Christmas Message 2019

Dear brothers and sisters,

When I was a boy, growing up in a very segregated city, I wondered, “What is it like in a black church during Christmas?” I wasn’t aware at that point how naïve I was, how little I knew about the African American experience. Now that I’m older and ecumenically involved at the National Council of Churches, I have had experiences that have given me a magnificent portal into beautiful “national black churches.” I have attended the Conference of National Black Churches for four years in a row as a part of an effort to have white church leaders exposed to the faith in these houses of worship. Hold that thought for a moment.

I recently read an article in The New Yorker magazine by Emily Lordi. She wrote about Mariah Carey’s blockbuster song, “All I Want for Christmas Is You,” and the album from which it came. Ms. Lordi explains that Mariah Carey came out of the experience of the black church and black gospel music. If we look at this apparently secular song from the perspective of the black church experience, we see more of what brought her to the moment of writing this song and what the song itself is showing us.

On the surface, the lyrics are anti-establishment or anti-materialistic, which of course they are as the black church often is—defiant in the face of a culture distracting us from what is most important, i.e., people, not things. And so, there is an affirmation about persons over things. But if we listen to the music and notice how the song is constructed, we see more. In black gospel music a single singer almost always “finds her voice” in the context of a supportive choir. She is not alone. While the majority culture threatens outside, Lordi notes that there is a “musical belonging” inside, where the sheer joy of being found in community (or being home) allows for a “letting go” into a Spiritual Reality that buoys one up and takes one higher.

So when Mariah Carey sings, “All I Want for Christmas Is You,” try to think of the “you” as a telescoping reality that starts perhaps with a special someone and expands outward to all those we know and love, all of those for whom we are grateful, and perhaps enlarges (for those capable of a bigger stretch) out to all of humanity and even to the Source of all life itself. The experience of human solidarity becomes an experience of the presence of God. The “you” gets bigger and bigger. This experience provides a safe place where one is finally able to be one’s true self. Mariah Carey, Lordi points out, in this song is not just in love with a special someone, she is in love with life, and she is abandoning herself to it in complete freedom. Lordi credits Mariah Carey’s experience in the black church for giving her that ability
to let go in the sheer joy of the freedom of a supportive community and it’s uplifting faith, hope, and love.

Never mind that the song doesn’t sound religious because the lines between the sacred and the secular are marvelously blurred in the black church. This is a people who believe that being born in a stable need not limit one’s potential. It’s an experience in church that powers a different experience in the streets.

Long ago this little white boy wondered what happens in a black church on Christmas. Now I want to say, “May it happen in all our churches and all our lives.”

Merry Christmas!

Your brother,

+Francis

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“Mariah Carey’s Christmas Miracle,” Emily Lordi, The New Yorker magazine, December 17, 2019