious orientation.”² Both authors proffer that these common values existed before slavery having their genesis in our African heritage.

In her essay “Interpreting the African Heritage in Afro-American Family Organization,” Niara Sudarkasa states that in order to fully comprehend the complexity of our family’s structure and culture, we must understand how our African roots affect who we are even now.³ She states that two principles/concepts blend in our cultural personality: “consanguinity and affinity.” Consanguinity refers to the kinship that is commonly assumed to be biologically based and rooted in blood ties. Affinity, however, is kinship created by law and rooted “in law.” Families grow through birth and the children are expected and trained to participate in the family structure. While law can terminate the relationship, blood ties are critical and difficult to break. In affinity, marriage creates a certain relationship, need and communal trust. When one enters the family, there must be commitment to the family structure in business, socialization, child rearing and spiritual development. One is now part of a family unit that demands loyalty and support. Whether by blood ties or marriage, the family established beliefs, norms and policed themselves when these norms were broken. Kinship and faith in God were the two critical components that held everything together.

III. Personal Remembrances

Some of my earliest remembrances of “family” were Sunday and holiday gatherings. We sat around a table with a lot of extended family as children listened. There was laughter, storytelling, ceremonial participation and lots of food. Our “family” always had people present whom I did not know and persons to whom I was not related. Uncles, aunts, and other so-called “relatives” attended every gathering and were a part of our community.

This community taught us much. Every subject was fair game, literally every subject was discussed with a level of love and acceptance. We learned much about life, family, business, community, social justice issues and the latest gossip whenever we could sneak a listen to “grown people’s business.” We also learned how families argue and reconciled, because by the evening’s end, peace abounded or appeared to abound. We were adults before we knew differently that this did not always happen the way we thought.

People were welcomed to drop by, give advice, chastise the children and, if necessary, stay in the home. My family and those around me were never the “us four and no more.” The strength of the family was the family itself, its joys, and sorrows. Our own ritualing was created within the family with a time for remembrance and celebration. Children were to speak when asked and questioning by adults was expected. On Thanksgiving Day, we gave thanks; on Christmas Day, had a gift for Jesus (by giving to others); and for Commencement events, we had to state what we wanted to be when we grew up. Lack of response was unacceptable, and inappropriate grammar was not tolerated. Everyone was expected to participate and to work in some form for the success of each event. From setting the table, making the punch or cleaning up, everyone had a job and kids could not disrespect elders for any reason. Family participation is the essence of the song “Family” in the movie Dreamgirls; “It’s more than you. It’s more than me. No matter what we are, we are a family... Whatever dreams we have are for the family.”⁴

Central to our gatherings was an abiding faith in God. Prayer was more than perfunctory; it was vital. We were taught that without God we could not make it. Without God, we would not be able to celebrate. Without God, the family was not strong. Depending on the specific event, prayer and biblical references were given. The children read the scripture or a poem (often one written by Paul Laurence Dunbar) and we had to go to church to complete the celebration in worship.

Replicating family values was taught by observation and daily instructional enforcement. We knew God was watching what we said and did; “sitting high and writing all the time.” Principles of fear, respect, discipline, community and unity were taught without negotiation. Everyone was responsible to the family, accountable for its success and heeded the wisdom of the elders of the community. A call to meet (a family meeting) was in fact a call to accountability which was always necessary to continue to strengthen the family.

Joshua called the people to meet to re-enforce the power of God, tradition and the strength of the family. This call was essential if they would survive and thrive the myriad attacks (internal and external). Gathering the people begins an open discussion that is to move us to action. In these discussions, we are reminded of the presence of God throughout history and the strength of prayer and faith. The recalling of our stories, global and personal, enables continuity, and application. Joshua needed to restore the sovereignty of God through the gathering of the people in a time of reflection and transition.

Much is experienced through the collective gathering. With diverse family structures, the Joshuas of our community must give Godly direction and guidance. People who know their history can apply its lessons and they have a different level of pride and self respect. When God through the church is added to such gatherings three life changing principles are taught: how to live, how to learn, and how to lead.⁵

Some of our families are not living a life decreed by God, although a large segment would state they believe in God. Some do not, because the church has been less welcoming to those who may not fit some church’s narrow definition of what constitutes family. Others have not learned to live with the myriad of life’s problems and have not found churches that provide tools for living. From job needs to counseling, the family requires more than a Sunday morning event.

With 50% percent of first marriages, 67% of second and 74% of third marriages ending in divorce, the family is clearly in need of help.⁶ With USA Today reporting that, “The newest and most detailed data on teen birth rates shows significant increases in 26 states...”⁷ With child abuse, spousal abuse and sexual assault plaguing our society, it is clear that we are in crisis and the Church has an obligation to teach families how to live in spite of sexism, classism, economic crisis, racism and so much more. People need to be taught how to live their best lives regardless of the circumstances and how to change the circumstances.

The call to family gathering embraces the individuality of each family member and his or her collective responsibility to the whole by the weekly, if not daily, sharing of school activities, work joys and sorrows, global concerns, and personal dreams and aspirations. This ability to communicate must not be overlooked. If schedules do not permit a daily gathering, certainly there must be a weekly time of gathering that is made a priority as it will strengthen the worth of each individual in the family and enhance the presence of God in the lives of all family members. When the family is unable to gather together on a regular basis and/or lacks the skills to do so, the Church is the place for support in teaching families how to live.

One such group, called The Gathering, exists at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Bloomington, Indiana where Reverend Patricia A. Efiom is the pastor.⁸ The church is a diverse blend of persons of various races, incomes, cultures, professions, single heads of households, grandparents and other kin as primary providers; what is most often referred to as the traditional family, and those who are single without children. The multipurpose event starts with a meal replicating a family gathering. By rotation, families provide the meal which is paid for by the church. All members of the families participate in some way, from cooking the healthy meals, setting up or cleaning up. There is a weekly check-in with people bringing family updates, grades, promotions, reports of illness, etc., and often a particular topic is discussed during the meal time including organized lectures or freer discussions. All families of the church are encouraged to participate and most do. Additionally, as part of this gathering, this church is teaching culinary and entrepreneurial skills to those who are unemployed for whatever reason including ex-offenders. After the formal mealtime, children, youth and parents (engage in age appropriate) biblical study called The Journey where the Bible is made relevant to the issues at hand. Where needed, homework help is provided. The Gathering teaches that living is a lifelong learning process and the core is God. God is pulled out of the pages of history and becomes a very real presence in the lives of those who gather.

Ultimately, our households must develop leaders. The Gathering and other similar groups teach personal and corporate leadership by having attendees watch other leaders. When the household witnesses personal faith, integrity and responsibility to God, and community; the family is stronger and so is the wider community.

Family and Kinship Sunday recognizes that strength and is a wonderful opportunity for the call to meet. It makes clear that above all that we do, the house that makes the decision to serve the Lord is the key to our strength.

IV. Audio Visual Aid

The movie Waterproof: This is a drama that deals with unresolved family secrets which begin to diminish when the family begins their personal quest back to God. When showing this film at your church, make sure that there is a film guide who can put in context the violence and stereotyping at the beginning of the film so that viewers are able to get to the moments of redemption weaved throughout the film. The film links several family themes which will evoke discussions.⁹

V. A Monologue, A Song, and Prose

A monologue follows that can be used to teach persons how some family approaches have not changed from generation to generation. Pastors and leaders would be encouraged to use parts of this as a sermon introduction or to make points about discipline and respect in our families.

What Our Parents Said

“Ok, let’s get this straight. I am the momma/daddy, you the child,
Eat everything on your plate because there are starving children in China/Africa, etc.
Boy/girl, I will knock you in the middle of next week.
I don’t need a dishwasher, I got one.
A hard head makes for a soft behind.
Before I let the police kill you, I will kill you myself.
Girl/boy put on some Vaseline, your legs are ashy.
I’ll give you your opinion when I am ready for it.
Was I talking to you? This is a grown folk’s conversation.
Take that (dirty/torn) underwear off, you never know when a car may hit you.
Boys/girls are like buses if you miss this one, wait a few minutes, and another one will be by soon.
Get out of my chair, you ain’t big enough...and when you are, you will be gone.
Go to the store and bring me back my change.
Who “dey” people? What’s their names, where they live, how you meet them? Their momma/daddy didn’t talk to me.....No, you can’t go.
Let’s get the order right: You finish high school, go to college, get married, get a job, put some money in the bank, then you can think about getting married, having sex, and a baby.
I don’t care if everyone else is doing it, you ain’t doing it.
I brought you in the world, I will take you out.”
In the house we go to church, no discussion. You can do what you want when you leave this house.¹⁰

We’ve Come This Far by Faith

Chorus:

We've come this far by faith. Leaning on the Lord.
Trusting in His Holy word. He never failed me yet.
Oh' Can't Turn Around.
We've come this far by faith

Verse:

Just the other day, I heard a man say. He did not believe in God's word.

But I can truly say, the Lord has made a way.
He's never failed me yet

Chorus.¹¹

I Believe God (A Prose Reading)

People ask me, Isn't it crazy to believe in something you can't see? And people wonder, Why do I still ponder, over an old dream that appears will never be. You see my faith is strong and anchored. My faith cannot be wavered, My faith makes the unknown reality, and one day, if I pray I know my dream will come to be.

I believe God. He is incredible, invincible. He can crumble the impossible. Yes, I believe God. Although my faith sometimes is tested On this shaky road I trod. I, oh I believe God.

When life's storm is harsh and bitter. And my ambition starts to wither. I won't be driven to crumble or complain. You see, doubting God is never the option to consider. I've seen too many miracles; Hidden inside my pain, Oh, now faith is the substance of things hoped for the evidence of things not seen. God works in mysterious ways by faith my miracle and my breakthrough are going to spring forth from my pain. Yes, yes. Oh, yes. I believe God. I believe. I'm a believer. I believe. God can. God will.¹²

VI. Making It a Memorable Learning Moment

With the advent of so many technological advances, Family Enrichment and Kinship Sunday will be a great opportunity for the blending of multiple generations. Elders could be invited tell their stories and the youth tape them with their IPODS, MP4 players and other digital recorders. Elders would be encouraged to bring wash boards, 8 tracks, tape cassettes, 76/33 records, black and white televisions, etc., as signs of their generation. They would also tell what their prayers sounded like, sing or list their songs, and gives the activities of the church in which they participated; what were the main church groups? Elders could be asked: How did God help them through the Great Depression or other crisis? The youth would in turn teach elders how modern technology is now reshaping lives and how they use it to function. Additionally, they would indicate what songs and church activities are meaningful to them as youth. A young adult team could oversee the entire production thus involving at least three generations youth ages 12-19; young adults ages 20-39 and seniors age 65 and older. The taping would begin several Sundays before Family Enrichment and Kinship Sunday to allow for the material to be shown on this Sunday.

Notes

1. Scanzoni, John H. The Black Family in Modern Society. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1977.
2. Hill, Robert B. The Strengths of Black Families. New York, NY: Astoria Press Printing and Binding, 1972.
3. Sudarkasa, Niara. "Interpreting the African Heritage in Afro-American Family Organization." Black Families. Ed. Harriet Pipes McAdoo. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publication, 1981.

4. Eyen, Tom, and Henry D. Krieger. "Dreamgirls: Family Lyrics." 1981
5. AHB & Associates: Principles of Success: anneheningbyfield, managing partner, 2006.
6. See, sample divorce rates at Divorce Rate Org. Online location: www.divorcerate.org accessed 17 January 2010
7. Jayson, Sharon. "Teen Birth Rates up in 26 States." USA Today. 7 January 2009.
8. Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Online location: <http://www.bethelbloom.com> accessed 17 January 2010
9. Waterproof. Dir. Barry Berman. Prod, Craig Finacannon, Frank Capra, and Roland Joffa. Perf. Whitman Mayo, April Grace, and Burt Reynolds. Cloud Ten Pictures, 2000.
10. anneheningbyfield. The Essence of My Existence. Nashville, TN: True Vine Publishing, 2010.
11. Goodson, Albert. We've Come This Far By Faith. Pacific City, OR: Manna Music 1963.
12. Carr, Kurt. "I Believe." Inglewood, CA: Gospocentric Records, 2008.