



## **MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT SUNDAY**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, March 21, 2010**

**Forrest Elliott Harris, Sr., Guest Lectionary Commentator**

President, American Baptist College, (Lectionary Collaborative Partner), Nashville, TN  
and Director, Kelly Miller Smith Institute on Black Church Studies, Vanderbilt Divinity  
School (Lectionary Collaborative Partner), Nashville, TN

**Lection – Hebrews 13:4** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v.4) Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.

*Infidelity is a moral decision to meet emotional, psychological and sexual needs outside of marriage and neglects the sufficiency of God's gift to fulfill our deepest needs and longings.*

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

For several decades, a host of social analysts and religious leaders have pointed to a crisis of “unprecedented magnitude,” one that goes to the very heart of the survival of the black family. The rate of marriage is falling in the black community. Why? The Patrick Moynihan report of 40 years ago points to a host of external and internal social problems that threatened the future of the black family which today have become an alarming reality.<sup>1</sup>

Although the debates continue about the exact components of the ominous cycle of economic and social erosion impacting black family life and the external and internal problems of black marriages, the fact is that while the history of North American slavery had no regard for the black family, and that systemic racism and structural discrimination continue as negative social factors upon black life, these are not the only factors negatively impacting the flourishing of marriage among black people.

While the legacy of social oppression still impacts the sustainability of black marriage in the twenty-first century, the internal problems that prevent the formation of healthy black families are the deep and wide problems associated with the social antecedents of various forms of distrust, emotional, psychological, and sexual infidelity within marriages. The religious and ethical implications of black sexuality (the basic dimension of our self-understanding and way of being in the world as black male and female persons), has been traumatically distorted into a form a black sexism that feeds acts of infidelity and sexual abuse and violence. The search for outside explanations for the internal problems of marriages in the black community will not provide sufficient responses to the need for introspective examination of why the social antecedents of marital infidelity continue to cause high rates of black fatherless households and divorce in the nation.

When Patrick Moynihan issued his controversial report regarding the problems of the black family in the late 1960s, roughly a quarter of black babies were born out of wedlock, which, during that period, was believed to be caused largely by low incomes, inadequate housing and high level school drop-out rates. Today, the increased proportion of black babies born out of wedlock coupled with the increasing rates of HIV/AIDS infections among black men and women, has made the situation bad for blacks regardless of their economic class. This suggests, among other things, that black male and female relationships exist in a chaotic maze of unhealthy understandings about sex, sexuality and sexual practices.

Some religious ethicists agree that distrust about sexual relations has driven a wedge between black women and black men. Michelle Wallace states, “For perhaps the last fifty years there has been a growing distrust, even hatred between black men and black women. It has been nursed along, not only by racism, but by an almost deliberate ignorance on the part of blacks about the sexual politics of their experience in this country.”<sup>2</sup> What we have now is an over-sexualized culture whose worst aspects are reinforced by distrust and sexual infidelity that violates marriage relationships.

Because of this basic distrust, or as Stacy Floyd Thomas puts it, “the inability of black men to completely love black women and black women being unable to fully respect black men,” the beauty of black sexuality, which includes our sex-role understandings, our affection orientations, physiological arousal and genital activity, and our capacity for sensuousness has become debilitated.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, the black church is being cited by some scholars as a destabilizing rather than a liberating factor in the life of the black family, particularly as it relates to black sexuality and marital fidelity. The black church has been virtually silent (through its message and ministry) about black sexuality, the increasing high rates of HIV/AIDS cases and has essentially abandoned its once strong and stern sanctions against extra-marital sex and out of wedlock childbirth. Pastors know the experience of heartbreak and pain when marital infidelity happens in their own lives and to members of their congregations. The black family loses moral strength each time it occurs. The issues associated with black sexuality and marital infidelity are old social problems that have escalated and now critically threaten the stability of the black family. The interrelated realities of black sexuality and spirituality represent ethical challenges that contemporary black churches must address.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Hebrews 13:4**

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

The influence of marriage remains a highly respected cultural, covenantal and spiritual reality in the black community. There are many models of lasting covenants of love and faithfulness that inspire others to enter the bonds of institutional marriage. The witness of my parent’s marriage of over sixty-two years is but one example. Such marriages are foundations of strength and fidelity that bless generations of children and grandchildren. My eight siblings and I were told by our parents of their love story of romance and survival against great social odds. Separated for a time due to my father’s deployment in World War II, and upon returning of my father from the military, my parents battled against social and economic rejections in a segregated Southern culture. Yet, my parents nurtured us with strong communal values of love, respect and spiritual dignity emanating from the black church. No doubt my parents endured and overcame problems that worked to destroy their bond of love for each other and our family. Their covenant of love and commitment to family gave them strength to pass on to their children the values of the marriage bond for building strong families. Fidelity is a value and a virtue we saw lived out in our home.

Fidelity does not develop without honesty, commitment, introspection, struggle, courage to face weaknesses and failures, and open communication about one’s emotional needs and sexual desires. I know this to be true in my own marriage. The anchoring of my own marriage comes from emulating the virtue of marital fidelity seen in my parents’ covenant bond of marriage. Through successes and failures, struggles and sacrifices, the bliss and joy of my own marriage has endured over thirty seven years.

Ironically, in my family, there are also experiences of painful divorces and stories of unhealthy trauma in marital relationships caused by various forms of emotional, psychological and sexual infidelity within marriage. Despite these experiences, new generations of marriages are occurring among our children. My mother (eighty-three years old) and father (eighty-five years old) were blessed to witness the most recent weddings in my family. Their model of marital love, commitment, and dignity are sustainable qualities and values the black church and community must pass on to future generations. The beauty and gift of sex, the black body and its connection to spirituality were never openly discussed in our home or in the black church of my childhood. But, the holistic sacred shelter of church and family transmitted the spiritual values that marriage and sexual love were holy and sacred gifts of God.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary Hebrews 13:4**

Other than at Christian weddings, the couplet verse of Hebrews 13:4 is infrequently used in black churches as a sermon text. Perhaps its infrequent use for preaching is because among the several epistolary lessons in Hebrews chapter 13, the focus of verse 4 is about honorable sexuality in marriage, and an admonition against sexual lust and unhealthy sexual relations. These are topics that have had legendary silence in the black churches.

The reason for this legendary silence is likely due to “the myth that black sexuality is a taboo” subject and the puritanical shame or guilt that many have come to associate with sexual lust and our everyday experiences of erotic orientations and attractions to others.

A careful diagnosis of the sickness of marital infidelity in the black community shows the development of a disembodied spirituality of sexuality that separates black love from spirituality. Rituals of celebration of black marriage and love should occur in the black church often and not just during the wedding ceremony to help people overcome and counteract this unfortunate dualism.

Hebrews 13:4 joins a host of scriptural wisdom (Acts 15:26-29; I Corinthians 5:9-11; Ephesians 5:3, 5; 1 Timothy 1:10), that bring the issues of sex, fornication and adultery out in the open for public God-talk. Among the reasons that discussion of sexuality persist in the black church as “taboo” is because, as Kelly Brown Douglass argues, “racist stereotypes of black sexuality” and “cultural attacks on black sexuality” render the black church silent on sexual issues.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this has led to a separation of black sexuality from black spirituality in the mind of many black folk and made them vulnerable to accept misinterpretations about sexual behavior that fosters distrust and even sexual repression and oppressive sexual abuse between black men and black women.

The “undefiled bed in marriage” is an expression pointing to the integrity of marriage. Our text indicates sexuality as an honorable expression in marriage as God’s gift to us. The perspective of this text is that to defile the marriage bed is to engage in fornication and adultery, two words that together cover all sexual activity outside of marriage. In saying that the marriage relationship should be “undefiled,” verse 4 brings marriage into

the circle of sanctification essential to worship that is acceptable to God (Hebrews 12:28).<sup>5</sup> In creating the marriage relationship, God in essence created a new life; “one flesh” the merger of two in unity without destroying individuality. Thus, this new creation by God should be honored in the same way that God honors all that God creates.

This scriptural admonition reminds us that “the black church, among being much else, is a sexual community.” People meet and marry in the black church. Private conversations go on about sex practices, sexual infidelity and divorce occur among church members. The black church has incorporated a host of sexual understandings – for good or ill - into its language, images, singing, preaching, worship and leadership patterns, and into its assumptions about morality and sexual practices.

Toinette M. Eugene, a Christian social ethicist, states that there is a fundamental interrelatedness between sexuality and spirituality in the Bible. The tendency of many black folk who interpret scriptural passages pertaining to marriage is to opt for a spirituality which is unrelated to the black body or they yield to the temptation to become too heavily fixated at the level of physical, genital, and material expressions of black love which keeps them off balance and unconnected in religiously real ways regarding marriage. Thus, the relationship between black women and black men in the black church and community still struggles to reveal the Imago Dei of Hebrews 13:4. Also, Genesis 1:27 says, “So God created humanity in God’s own image... male and female God created them” (Genesis 1:27).<sup>6</sup>

The writer of Hebrews 13:4 has a high view of human sexuality. What this scripture recognizes about marriage is that marital relationships are at the heart of what it means to be created “in the image of God,” and that the relationship between male and female is the human expression of our relationship with God. In other words, our sexuality, our capacity to love and be loved, is intimately related to our creation in the image of God. Erotic sexual experience is an important part of human sexuality, but the point of this text is that human sexuality an honorable gift from God, is a far more life affirming and community building reality than merely coitus outside of marriage. This biblical admonition about sex and marriage fosters a quality of relationship of wholeness between God, partners in marriage and the faith community, and it places sex in marriage as an honorable covenant of love in both the family and household of faith.

## **Celebration**

Because the black church has access, and is often indeed the presiding agent in the process of sexual socialization, it has a potentially unlimited opportunity to restore the ancient covenant of Scripture and tradition which upholds the beauty of black love in its most profound sense. Whenever black love in marriage is discouraged or disparaged by infidelity, the black church has an unparalleled option to model the gospel values of love and unconditional acceptance that invite forgiveness and compassion to those who seek healing and hope in their relationships. Salvation history reveals that the God we meet in Jesus is on the side of black love and marriage!

**Sights and Sounds:** Imagine and hear the cries of the ancients as families were separated and lovers were denied conjugal intimacy in homes of love and safety. Now recall the sounds of music, the exchange of the wedding vows, and the cheers of the audience when you witnessed the marriage ceremony of a couple as they proceeded out of the sanctuary or wedding hall as “one flesh.” Recalling these sounds should remind us that the ancient and contemporary sounds of black love have crossed deep chasms of pain and pathos, joy and ecstasy.

**Tastes:** Last year my wife and I traveled to Prague (the largest city in the Czech Republic). One evening in the open air of a beautiful sunset, we ate a meal together. While eating my wife pinched off a small piece of the delicacy she was eating and placed it into my mouth for sampling. The intimacy of that moment took me back to our wedding day when we fed each other a piece of the wedding cake. At that moment, I was again grasped and arrested by the deep dimensions I have come to know of my wife’s love. The faithfulness of such love should be intimately nurtured and celebrated often as a gift of God.

### **III. Sermonic Illustration**

Black love in marriage is a beautiful gift from God. During the celebration of my nephew’s recent wedding, tears of joy flowed freely from him and his mother while they danced to music celebrating black love. His mother, having experienced a painful divorce twenty something years ago, found healing resources through the church and family that enabled her to nurture trust and love in the family. The groom and his mother finished their dance; the groom’s grandmother was summoned to the dance floor. While they danced, an overwhelming joy enveloped onlookers with the joy of knowing that the tradition of marriage and covenantal love continue to be part of our family legacy.

### **IV. Sermonic Notes and Resources**

- See the website on Sexuality and the Black Church, Webinar Series on Sexuality and Ministry in the Black Church Context, Dr. Deborah F. Mullen, Leaders; Mr. Michal Elam, Moderator. Google “Sexuality and the Black Church” for the pdf file.
- How we treat sex is intimately related to how we acknowledge our relationship to God and others.

### **Notes**

1. Rainwater, Lee, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and William Lowndes Yancey. “The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy.” A Trans-action social science and public policy report, including the full text of the Negro family, the case for national action by Daniel Patrick Moynihan. [Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor.]. Cambridge, MA., London, UK: M.I.T. Press, 1968.
2. Wallace, Michelle. Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman. New York, NY: Dial Press, 1979. p. 13.

3. Eugene, Toinette M. "While Love is Unfashionable: Ethical Implications of Black Spirituality." Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy. Eds. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall. New York, NY: Routledge, 1996. pp. 106, 110.
4. Douglass, Kelly Brown. Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999.
5. Craddock, Fred B., Luke Timothy Johnson, David L. Bartlett, Duane F. Watson, C. Clifton Black, and Christopher C. Rowland. The New Interpreter's Bible. The Letter to the Hebrews, the Letter of James, the First and Second Letters of Peter, the First, Second, and Third Letters of John, the Letter of Jude, the Book of Revelation. Volume XII. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998. p. 163.
6. Eugene, Toinette, M. "While Love is Unfashionable: Ethical Implications of Black Spirituality." Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy.