

**INVISIBLE MEN**  
**REV. JUAN R. THOMAS**

**My Confession**

This sermon is about African-American men who are living on the “down low” or the “DL.” Those reading this sermon might be compelled to question the author’s motivations behind writing on such a controversial topic. Wondering if I am the man for which I speak. Wondering if I am saying like Peter, “Is it I, Lord.” I understand that when dealing with a sensitive and uncomfortable subject such as this, that one opens the door to questions and suspicions as to who they really are?

My confession is that I write as a heterosexual man who is not nor has ever been involved in the “down low” lifestyle, but, who is deeply concerned about the state of his African-American community; I write because serious debates concerning what is “appropriate” male sexuality began for me during my days as an undergraduate student at Morehouse College and have continued through the present day; I write because I was deeply disturbed by the attack of a Morehouse student by another Morehouse student who accused him of staring at him while he was in the shower; I write because I was disturbed when a pastor I knew as a mentor welcomed gay people into his church as long as they did not “practice” any gay activity; I write because for nine years I have attended a church that was led by a pastor who opened his arms to same-gender loving people, but has been ostracized by many members of the church, other religious leaders and denominations, and the larger African-American community; I write because I saw friends abandon one of my fraternity brothers when he “came out of the closet” after 22 years of marriage to his wife and being on the “DL;” I write because in trying to walk

faithfully in my calling I was once approached for sex by a prominent black male pastor who is married with children and because I have met and have known of other black male pastors who are married and on the “DL.” And to those who say, does thou profess too much? I simply respond with the words of Jesus’ delivered in his trial sermon: *The spirit of the Lord is upon me for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.....to open the eyes of the blind!* (Luke 4:18) I write to open the eyes to the blind so that we can see our invisible brothers and move to a place of healing and reconciliation. For, woe is me if I preach not the Gospel! (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 9:16)

### **A Man in the Crowd**

According to the Gospel writer John, one morning a crowd gathered near the Mount of Olives to hear the teachings of Jesus. It was here, at the Mount of Olives, where Jesus frequently gathered to teach his disciples and followers. It was here, at the Mount of Olives, where Jesus wept over the City of Jerusalem. The road from Jerusalem to Bethany (the place where Jesus would later depart from his disciples) runs through the Mount of Olives. John tells us that Jesus appears in the temple courts one morning to teach the people who had gathered. Perhaps he was going to teach them how to pray or share a parable about a meaningful lesson of life. But instead, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law disrupted the lesson for the day by attempting to embarrass and trick Jesus, bringing forth a woman to be stoned who allegedly was caught in the act of adultery. I can hear a man in that crowd saying, *They are dragging her into the temple court in front of all of these people.* Jesus uses their efforts to humiliate her and to trap him as a teaching moment. ***“If anyone of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw the first stone.”*** Jesus clearly teaches that many others that gathered that day were not

without sin and perhaps not without secrets. The man in the crowd says, *Look! Everyone is walking away, and all the older cats are leaving first. What's up with that?* Moreover, Jesus teaches we should be slow to judge and not live in hypocrisy. These are important lessons because I believe in that crowd that faithful morning were other people who could have easily been “caught” in something. In that crowd that day, were the people we see in our churches and in our community. How many people in that crowd, and in our churches, and in our communities have had their own private affairs, or suffered embarrassment from domestic violence in their home, or had sexual desires for which they felt ashamed? In that crowd were people like you and me.

However, I lift this text, in the words of Peter Paris, “to raise other questions of the text.” What were those people’s sins or secrets? What were the secrets of those women and men? Was there a man in that crowd who had a wife, children, and a secret? I can hear that man in the crowd again, *I'm just glad it's not me standing out there in front of all these people having my secret revealed.* Perhaps he was living a public life with a wife (or girlfriend) and children while living a private secret life? I believe there was a man in that crowd at the Mount of Olives that had his own secrets.

Similarly today, how many men in our community are living with a secret: a public heterosexual life but a private or “invisible” homosexual life? How many African American men live a life on the “down low” or “DL” knowing full well that if they were ever exposed, they too, like the woman in this text would be publicly “stoned,” humiliated, or much worse. These brother can say like Lamech said to his wives after killing a man, *“If Cain is avenged seven times then Lamech seventy-seven times,”* believing that if they will stone a woman for adultery then they will do much worse to a

brother caught on the “DL.” (Gen. 4:23-24). These brothers are the “Invisible Men” in our community.

### **On the Down Low**

In his book titled “On the Down Low,” J.L. King writes a detailed account of black men who live on the “down low” or “DL.” This term is defined as men who have sex with other men privately but still maintain sexual relationships with women. King, who himself was married and lived for 25 years on the “DL,” provides five reasons why these brothers live a secret life and explains why they do not expose themselves to public humiliation by revealing their secret invisible lifestyle.

King reveals that “down low” brothers hide their secret for fear of facing rejection and backlash from their families, friends, co-workers, churches, and professional colleagues. These brothers are just like the fictitious man in the crowd from our text who is afraid of being stoned if his secret is ever uncovered. Moreover, the most significant hurdle for these brothers is the possibility of losing their wife and children. Many “down low” brothers like having sex with men but still love and want to be with their woman.

Secondly, the African-American community has traditionally not embraced openly gay black men. Unlike the white community who has supported openly gay public figures like Elton John or Ellen, or in T.V. shows like Will & Grace, “DL” brothers believe that no such reception will be waiting for them if they “come out.” King argues, “The media has let white gay people feel more comfortable in their skin and it’s accepted. The greatest taboo is to be black and homosexual, and I refuse to be labeled and classified that folks will look at me as something different. I am a man.” Can’t you hear that man in the crowd saying, *There is no way in hell I will expose myself up to these*

*Pharisees and teachers of the law. They will crucify me! I have to be extra careful not to get caught like this adulterous woman.*

Throughout the African-American community we continuously hear the cry for “strong black men.” We need strong brothers, proud brothers, to mentor our young boys, marry our women, and serve as role models in our community. In large number, the African-American community echoes the words of the 18<sup>th</sup> century poet J. G. Holland:

**GOD, give us men! A time like this demands  
Strong minds, great hearts, true faith and ready hands;  
Men whom the lust of office does not kill;  
Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy;  
Men who possess opinions and a will;  
Men who have honor; men who will not lie;  
Men who can stand before a demagogue  
And damn his treacherous flatteries without winking!  
Tall men, sun-crowned, who live above the fog  
In public duty, and in private thinking;  
For while the rabble, with their thumb-worn creeds,  
Their large professions and their little deeds,  
Mingle in selfish strife, lo! Freedom weeps,  
Wrong rules the land and waiting Justice sleeps.**

However, the African-American community rarely sees homosexual men as the answer to this pray request. “DL” brothers are acutely aware of this reality and, therefore, keep their sexual activity with other men invisible from the larger community.

### **An Issue of Gratification vs. Orientation**

A third and significant factor concerning the “down low” lifestyle is that many of these brothers who are having sex or engaging in sexual activity with men do not necessarily consider themselves homosexual. According to King, “If I was a gay man, I may want to be in a relationship with another man and play house. But when you’re on the “down low” all you want to do is have sex.” King continues, “Gay men march in gay parades, hang out in gay clubs, and go to gay beaches. A gay man knows that he likes men not women.”

Gay men who are not public are called “in the closet” where “DL” brothers are considered to be *behind* the closet. Behind the closet means these brothers are so undercover and are in complete denial of their sexual activity with other men.

This sentiment is buttressed by Rev. G. Lloyd Rediger, who in his book, “Beyond the Scandals, A Guide to Healthy Sexuality for Clergy,” argues that through his psychotherapy in counseling gay clergy over the years say he has come to understand that homosexuality is not a choice, it is a recognition. However, he continues by stating that a homosexual lifestyle versus a heterosexual lifestyle is a choice. (page 181) So while “DL” brothers may not consider themselves homosexuals, they are choosing to engage in homosexual activities. Therefore, to many, this is a distinction without a difference.

Our brothers on the “DL” cannot escape from a critical analysis of their activity. We must raise the question of whether their behavior is a question of their character or their identity or both? If we accept a “DL” brother’s premise that he is not a homosexual man, then his secret activities with men must call into question his character. If he is involved in an extra marital affair with another women, no one will deny that he is being unfaithful to his wife. In this instance, he stands in complete solidarity with the adulterous woman we meet in this text. Whether he is unfaithful with a man or woman, it’s a violation of his commitment. He too, should hear the words of Jesus to our sister in the text, “go and sin no more.”

My concern here is not simply rooted in a question of morality, but is rooted in the reality that when our “DL” brothers engage in sexual activities with other men they are exposing themselves and the women in their lives to a greater risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. According to the Center for Disease Control, of all black men living with

HIV/AIDS, the primary transmission category is sexual contact with other men, followed by injection, drug use, and high-risk heterosexual contact.

However, if in fact the “DL” brother is a homosexual man but denies this reality, then he is not aware of or in acceptance of his true identity. By not accepting this identity, the “DL” brother is subject to battle with self esteem issues that can result in abusive behavior to his woman, family, and to himself.

### **The Church: Throwing the Stone of Condemnation**

A fourth reason is that “DL” brothers fear that if their lifestyle is unmasked that their church will be prepared to throw stones at them in condemnation and they will face the same sentence as our sister in this text: public humiliation, ridiculed, or perhaps worse. Too many Black churches look like the Pharisees and teachers of the law in this text and approach these sensitive situations ready to throw stones of condemnation. In fact, the majority of Black churches rarely engage in healthy, mature, or honest dialogs around human sexuality. Most 21<sup>st</sup> century Black churches are even less equipped to respond thoughtfully to issues surrounding homosexuality not to mention the “DL” lifestyle. The Word from most pulpits is that homosexuality is a sin or a demonic spirit, and that homosexuals need to be cleansed from their sins.

Many pastors conveniently ignore the fact that their choir directors, ministers of music, and other church members are homosexual men, but will preach that the gay lifestyle is a sin and not acceptable in the eyes of God. These pastors live in a state of blind denial and pretend that “what is ain’t.”

I recently attended a worship service during the holy season where a prominent, theologically sound African-American pastor preached a sermon that was socially

relevant, liberating to African-American women, and politically conscious. However, during his message he listed a series of evils that congregants should avoid: womanizing, gambling, drinking, drug abuse, *and* “homosexuality!” He, like the majority of African-American pastors, takes a hard-line position that men having sex with other men is a sin, period.

### **Is Homosexuality a Sin?**

In his sermon titled “Good News for Homosexuals,” the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. puts forth a powerful and compelling argument confronting how the church has historically viewed and responded to the issue of homosexuality. He challenges traditional religious orthodoxy by bringing into plain view questions of biology and psychology. He states that homosexuality is a matter of psychology and biology, the interaction between *psyche* and *soma*-mind and body. It is not simply a matter of morality. He calls on the church to study scriptures carefully and not misuse the sacred text by taking it out of context in the way racists used the bible to justify the enslavement of Africans. Dr. Wright notes that each of us enters into life with a particular set of physical and mental givens that are shaped by the individual circumstances of our inheritance; Wright says, God did that. Or do we stop believing Psalm 100:3, “*It is he that hath made us and not we ourselves?*”

All pastors would do well to read, study, contemplate and reflect on this powerful sermon. (Good News! Sermons of Hope for Today’s Families, by Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.)

### **Black Women: Throwing the Stone of Rejection**

Finally, “DL” brothers live a public life as husband, boyfriend, father, uncle, community leader, big brother, and role model. Many of these brothers hold

distinguished positions in civic and professional organizations in our community. They have worked diligently to earn a certain social status that they want to preserve and protect. Their private life on the “down low” causes them to lie to and sneak around on their wife or girlfriend in order to hook up with their male lover, thereby having it both ways.

Beyond the obvious violation of the commitment in the relationship, understandably, black women approach this subject from a perspective concerned about their own health and safety. In 2005, information from 33 states revealed that black women make up 64% of the women living with HIV/AIDS. (Statistics from the Center for Disease Control). While HIV/AIDS is not a “gay disease” studies suggest that women that engage in sexual activity with men who themselves have sex with other men are at a greater risk of contracting the AIDS virus. This alarming reality has led many black women to ask the men in their lives whether or not they have had sexual encounters with other men. Most sisters acknowledge that they will not knowingly get involved with a man who admits he has engaged in sexual activities with another man. “Down low” brothers know this reality and, therefore, want to desperately avoid black women throwing stones of rejection their way. These brothers work diligently to keep their secret lifestyle hidden or invisible by lying and being deceitful. I hear the man in that crowd again, *If they find out, I will lose everything I have ever worked for and tried to accomplish. My reputation will be ruined, my career will collapse and she will take my children away.* Brothers on the “DL” consciously or subconsciously contribute to the oppression of women by treating women as objects to possess and are in serious danger of killing the mothers of their children. Too many women are unaware of their man’s

activities and are denied the freedom of choice, which exposes them to potential illness and death.

### **It's the lie that gets you**

Another powerful lesson from the text is that it's the lie that gets you. By challenging those who were without sin to throw the first stone, Jesus compels them to be honest. If they were honest, they could not deny that they too had sinned. If they had lied to themselves, they would be guilty of hypocrisy. President Richard Nixon expressed a similar sentiment after reflecting on the Watergate scandal that ended his administration, he realized that it's the lie that gets you. He understood that it was the cover up that eventually led to his political downfall. Our brothers on the "down low" would do well to heed this lesson from the text and from Nixon who had to learn it the hard way.

The irony in the Black church is the number of pastors that preach and teach that God does not ordain a homosexual lifestyle, but yet, they practice a "DL" lifestyle. They have failed to learn this important lesson that Jesus teaches. Black Pastors on the "DL" who throw stones of condemnation at homosexual men and other "DL" brothers are guilty of being hypocrites, disingenuous, and outright liars. They are orchestrating a cover up since many of these same pastors are married to woman and have children. However, too often these preachers stand in their pulpits Sunday after Sunday and throw stones at the brothers who are engaged in the exact same acts they themselves are doing, forgetting that he too must be honest and *he without sin should cast the first stone*.

### **A Moment of Consciousness**

In the King James Version, the text reveals that when Jesus had said this in response to our sister's accusers, they that heard him, were *convicted by their conscience*

and walked away. A Word from the Lord ought to convict our personal and collective conscience. Brothers on the “DL,” the Black Church, and the entire black community must to be *convicted by their conscience* and move to a deeper and more thoughtful dialog about this serious issue that is plaguing our community. For the sake of our women and children we must be *convicted by our conscience* to develop new approaches in ministry and conversations. The text teaches us that when we are first honest with ourselves, we can free ourselves from being hypocritical, judgmental, and morally inconsistent. For when those who heard Jesus were *convicted by their conscience*, they had no choice but to be honest with themselves.

If we dare to be honest, there are at least four levels of consciousness that we must develop in order to be free: for our “DL” brothers generally, the “DL” brothers who do not consider themselves homosexual men, the Black Church, and the Black Community.

“DL” brothers you may be afraid of the stones of condemnation, the stones of rejection from family and friends and are in hiding, but the Word from the Lord that should convict your conscience is: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me. (23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm). When my father and mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up. (27<sup>th</sup> Psalm). He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most high shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty (91<sup>st</sup> Psalm). No lie shall live forever. This truth will set you free!*

For my brothers who are on the “DL,” even if you do not consider yourself a homosexual man, your sexual activity with other men is a violation of the commitment you made to your wife or girlfriend. You are being unfaithful. She might not know, but

God knows. God also knows you and loves you. The Psalmist says, *Thou hast covered you in your mother's womb. You are fearfully and wonderfully made* (Psalm 139:13-14).

Life will be more peaceful and less stressful when you are in complete honesty and live in integrity with women and honor their right to choose whether or not they want to be in a relationship with a man who is not exclusively heterosexual. This truth will set you free!

The Word from the Lord to the Black Church is God made us in his own image. “DL” brothers are children of God and deserve love and affirmation. The Black Church must put down the stones of commendation and pick up a new dialog about human sexuality that understands, “sexuality is God’s gift of relational generativity and sex is the human thoughts and behavior that express the genital and intimate aspects of sexuality.” (Rediger page 24) As theologian and now President of Morehouse College, Robert Michael Franklin properly notes, “the black church’s traditional teachings about homosexuality have made it difficult for “DL” brothers to be honest about their sexual preferences and practices. This lifestyle has threatened the well-being of many innocent wives, women, and children.” Franklin calls for the Black Church to stop insisting that these brothers “stay in the closet’ but to create an environment where all adults can freely and fully be who they are before God. This will allow these men to cease from their selfish and destructive behavior and live in integrity with themselves and with others. This truth will set the Black Church free! (A Crisis in the Village, pp: 90-91 by Robert Michael Franklin.)

Black churches should join and participate in organizations like Balm in Gilead in New York City. This organization provides education and training for churches that want

to establish HIV/AIDS prevention programs. They also sponsor conferences and workshops for church leaders to educate them on the different types of preventive programs and fighting against homophobia in the church. Every Black church in our community should have or be affiliated with a HIV/AIDS prevention program.

However, for the Black Church to embrace an open and affirming stance on this issue, the black pastor must live in integrity with his own sexuality. This necessarily may lead pastors to have to seek professional counseling. National associations like the Association of Black Psychologists in Washington, DC, are available to provide local referrals to clergy in need of professional counseling. The church is the elongated shadow of its leadership. If the black pastor leads an invisible lifestyle, he is ill equipped and lacks the personal integrity to properly lead members of his congregation to responsibly resolve critical questions about their own sexuality. Again, no lie shall live forever. Black pastors on the “DL” must be faithful to their calling and their identity and remember the words of the Psalmist David when he cried out:

*Have mercy upon me, O God, According to Your loving-kindness; According to the multitude of Your tender mercies, Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, And cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, And my sin is always before me. Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners shall be converted to You (Psalm 51).*

To thine own self be true. This truth will set the Black Pastor on the “DL” free!

Finally, the Word from the Lord to the black community is to be patience, remembering that *they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.* (Isaiah 40:31) This does not mean we do nothing! More members of our community need to demonstrate patience and sincere discernment and consciously engage in a healthy

deliberative process about human sexuality. Womanist theologian, Dr. Linda Thomas, teaches that sexuality is a gift from God. When we express ourselves sexually, it is spiritual. God made us sexual people just like the people in the text and we must be less judgmental and hypocritical surrounding issues of human sexuality.

In her book, “Stolen Women, Reclaiming our Sexuality Taking Back our Lives,” UCLA’s, Dr. Gail Elizabeth Wyatt, who is a clinical psychologist and sex therapist, offers five key principles of sexual responsibility for African-American women that I believe can be embraced by the entire African-American community. She suggest that:

1. Having the courage to get adequate sexual knowledge;
2. Connecting our family values to sexual socialization and sexual behavior;
3. Protecting each other from abuse and exploitation;
4. Valuing the ability to control our own sexual decision making; and,
5. Creating respectful and mutually satisfying relationships that include sex are essential elements to creating the environment of healing and reconciliation needed for such a time as this. (pages 224-228)

Unlike the crowd in the text, we cannot be satisfied with simply walking away once we have come into a new level of consciousness. Even though the Pharisees, the teachers of the law, and the crowd were honest and did not stone our sister, they did walk away. Here, the text becomes problematic. But the text does teach us to be honest. When we are honest, we realize that the “DL” lifestyle has too many implications for the future of our men, women, and children for us to just walk away. We cannot afford to walk away from our responsibilities. This will not be easy, *but nobody told me that the road would be easy! But I don’t believe that he has brought us this far to leave us!!* We cannot walk away from our brothers who will need support and encouragement. They will need

counseling, support groups, and transforming ministries. We cannot walk away from the sisters who are faced with a new reality that their man is on the “DL.” They too will need counseling, support groups, and ministries where they can learn how to trust again. We must learn to support and affirm our brothers encouraging them to live in integrity by creating an environment where they can be embraced in our beloved community. We must support and affirm our sisters who may face serious health threats and loss of their family structure. They are our grandmothers, mothers, sisters, aunts, nieces, cousins and friends.

Lets stop classifying these brothers as pedophiles and bashing them over the head Sunday after Sunday. These men are our grandfathers, fathers, brothers, uncles, nephews, cousins, and friends. We must not allow them to flee from our presence for when they are in our presence they must experience the awesome and powerful love of God. This truth will set us all free and we shall be free indeed!