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Looking for love the Christian way doesn't always lead to happiness

Mariam Williams | Jan. 13, 2014 At the Intersection

In "Bride's Story a Cautionary Tale of the Mistakes Some Black Women Make [1]," relationship columnist Demetria L. Lucas muses about parents teaching black girls to go after professional accomplishments, not marriage, and how they grow up to be black women who have bypassed love and are less fulfilled because of it.

Ironically, I stumbled upon this article after listening to Beyoncé's feminist anthem "Flawless" at least twice within the hour. Despite feeling recharged by the song's messages to women to feel good about themselves and to rethink sexist double-standards, I read Lucas' article and thought with a sigh, "The story of my life." Except my story has a faith layer.

My parents -- through their life-long choices to remain single, their pride in my accomplishments, and sometimes their blunt statements like, "If you come home from college pregnant, I'll shoot you" -- told me that art and academics were the most important parts of my life and warned against love's folly. Though I've never brought anyone home for them to meet, I don't think they realized how anemic my social and dating lives were. I probably seemed fairly happy and well-adjusted, and I didn't rebel and give them grandchildren, so there was no need for them to switch up their message. Even when I called my dad at age 31, sobbing after confirming the man I had been hoping for the past 4 years to reunite with was engaged, his advice to me was to get over it by devoting myself even more to my writing.

While my parents were teaching me to be the best student I could be, my Christian faith taught me to aspire to marriage but to eschew love until then or until God revealed with whom it would be OK to share my heart. God was preparing me to be a wife and my future mate to be my husband.

Though some of us had divorced or unwed parents, questions like, "What if God hasn't called you to be married?" were shunned. Dating was permissible, but with books like *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and the True Love Waits campaign growing in popularity in evangelical and other Christian circles, it was discouraged. Dating presented a danger: temptation. It could lead to premarital sex, or you could end up in an "emotional soul tie." (I think that means you could fall in love with someone you don't end up marrying, but because "emotional soul tie" is a made-up term, it's open to interpretation.)

Sexual sin separates us from God, the heart is deceitful [2], and an unmarried woman should be concerned about the Lord's affairs [3], anyway. Hence, many a youth and young-adult minister and female disciple said, "Guard your heart." I have more Bible study notes from my college years about Christian or biblical ways to date and wait than I do about finding God's purpose for my life.

After graduating from college, I found more balanced teaching in the church I joined and still attend. Living "saved and single" wisdom is woven into broader sermons, but when it's given, the congregation -- the majority of which is single black mothers over 30 -- hears my parents' message with a God twist: God has called you do great things, so don't wait for a man or get distracted by the wrong one while you pursue God's calling. From the pulpit, I've been advised to take myself out to the movies and dinner if no man can see how "fearfully and wondrously [4]" God made me. Preachers have even used Mary and the virgin birth as examples of the amazing

things God can do through women without a man.

One other common theme from the pulpit: God is interested in your character, not your happiness. This is undoubtedly the most damaging message I've received in the 20-plus years since my baptism. I didn't think that meant God wanted me to be unhappy, but rather that character building, like the vine pruning Jesus spoke of in the book of John, felt unpleasant but was a good and necessary thing that pleased God. But it led me to believe suffering was the optimal choice. When I finally got the opportunity to pursue love, I was too wary of it to know that *good* feelings about it were a blessing, and I made bad choices that I'm afraid might result in me living and dying alone.

Although I'm admittedly resentful, I don't write this to bash my family and religious community for what they taught me about romantic love. I'm sure everyone did as they knew best, but for future generations, I want them to know better. When thinking about this in terms of what I would tell my children, if I ever have them, about dating and romance, I came up with a solution [5]: Teach girls and boys to pursue happiness and balance with achievement. But I don't want to tell ministers what to tell their followers. After all, much of the teaching I received was biblically sound. Looking back on it now, however, I think it was also extreme and that it asked me and too many other women to abandon part of our humanity, which is something God, who wants us to be whole, can't possibly approve of.

[Mariam Williams is a writer born and raised in Louisville, Ky., where she's received numerous arts awards. When not working in the field of social justice research and taking graduate courses in women and gender and Pan-African studies, she blogs at RedboneAfropuff.com [6]. Follow her on Twitter: @missmariamw [7].]

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