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# Memory, Identity, and Hope: Reflections for American Baptist Ecclesiology in the 21st Century

*"...memory...can provide hope in the midst of degradation and strength to continue to put one foot in front of the other in movements for justice."*

EMILIE M. TOWNES

To explore memory, identity and hope within the context of American Baptist ecclesiology is an expansive terrain. I choose to look at the past, present, and future in my paper—leaning into my strengths as a Christian social ethicist who uses a womanist framework to do so. I focus on these areas because I want to urge us to not let this be a footnote in the life of who we are as American Baptists, but that we resume a much needed theological conversations in the context of who we are that can help our churches and our denomination think deeply and broadly about the "why?" of our discipleship and the "how?" of our mission in a world that is often chaotic. For in times of chaos, we often look for safety and comfort and assurance—or we think that is what we are doing—rather than to step out as pilgrims on a journey that must be wrapped in the bold strokes of faith and perhaps not at all sure about where we will end up. But our faith and God's grace *will* hold us (even when our courage wanes) if we dare to tackle large issues, hard issues, arresting issues. For this, I argue, is the way of Jesus and the hope of salvation.

So I begin with memory. I do so using the work of the U.S.-born Black writer, James Baldwin as my guide. I then move to identity and use a famous breakfast food face, Aunt Jemima, to help us steer those waters,

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not as memory but as counter-memory. Finally, I end with hope. With hope, I begin with a memory about heaven in my childhood and turn to a soliloquy from the movie, *Daughters of the Dust,* a film about the upcoming migration of a South Carolina Sea Island Gullah family from the island to New York City at the turn of the twentieth century.

Let us begin.

## MEMORY

A quotation from the writings of James Baldwin:

> ...what it means to be a Negro in America can perhaps be suggested by an examination of the myths we perpetuate about him.
>
> Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom are dead, their places taken by a group of amazingly well-adjusted young men and women, almost as dark, but ferociously literate, well-dressed and scrubbed, who are never laughed at, who are not likely ever to set foot in a cotton or tobacco field or in any but the most modern of kitchens. There are others who remain, in our odd idiom, "underprivileged;" some are bitter and these come to grief; some are unhappy, but, continually presented with the evidence of a better day soon to come, are speedily becoming less so. Most of them care nothing whatever about race. They want only their proper place in the sun and the right to be left alone, like any other citizen of the republic. We may all breathe more easily. Before, however, our joy at the demise of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom approaches the indecent, we had better ask whence they sprang, how they lived? Into what limbo have they vanished?[1]

In the essay where this quotation was taken, "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin explores Richard Wright's classic tragic novel, *Native Son.* Baldwin is working fiercely to construct what it means to be a Negro in America. For Baldwin, this is visceral. He is tired of Black folk being treated as mere social agendas rather than as flesh and blood. He notes that dehumanization is never a one way street; that the loss of identity–be it stolen, borrowed, denied, or annihilated–has consequences far beyond those who are the immediate victims; that our crimes against ourselves echo and haunt and damn and eviscerate us.

And it is not enough–not in 1955, not in 2011–to think that we can leave our memories checked at some dismal door of gerrymandered

elections or xenophobic nationalism or sycophantic equalities or ill-prepared disaster plans that make us terrorists of our own people. The smell of blood and dirt and catastrophe are ripe within our nostrils if we remember. If we allow memory and the power of memory to weave other stories of the American Dream. Not different, not separate, not oppositional, not subversive–simply other stories. But *not* the other as object for too many Derridas or Foucaults or Spivaks but the folks who are really just 'round the corner, but we act as if we do not know them because this is what we have been trained to do as "natural."

Quite frankly, I'm tired of being called "the Other." I don't find it liberatory or transformative. What I *am* finding, in postmodern America, is that it often becomes an excuse to remain ignorant and arrogant about our illiteracy of other peoples: their thoughts, their religions, their politics, their values, their social structures, their moral landscapes—their is-ness. We practice this highly suspect brand of progressivism as import and export when we do so and what remains "natural" is hegemony. It's just prettified with neat word games and mental maneuvers because far too often, all that we really achieve with many postmodern categories is producing constructs like "center" and "periphery" that reveal our vexing fixation on making a complex world simplistic and the messiness of diversity neat and pristine when it is really a mash-pit of realities.

So we remain the same people who want to do justice, but demand safety. Who want to be prophetic, but fret over status and position. So I turn to something I've found to be a powerful element in the gospel and in our ecclesiology–the power of memory. True, memory can fail and fail in spectacularly devastating ways. It can leave blanks and fill blanks with mistakes. It can be a collaborator with forces that only know suppression and denial of life and wholeness.

*But,* memory can also succeed in deep and profound ways. It can provide hope in the midst of degradation and strength to continue to put one foot in front of the other in movements for justice. So perhaps it may be best to think of memory as a kind of counter-history. One that challenges the false generalizations and gross stereotypes often found in what passes for "history" in our social worlds and religious spaces. For memories can disrupt our status quo because they do not rest solely or wholly on objectivity or facts. They materialize from emotions and sight and sounds and touch and smell. They come from the deepest part of who we are. They are dynamic and spark new configurations of meaning. And if used well, they keep us on the potter's wheel so that we never rest too comfortably with knowledge that is, at best, only partial and never ultimately complete. And memories can vanish into limbo (into absolute neglect, into oblivion) only to filter back into our lives as

shame or anger or pride or righteousness.

You see, the American story *can* be told another way, such that the voices and lives of those who, traditionally and historically, have been left out are now heard with clarity and precision. These voices can then be included into our conversations—not as additives—but as resources and co-determiners of actions and strategies—*and the moral agents they are.* These stories are not there in response to crass goals-driven moves, but ones that acknowledge the intimate humanity of our plurality and works with as much precision as possible to name its textures.

I invite you, then, to journey with me on this gospel journey–a journey of pain, a journey of promise, a journey of hope.

## IDENTITY

I use the caricature of Aunt Jemima as a counter-memory to try to illustrate what I have raised thus far. Counter-memory is a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. It starts with the particular and the specific and then builds outward toward a total story. Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden stories excluded from dominant narratives and forces us to revise existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past.

We have all seen her–Aunt Jemima's smiling face on pancake mix. But most of us do not know her origins. She began when a White man decided that he could be Black and a woman, so he dressed in drag, put on blackface, and became a part of the minstrel tradition of the 1800s and 1900s in the United States.

In the beginning, she was a real, slender mulatta ex-slave whose face was put on bags of self-rising pancake flour. As the advertising campaign proved popular, she entertained the crowds at the 1893 World's Fair with *inoffensive* tales of slavery told in dialect (read irony, read horror, read annihilation).

Aunt Jemima–she came to life from the pens of advertising copy editors and illustrators as a large, dark Black woman to "grace" the pages of ladies' magazines; while imitation Aunt Jemimas toured county fairs and grocery stores and club bake offs to sell the pancake dough of a White man who understood that some images sell and some images sell better than others. And these Jemimas made her "story" up—creating legends about her—or was it about themselves? Part of Aunt Jemima's appeal is that she was the turbo-prototype of an idealized, if not stylized ante- and postbellum South: mythical Aunt Jemima who revived hundreds of (White) southern soldiers with her pancakes. Mythical Aunt Jemima who had been a slave on Colonel Higbee's plantation down on the Mississippi River. Mythical Aunt Jemima who was freed

after the Civil War and who gave up her flapjack recipe to a northern milling representative. *Now, this should have raised our collective eyebrows to think that a Black woman who knows how to cook would give up all of her recipes to anyone.*

Many in my generation grew to despise her or be embarrassed by her in the 1960s and we thought we had banished her with raised black gloved fists and self-empowerment and affirmative action and an emerging Black middle class. But she did not vanish into limbo because Black folk never controlled Aunt Jemima or Uncle Tom or Topsy or any of the other Black caricature and stereotypes. They are creations of the White imagination–its fears and its terrors and its stereotypes and its attempts at justice. But because we often fail to examine caricatures and stereotypes, we never know ourselves or each other—only our false images that sit like so many rows of false teeth molded to fit someone else's head. And, we often fail to grasp the full impact of what it means that Black folk did not and do not own these public identities of Black life.

And so she's back—updated, kerchief-less, and with pearls. Popular not only on pancakes—original, complete, buttermilk, buttermilk complete, whole wheat (also available online), buckwheat (also available online), frozen homestyle and buttermilk, and homestyle batter, frozen mini pancakes, and mini syrup pancake dunkers—but also on syrup—original, butter rich, lite, and butter lite—and frozen waffles—homestyle, blueberry (well, really dried apple parts treated with blue food dye), buttermilk, lowfat, and syrup dunkers—and frozen french toast—homestyle, cinnamon, cinnamon toast sticks, and syrupdunker—and coffee cake mix and corn bread mix and cornmeal mix—white, yellow, self-rising, pre-blended—and griddlecake sandwiches.

Aunt Jemima is back because limbo returns her to us as more than a relic; more than an updated image of Black womanhood or as collateral to Black manhood. She is back as commodity and property. She is back because she is profitable and identifiable. And in a world where you and I are often reduced to digits and statistics, image matters when it is making money. She is back in giveaways and mail-in premiums and in recipe booklets and dishware and with an entire family of character dolls with names and history—offering us food that is processed, complete with unlabeled genetically modified ingredients.

And if we refuse to use the power of her presence and endurance and rear up even weary heads to ask these ethical questions: who is it that has named Aunt Jemima's family? Is this some obscene product line from the World Wrestling Federation or Mattel, sold at our local Toys-R-Us or Kay-bees or FAO Schwarz? Meant to out duel Leapfrog Leapster and Disney Princess Dolls and Elmo for the favor of little kids who have been shaped into mega-consumers of a mega-culture and

pseudo-history? Is this Barbie and Ken (or Barbie and Blaine or Barbie and whomever Mattel decides should be her boyfriend) in Black woman drag electric sliding off boxes of powered flapjacks so that we can dash into the day more efficiently with the promise that we've been well-fed by a good cook? Indeed, who or what is naming *any* of us—regardless of color, gender, age, ability, class, nationality, and on and on? Who or what is making our histories—social and religious—denigrating ideological constructions?

If we do not ask these questions and many more, then we allow others, real others, to carve out hollow legacies for the generations yet to come for all color of children. And God-talk collapses into a *meaningless* drivel of hosannas or inconsequential theological escape hatches that only serve to reify demonic stereotypes and our ecclesiological musings fraught and at times desperate as we seek reconciliation or common ground that simply is not there.

It is small wonder that we have tried our best to vanish Aunt Jemima into limbo. She is a painful reminder of not only slavery, but the very commodification of identities that has become our stock and trade on a global scale. Even in the communities of resistance that seek genuine diversity and equality; Aunt Jemima and her kindred stereotypes—Uncle Ben, Rastus, Old Uncle Tom, Uncle Remus, Mandy the Maid, Preacher Brown, Deacon Jones, Sambo, the Gold Dust Twins, and Ol' Mammy—rise up as haunting caricatures of Black life. They are created to sell not only products, but to siphon off our lives through a sea of big lips, large grins, rolling eyes. Rather than avoiding the re-inscription of conventional oppressive hierarchies of class, gender, and race, black marginalized communities have often fallen victim to these evil forces with Aunt Jemima and *all* of us as the casualties.

Our identity has been made property and it should leave a sickening weariness in the pit of our collective stomach, for property means things owned, possession. On a good day it can mean attribute, quality, or characteristic. On another day it may mean a moveable object used in a dramatic performance.[2] And it does not help us that property stems from the Latin *proprietas*—related to "proper." That is: "pertaining to oneself or itself or a person or thing particularly, strictly pertaining; thorough, complete, excellent, fine;" specifically adapted; from the Latin "*proprius*: one's own, special, peculiar, problem;" from the Erench "*pro priuo*: as private or peculiar thing; hence properly (appropriate, fitting); property ownership (especially private): thing or things owned; attribute, quality; propriety, portable article for a dramatic performance."[3]

All the word studies in the world will not relieve my womanist methodological queasiness because ultimately property gets back to owning and ownership and possession. Even my own discipline of Christian ethics

gives me the "willies" because of how it has understood property; as the goods of this earth that are given by God so we all must use them in the pursuit of our self-realization; that property rights are subordinate to the common right to use property, but there is a right to own property.[4]

I am left with a wearying queasiness in the pit of my womanist theo-ethical stomach because the arrogance of all of these definitions is the assumption of control and autonomy. I am left to wonder in what space or spaces in this country do Black peoples and other brothers and sisters have control and autonomy? How many more tragedies and unnatural disasters like Hurricane Katrina do we need to point to what happens to the poor and darker skinned in this country? As we move internationally, East Indians are mistaken for Arabs who are mistaken for Muslims who are lumped under the label terrorist. Quite frankly, my brothers and sisters, we are wary of dark skinned people across the globe. We warehouse the Travelers, the Roma, the gypsy, the Dalit with our disdain and fear. And as we do, *we* are barely in control of our lives, we have almost no control over our commodified bodies, and autonomy is a far-away ideal.

How do we grasp a-hold of our identity and truly name ourselves instead of constantly looking into some strategically placed funhouse mirror of distortions and innuendos and mass marketing that smacks its lips and rolls its eyes while chanting "mmmm mmmm good?" Well, I am not here to offer solutions this morning but to name one of the many vexing terrains we must traverse as a denomination that is shrinking in number and may well be dying if we want to live. We must speak these gospel truths and more with power—all of us—if we are to face our future with a measure of hope that can help us build a robust future that may not always mean increasing numbers for our membership, but should always mean we are growing into the power of our witness with faithfulness and truth and spirit.

For when Black identity is property that can be owned by someone else, defined by someone else, created by someone else, shaped by someone else, and marketed by someone else; we are chattel now dressed in postmodern silks and linens. Our buckboards and dusty trails have been exchanged for one-legged stools by the one-way revolving door of academia and boardrooms and church councils. And we are told that these unstable stools are truly seats at the table. But when we speak, we are not heard; when we scream, they do not listen. Instead, we are often left standing on a malformed Gold Dust Twins soapbox with auction blocks as our footstools and the hangman's noose as our lullabies to rock us into the ultimate deep sleep.

It is at this point that counter-memory becomes helpful as the reconstitution of history.[5] It is found in the writings of Black folk from W.E.B.

Du Bois to Baldwin to Toni Morrison; George Liele to Martin Luther King, Jr. to James Cone to Katie Cannon. It is in the sermons of James Forbes, Prathia Hall, Carolyn Knight, Bishop and Samuel D. Proctor. It is sung in the music of Shirley Caesar, Thomas Dorsey, Mahalia Jackson, Richard Smallwood, Rosetta Tharpe, and Hezekiah Walker. Yes, these folks and many others who represent the patient and persistent work of mining the motherlode of Black life in the U.S. and beyond, remind us that in the midst of our socioeconomic, sociopolitical, theological and ethical struggles, the search is not only for truth, it is also a search for justice and the will to proclaim it and the courage to live it.

This is truly more than academic. For wrapped up in the winding sheets of injustice and hatred and fear are dominations that are repeated over and over again. They become fixed in our rituals—secular and religious–with meticulous precision that impose rights and obligations in biased and nuanced ways that masquerade as "the normal." And they mark all of us with the stereotypes and caricatures that take us further away from our humanity and genuine opportunities to come know each other and perhaps even understand each other.

Our memories become engraved with illusions and we are no longer able to see them as the figments they are because we have no scaffolding in place that can help us see otherwise. We cannot create counter-memories that will help us step outside of ourselves and so we end up with Baldwin's admonition as watchword and as beacon of hope.

You see, the fact of the matter is that Aunt Jemima is a lie. She was modeled after the old Black mammies of the U.S. South, but these mammies never existed in the ways the White southern imagination has presented them to us. The reality is that few slaves ever had enough to eat—so fatness was almost totally out of the question; house slaves were usually light-skinned and young if they were women; and she cannot be found amongst the surviving ex-slave oral interviews.

The minstrel tradition of White men and women in blackface from which Aunt Jemima springs, performed a grotesque mockery of Black life and culture. They had no idea that by singing authentic Black songs and dances that were a commentary and critique on White racism and discrimination that they were critiquing themselves. Minstrelsy presented a counterfeit and imagined version of blackness as truth complete with Aunt Jemima loosed from her box.

But this kind of thoroughgoing commodification is not easily recognized, analyzed, critiqued, or eradicated. However, use of counter-memory refuses to measure Black and all other racial and ethnic realities by stereotypes. It resists the scatological moonshine of the gross commodification of human lives in which peoples are reduced to profit

margins or name brand products for our easy consumption.

Counter-memory prompts a necessary and vital *intra*-communal analysis that is crucial for our ecclesiological conversations that must also challenge ourselves in the many colors of peoples here this morning and within the American Baptist family to begin to refuse to continue to live in the gross stereotypes and/or sentimentality that are often the main ways we see each other and believe each other to truly be.

Counter-memory gives us ethical and theological reflections and sociocultural critiques that do not further erase and exclude women and gender in racial analysis, the multiplicity of sexualities, the socio-economic stratification within and beyond Black cultures, the genuine valuing of age—young and old, the mélange of religious worldviews sweeping head and heart/body and spirit, the continuing impact/fall out/beat down of colonial and neocolonial mentalities on peoples of the African diaspora. But I must engage counter-memory with one crucial awareness: it is of little help if in my cultural and theo-ethical critiques, if my womanist Baptist thought, merely replaces the forms of supremacy we know so well with a postmodern Black slow drag of annihilation. Or I sanction a brand of scholarship that is nothing more than a gigantic holding pen for the mind and the intellect. Or if I am content that the plateau for excellence is to make lists, set quotas, craft exclusive standards of specious excellence. Instead, we must fight with every ounce of our bodies and spirits from becoming monuments of irrelevancy and domination as American Baptists. For a gospel that helps us move from memories that may be false or true or simply misremembered, demands from us an unwillingness to ignore the mundane daily evils we spin by denying parts of our personhood.

Simply put, the God of heaven and earth did not raise us to do any less and prompts us to live in a faithful witness that crafts ministries that will do much more.

And so, I turn now to hope.

## HOPE

I begin with a poem I've written about heaven.

when i was a little girl

i spent a good deal of time trying to conjure up heaven

i thought that if i could just imagine those angels, those harps, those clouds

then i wouldn't be so scared of this big angry white-haired, white-bearded, white furrow-browed God the minister preachified about on those Sunday mornings in Southern Pines, North Carolina

i thought if i could see those fluffy clouds

sit on those soft-with-goose-down couches

move around with grace and style as my walk was a *glide* all over heaven

always being good, never having to worry about being bad

smell the tasty (cause i just knew anything that had to do with heaven had to be tasty) food

the fried chicken

the hot-with-butter rolls

the spoon bread

the gravy made from chicken grease

the fresh greens

the fresh string beans

the big-grained rice

the macaroni and cheese

the mashed potatoes

the candied yams, coming right from the ground

the rib roast

the salmon croquettes

the salads–lettuce and tomato

the cakes–pound, coconut, chocolate

the pies–apple, sweet potato, chess, pecan

the kool-aid

the lemonade

the sweetened tea ('cause there was no such thing as *un*sweetened tea when i was growing up)

and butter, butter, butter, butter

i realize now that i was associating heaven with the way my grandmama's house smelled on Saturday night and Sunday

i thought if i could hear the good music–'cause even my playmates and i knew that all angels knew the beat, could carry a tune and played a mean harp

then i wouldn't worry so much

when the men in white sheets marched through the black section of town where my grandmother and all the other loving people i knew lived

i thought if i could just conjure up heaven in my mind

and in my heart

and in my prayers

then maybe

just maybe . . .

when we live our lives without hope, far too many of us have become beggars at the table of religions that sanction our own destruction

and we find ourselves content to live out the weary drama of an outdated carousel of momentary ecstasies

and some of us think that this is holy

Hope keeps us connected to our humanity, our values, and our world. We hope to live on into the next generation and we expect God's judgment, God's salvation in this world. And it is right smack dab in the

midst of this rich hope that I find a space for us to begin to talk about what may be some of the textures of the calling each of us, as people of God, must engage as the prophetic work and hope found in justice-seeking and justice-making and all forms of caring that seek healing of body, mind, spirit, and soul.

You see, a hope that leans into justice is about the search for salvation, as individuals and as community within communities of faith. To engage in prophetic vision justice-seeking and justice-making places us in a tension between our present social order and the coming Day of the Lord. It is rooted in history and grounded in today and provides for us a calling of care that can be, must be a standing ground for the transformation of society–it is the new heavens and new earth. This search for justice is not a desperate search for just any kind of revelation. It is a soul-deep and wish-filled conviction that our current circumstances are not ultimately definitive or inevitable. You see, engaging the prophetic is to seek to provide a vital ministry in the face of the difficult reality that far too many of us live in whirlpools of catastrophe.

The very nature of engaging a prophetic vision means that we must refuse to accept or tolerate injustice and faithlessness masquerading as piety. The justice we must seek for the common good does not delight or support the status quo—for this often does not reflect the will of God, but is the architecture built from our own stiff-necks.

No, this justice is rooted in our biblical faith, in our lives, and in our future as we work with God for a world of peace and wholeness, as we model and live that we can be radical advocates for a justice of substance and concreteness. Yes, this is a search for justice that stares down evil, rejects its inevitability, and chooses life over extinction.

Friends, we stand in the tradition of Isaiah to 2 Peter to Revelation that suggests a new heaven and a new earth. One in which the very is-ness of life is challenged and debunked. One in which a new reality and hope for full humanness emerges. It is one that envisions God accomplishing divine plans within the very fabric of our lives and we are to stand with God and lend our hearts, minds, souls, and energies to the task—relentlessly.

I am urging us this morning (and beyond) to let doubt lead us to hope that leads us to justice that is a salvation embracing all of humanity so that we are transformed body and spirit, individuals and society, persons and cosmos, time and eternity. The justice we proclaim, the justice *we* seek must not be formed out of crass stereotypes and caricatures. It is one that joins in community as God touches all of humanity in a caress that is neither sentimental nor spiritualized.

Like the character Eula from Julie Dash's wonderful movie *Daughters*

*of the Dust*, we must remember:

> There's going to be all kinds of roads to take in life.... Let's not be afraid to take them. We deserve them, because we're all good women. Do you...do you understand who we are, and what we have become? We're the daughters of those old dusty things Nana carries in her tin can.... We carry too many scars from the past. Our past owns us. We wear our scars like armor...for protection. Our mother's scars, our sister's scars, our daughter's scars.... Thick, hard, ugly scars that no one can pass through to ever hurt us again. Let's live our lives without living in the fold of old wounds.[6]

What a powerful cry of hope. What a wonderful place to begin to respond to, to engage, and to live out of a prophetic vision for the models of justice and vibrant ecclesiology we must have to remain faithful and relevant to the challenges and joys people face today. Yes, this is a demanding or difficult task but we must have dreams that can be more powerful than the nightmares, possibilities more radical than the realities, and a hope that does more than cling to a wish or wish on a star or sit by the side of the road, picking and sucking its teeth after dining on a meal of disaster and violence that is made up of our lives and the lives of others. We live in a challenge that should compel us to cry out in a shout that is brimming with hope. This is not the hope of Pandora's box or Aristotle's naïve youth or Goethe's happiness or Camus' myth.

No, our cry of hope we must be unequivocal and unambiguous. It is a hope that is found within the pages of scripture. It is enduring and pervasive. It is positive; it is the divine power of life. It is the expectation of a justice-filled future established on God's promise and supported by our ever-evolving and deepening trust in God as we build God's church with a fierce belief in soul freedom, abiding piety, and fierce social witness. Hope does not empty out our lives for it is the new heaven and the new earth. It is the eternal life of all God's creatures who are brought to this place through God's justice, love, and mercy.

Yes, this hope is one that pulls the promise of the future into the present and places the present into the dawn of a future that is on the rim bones of glory so that we *live out of a hope that lets folk know that justice, love, and mercy mean something, and are more than rhetorical ruffles and flourishes that we turn to when our faith is challenged.* Hope must be more than a leaning-crutch when times are tough. Genuine hope is a catalyst for ornery acts of justice-making and love-keeping and mercy-living—of living our faith! None of us can hide from any of the "isms," obscene

war-making; the economy, HIV/AIDS, terrorism, natural disasters that then turn into obscene governmental neglect and cronyism, rising oil prices, media reducing all of us to sound bites that are then sent spinning onto our airwaves as "facts" that really are nothing more than cannon fodder for perpetuating ignorance. To put it more bluntly, we are *not* called to be poster-children for the status quo.

We must refuse to live our lives in the past tense, the sad "what ifs," the dead end "maybes," or the rootless and fruitless "could bes." Living our faith is something we do every day:

in the everydayness of listening closely when folks talk or don't talk to hear what they are saying

in the everydayness of taking some time, however short or long, to refresh ourselves through prayer or meditation

in the everydayness of speaking to folks and actually meaning whatever it is that is coming out of our mouths

in the everydayness of being a presence in people's lives

in the everydayness of sharing a meal

in the everydayness of facing heartache and disappointment

in the everydayness of joy and laughter

in the everydayness of facing people who may expect us to lead them somewhere or at least point them in the right direction and walk with them

in the everydayness of blending head and heart

in the everydayness of getting up and trying one more time to get living right

We must embrace the many challenges before us, be comforted by hope and live our lives as citadels of faith and justice and spirit every day. Which means we live our lives from our heart, even if it is broken or

bruised because we believe and live with every ounce of whatever being we have that loving the world and all creation is a good thing. Living this love will get us to lives of deep spirit and spirituality. Living this love will get us to justice, love, and mercy. Living this love will take us outside of the folds of old wounds that make us perform postmodern minstrel shows of wickedness. Living this love means creating communities that are torchlights of the goodness of creation made up of folks like Miss Rosie across the street, Miss Montez around the corner, Cousin Willie Mae down by the juke house, Mr. Press over at the barber shop, Ms. Geer who ran a beauty parlor out of her home, Mrs. M.O. Sneed Lee who taught generations of children to read, do their plus ones, times tables, and *not* kill themselves on the jungle gym; Mr. Butler who taught generations of children to love math and science through rhymes and counting games and took us fishing on Saturday mornings.

These are the things that get God up doing a standing ovation in creation. These are the things that get a divine mmmmm...ummph... ummph...ummph. What gets God up doing the electric slide or a Texas two step or Irish step dance or just plain shimmying in the spirit is when we refuse to accept indifference as passion, lazy platitudes as vibrant faith, moaning skepticism as committed witness, trifling clichés as vibrant spirituality, arrogant disdain as a world-filling love, clinging to survival and calling it life in the Spirit.

Let's do a shake dance for discipleship and our journeys of faith toward ever-increasing faithful witness and run the race faster, think through the perplexities of life better, jump the obstacles higher, kick at the doors of injustice harder, and be the true people of God *and hang tougher.*

Such is the work of the Spirit!

## NOTES

1. James Baldwin, "Too Many Thousands Gone" in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 27.

2. *The Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, ed. Della Thompson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), s. v. "property."

3. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, ed. T.F. Hoad (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), s. v. "proper."

4. *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, eds. James F. Childress and John Macquarrie (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), s. v. "property."

5. George Lipsitz, "History, Myth, and Counter-Memory," in *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1990), 227.

6. Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julia Dash (1992, New York: Kino International, 1999), DVD.