



GRADUATION SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, June 14, 2009

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Lection - 2 Timothy 2:1-7; 15 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; (v. 2) and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well. (v. 3) Share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. (v. 4) No one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday affairs; the soldier's aim is to please the enlisting officer. (v. 5) And in the case of an athlete, no one is crowned without competing according to the rules. (v. 6) It is the farmer who does the work who ought to have the first share of the crops. (v. 7) Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in all things.

(v. 15) Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Graduation Sunday is a special day to highlight certain educational events or take occasional moments during a worship service to acknowledge the particular educational accomplishments of students in the congregation who have completed degrees in high school, college or at the university Master's and Doctoral (graduate) level. It is important to note, on these auspicious occasions, we set aside a special worship service to acknowledge the educational accomplishments of students (particularly youth) within our churches, but is that enough to change the way in which education is regarded as God's gift to the world? The answer, in a word, is "No!" The general sense on this day should not be that our embrace of educational excellence is "elitist" or "acting white" but, rather, it is a means of utilizing God-given knowledge, expertise, and wisdom in ways that can save our families, our culture, our community, and, ultimately, ourselves. This liturgical moment must see this as the major objective of this most special day.

I. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 2 Timothy 2:1-7; 15

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

During my academic career, probably one of the most rewarding events during the graduation season is the kente cloth blessing ceremony (see “Other Recommendations section”), a tradition that I participated in as a student graduating from college, seminary, and university studies and now one which I facilitate for the African American graduates under my tutelage as a seminary professor. Whether it is before or after commencement services, without fail, I find an old tree to gather the students, their family and friends around to have prayer, song, thanksgiving and words of encouragement and expectation as I, along with other black faculty, inform them of the sacrifices many of their ancestors made (some being lynched from trees not much different than the one under which we stood at that time) so they could have the right to read the “Word of God” for themselves – a word they knew that if *rightly divided* would reveal the truth that their enslavement was sin. In ways large and small, the symbolism of the tree that covered their heads, and the placement of the kente cloth stole around the necks of graduating students, is about more than simply making a unique gift of this woven fabric to African American graduates. It is about creating a link with each other as well as to the promise and perils of our American past, and our larger connection to our African ancestry of linking learning with liberty and loving God.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The text in 2 Timothy illuminates a great concern that, in doing God’s work, we must use a sound approach that unites the labor of head, hand, and heart. As this passage illustrates, a sound education is not simply a process of mimesis (rote memorization and repetition) but rather an engaged process in which we understand, remember, and pass it on as an act of faith. However, there has been considerable reluctance in many circumstances by black women, men, and children to wholeheartedly uplift the nature of education as a pathway to success and personhood to the same heights as sports or entertainment. Just as there is an emphasis in coaching black youth to become excellent athletes and encouraging the modestly talented performer to strive for superstardom, we need to have the same level of passion and commitment for intelligence and wisdom within our community.

According to New Testament scholar, Clarice J. Martin, the author of our passage writes the words in 2:1-7; 15 “like a doting parent who in the last days of life teaches a series of unforgettable ‘life lessons’ to a beloved child.”¹ The author, who has been traditionally identified as “Paul,” urges Timothy, his star pupil and apprentice in ministry, to “be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” Moreover, he urges Timothy to entrust what he has heard from him to faithful people who will, in turn, teach others (v. 1-2). The passage shows a mentor telling his student to emulate the best of what he has seen and learned from his role model. In Timothy’s case, Paul was not speaking merely of his teaching of Timothy but also of those from whom Timothy first learned, his ancestors. The previous chapter highlights that he has been blessed with the gift of his ancestors for it was through the “faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice” that Timothy must rekindle what they had placed in him, not as something that he earned or was unique to him, but was in fact a “gift of God” (1:5-6).

In essence, the “Paul” of 2 Timothy tells Timothy to whom he’s going to pass his mantle to recall, remember and represent the one who has formed him in knowledge and faith by: suffering like a soldier (v. 3-4), being driven like an athlete to reach his goal (v.5), and remaining

expectant like a farmer who is confident that hard labor will result in a good harvest (v. 6). The teacher tells the student, in essence, that graduation is not only learning these lessons but seeking God, the supreme teacher, to provide greater understanding in how these lessons should be carried into the world (application). He encourages him to be sure to pass the most important test, gain the greatest reward, and receive the highest honor, which is to be “approved,” which is to be given the highest endorsement by God (v. 7). *And how does one attain the degree of approval?* By recalling what’s been taught, remembering those who have forsaken much for your opportunity, representing the heritage and legacy of one who is unashamed of loving God with one’s soul and mind in the pursuit of truth (v. 15).

This text teaches us that intellectual growth is tied to spiritual growth and carrying forth that which has been instilled within us from the best of our heritage. Especially for the black church, learning is not an option. As James Cone states, “profound soul-searching and vigorous intellectual reflection are necessary if we are to continue to grow in an understanding of our faith and of our calling,” no matter what our professional interests may be.²

There is alive within us a tradition, as we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses (Jesus Christ, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglas, Septima Clark, Martin Luther King, Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, to name a few), a burning desire to find the truth that will set us free – to redeem the lives that hung from southern trees and reclaim the genius and majesty of those African ancestors whose resourceful genius and royalty shone as bright and strong as the kente stoles that adorn the necks of black graduates across the country where the shackles of racist ignorance threatened to abolish and forever enslave our race. And no matter the sanction or sacrifice, we must rekindle within us the lifelong commitment to learning, and believing like our ancestors that with learning comes liberty. We must be like Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey, who learned the word of God for themselves so they could lead a revolution of black Christians in proclaiming that the same God who freed the children of Israel would free enslaved African Americans. We must be like Thurgood Marshall and W. E. B. DuBois, who pursued educational excellence as both a vehicle and vindication of God’s liberating power. We must be like Mary McCleod Bethune and Barbara Jordan, who demonstrated that the truly wise black woman doesn’t have to be hemmed in or held down by the constraints of either racism or sexism in order to succeed. We must be like Jesus who, even as a young lad, studied at the feet of the rabbis and mesmerized his own teachers with pressing questions that upset the order of his society even as it laid the foundation for transforming the world and our very souls.

We must now reclaim and rekindle the power of God possessed by these ancestral heroes of faith, the power that “compelled them to fight for justice and to ask critical and relevant questions about the world they lived in. God’s power was the something within each of them that forced them to answer their call.... The same spirit empowered these faithful servants to love God with their hearts, minds, and souls. We are called to follow their lead.”³

Celebration

We know that, as Rev. White says in our cultural resource unit for today, A is for Afro-American and F is for fool. We are too smart to let the educational foundation laid by our ancestors gather dust. We will love the Lord our God with our entire being, even our minds. We have some miles

to travel and promises to keep, before we enter our last sleep. Our ancestors did not open the doors of education for us in vain. We promise to keep building on their solid foundation. We promise to make them proud. We promise to walk like, talk like, and live like the educated and talented people of God who we are.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details for this passage include:

Sounds: Words of wisdom, stories of ancestors who strived to learn and gain an education (v. 1-3); graduation music playing; and

Sights: Students listening intently to their teacher (v. 1-2); a soldier tirelessly standing vigilant, alert, and unfettered on the battlefield (v. 3-4); an athlete, studying the strategy of his/her next play (v.5); a farmer patiently tilling the ground with an anticipating smile of the harvest that will be reaped; a graduate, draped in a brilliant kente stole with a bible held to their heart and a diploma in hand, surrounded by his family and mentors.

IV. Other Recommendations (Words to be read by the Pastor or Chair of the Christian Education Department)

Graduation Kente Cloth Blessing Ceremony

Today, kente cloth is recognized worldwide as a quintessentially African cloth, with its bright colors and bold patterns that is appealing to African and Western eyes alike. Kente originates from Ghana, West Africa where we, as a people, were discovered, captured, and enslaved. Traditionally woven by men and dyed by women, the most skilled and talented members of the village were assigned the role of holding, literally holding, together the fabric of the community. In our ancestral homeland, kente cloth appears in a variety of ceremonies and rituals ranging from funerals, marriages and initiation rites to harvest blessings and gifts. It is also used in shrines and sanctuaries to pay homage to the Creator God. In these ways, the kente cloth is an integral part of many aspects of both daily and ritual life.

Most importantly, the very creative process that brings the kente cloth into existence is a mark of creativity and excellence in transforming a tantalizing idea into a tangible item. Much like its ideal function in traditional West African society and culture, the presentation of kente stoles to black students as brothers and sisters who have helped hold together the fabric of our black community at institutions of higher learning. Just like this precious cloth, our brothers and sisters commit themselves wholeheartedly to their academic studies not only for their own fame and glory but also to be a blessing to the entire community. In living up to his or her potential, each successful graduate has exhibited genius, discipline, integrity, beauty, and dignity that is a clear indication that he or she have heeded the call of a lifelong sense of purpose established and set in motion by a God who promises us freedom beyond enslavement. Like this cloth that reflects the matriarchal-based nature of the Asante society, every student who receives the stole stands on their ancestors' shoulders in order to claim a prize for which they have sacrificed much and inherited much. And, much like their ancestors before them, their success will be known through the succession of us who seek to follow the road and press to the mark of a higher calling.

So, by gathering as a circle of students, educators, friends, loved ones, and community members during a kente blessing ceremony, we have the opportunity to create a modern-day version of the hush harbor that allowed our enslaved forefathers and foremothers to not only survive but thrive in even the harshest realities of our world. Both the precious cloth and the reclamation of sacred place illustrate the important role of leadership and the need to exercise it appropriately. Therefore, standing in the presence of each other and with the blessing of our ancestors, our community, your family, and your good name, we pray blessings over all of those who are graduating with the power of the Lord our God, Christ our Savior, and the Holy Spirit our Comforter to give them (and ourselves) the push needed to go out into the world and, in the words of theologian Howard Thurman, “to go your own way, do your own thing, and live in such a way that God, nor your people, will ever be ashamed for having made you.”

Notes

1. Martin, Clarice J. “1-2 Timothy, Titus.” True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary. Brian K. Ed. Blount, et al., Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007. p. 430.
2. Cone, James H. “Loving God with Our Heart, Soul, and Mind.” Blow the Trumpet in Zion!: Global Vision and Action for the 21st-Century Black Church. Iva E. Carruthers, Ed. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005. p.59.
3. Ibid., p. 64.