

UPON

*The  
Miracles  
of a  
Black  
Church*

THIS

ROCK

Samuel G. Freedman

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THE MIRACLES OF A  
BLACK CHURCH



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HarperCollins *Publishers*

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FIRST EDITION

*Designed by Alma Hochhauser Orenstein*

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Freedman, Samuel G.

Upon this rock: the miracles of a black church/Samuel G. Freedman.

—1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-06-016610-X

1. Youngblood, Johnny Ray. 2. Baptists—New York (N.Y.)—Clergy.  
3. Afro-American Baptists—New York (N.Y.) 4. Saint Paul Community Baptist Church (Brooklyn, New York, N.Y.) 5. Church and social problems—New York (N.Y.) 6. Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.) I. Title.

BX6495.Y68F74 1993

286'.1'092—dc20

92-53323

[B]

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93 94 95 96 97 ❖/HC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# CONTENTS



Prologue—Another Beggar	1
1. Twice Called	21
2. An Accident of Melanin	65
3. Flesh and Fantasy	83
4. Serious	127
5. The Overcoming Crowd	155
6. With an Asterisk	193
7. Blood Test	215
8. Where the Roses Grow	241
9. Between Marrow and Bone	263
10. Morning at Midnight	291
11. In Caesar's Household	307
12. Passage to the Past	345
Epilogue—Against the Gates	361
Bibliography	365
Acknowledgments	371

## PROLOGUE



# ANOTHER BEGGAR

**T**HE FIRST AFRICAN SLAVES arrived in the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam in 1626. Some thirty-four years later, it is recorded, slaves appeared in the adjoining town of Brooklyn. Well before the end of the century, historical accounts tell of their presence in the expanse of flatland and estuary called New Lots, which someday would be subsumed by Brooklyn, as Brooklyn would be subsumed by New York.

Slaves tilled the soil for corn and potatoes and wheat. They built the mills along the salt creeks. They raised the horses their masters raced for amusement. On Sundays the Dutch, believing themselves enlightened, allowed their African captives to worship in church. Christianity would keep their minds safely centered on the next world.

Still, these Africans confounded their masters, the way they clung to such strange names as Kouba and Yaft, and commingled Christianity with belief in spirits, potions, and charms. There was even a rebellion in New Amsterdam in 1712, and nine whites fell beneath hatchets and knives. Not until 150 years after slaves were first sent to New Lots did one merit burial in the yard of the Dutch Reformed Church:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF FLORA,  
A COLORED WOMAN, WHO DIED JAN. 5, 1826, AGED 104 YEARS  
STRONG FAITH, TRUSTING IN HER SAVIOR

\* \* \*

One hundred sixty-three years later and seven blocks away, the Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood mounts the altar of the Saint Paul Community Baptist Church to celebrate Christmas Eve. His step remains springy at the age of forty-one, his years betrayed only by a dusting of gray on each temple. He wears vestments trimmed with ebony velvet, its shade not much darker than that of his skin. Beneath the broad cedar beams of the roof, behind a lectern decorated with pin lights and evergreen sprigs, Reverend Youngblood's eyes flicker, and his high cheeks rise even higher. He is smiling at the faces before him that fill twenty-three rows of pine pews, back to the rear wall with its stained glass and tall chimes; he is smiling at the faces that stretch off to his left, claiming the metal folding chairs of the new wing. The assemblage today comes to one thousand worshipers, people who, like their pastor, descend from African chattel, who, like him, have lived against all adversity to see this holy day. Reverend Youngblood calls them "my folk."

He sees the ushers, the women in white dresses, the men in navy suits, each adorned with a medal of brass and enamel, seating the stragglers. He nods toward the wings for his childhood friend, Eli Wilson, to strike the organ chords of "For God So Loved the World." He hears from behind him the choir, bedecked in gray robes with lavender piping and a treble clef across the chest, lifting their voices into a great graceful arc. He feels on his shoulder the strong hand of Douglas Slaughter, the young minister he discovered waiting tables in Atlanta, and who now is his protégé.

And after the hymn subsides, Reverend Youngblood prays. He prays for friends and family and health; for Saint Paul is a place not only of faith but of hope. There are clipped shrubs on the lawn and poinsettias in the windows and a neon cross that bears the promise JESUS SAVES. There are a school and a bookstore and a computer system all beneath its roof. Where only eighty-four worshiped when Reverend Youngblood first was called, fifteen years ago, now the rolls tally close to five thousand. Why, in the last year alone, Saint Paul has seen the joys of 12 weddings, 16 conversions, 68 baby blessings, 275 baptisms, 620 new memberships.

But as he continues, head bowed and eyes closed, Reverend Youngblood prays also for the "enemies who give us reason to pray."

Of these, too, God has provided an abundance. Around the oasis that is Saint Paul sprawls a landscape of tenements and housing projects, of vacant lots where factories once stood, and locked and barred bungalows where decent people still try to live. It is not the places or their people that are the pastor's foes, but rather the forces of poverty and racism and industrial decline that created them, and perhaps most of all the crime that feasts upon them. In the slum called East New York, which stands on the bones of the Dutch settlement of New Lots, the last year counted the greatest concentration of violence in all New York City—90 murders, 102 rapes, robberies and assaults by the thousand. Only hours earlier on this blessed morning, a nine-year-old boy died in the neighborhood hospital, shot through the window of his aunt's apartment by a drug dealer who had mistaken his silhouette for that of a rival.

The police in this precinct wear T-shirts that say THE KILLING FIELDS. Even Saint Paul must guard its entrance with electronic surveillance and surround its parking lot with a chain-link fence topped by razor wire. Despite the activities during the week, the choir rehearsals and Bible study classes and myriad ministries, even the brawniest men would sooner double-park outside the church than turn a corner beyond its view.

It is not merely Reverend Youngblood's vanity to believe that Saint Paul is the best thing for blocks around. In the program each worshiper receives this morning, on the page labeled "Updates from 'The Paul,'" there are notices of adult education classes and sales of a videotape of a recent choir concert and the upcoming appearance by the church's youth group in a dance competition. So full of good news is the column that for one of the rare Sundays it omits Reverend Youngblood's request that parents lend him their children's report cards so that he can read their grades from the pulpit. In ways both obvious and ineffable, Sunday redeems all else.

"This is a party, y'all," Youngblood now tells the congregants, and Eli Wilson carves the deep groove of the gospel song called "Jesus Is the Light." Across the stage, his assistant, James Jones, answers on grand piano. The choir sways from side to side, hands clapping and shoulders shaking. Reverend Youngblood bounces forward on his feet, and pounds the beat into the air fist after fist, like a fighter working the heavy bag. Even the ushers, instructed to hold one hand at

their sides and one behind their backs, quiver against the impossible ideal of restraint.

"Now I know we got a 'small' ensemble in the choir loft," Eli says teasingly, as he drops the volume and wipes his brow, "and I can see by the looks on your faces out there, I know what you're thinking. You think we've just come to entertain this morning. Don't you?" He lets the phrase linger. "Well, we didn't. Just because the small ensemble is in the choir loft doesn't mean you're off the hook. We came to worship. Amen?"

"Amen," one thousand voices shout.

"All right?"

*"All right."*

Eli has a voice from an oaken cask, a voice that can inflate a bare room without effort. But now he leaps up from the organ, pulling the microphone with him, and begins to rip and tear through the song. He turns its melody into an obstacle course of grace notes and minor keys, erupting into phrases of praise, reeling back from the mike to narrow his eyes and clamp his lips in resolve, and finally pitching forward again into a fervent, shamanistic kind of call-and-response.

*I know He'll show up*  
**SHOW UP!**

*In me*  
**IN ME!**

*I know He'll rise up*  
**RISE UP!**

*Rise up*  
**RISE UP!**

*I'm gonna praise Him*  
**PRAISE HIM!**

*Praise Him*  
**PRAISE HIM!**

In the pews, arms swing and tilt like saplings in a strong wind. Heads bob by the score, heads in African *kufi* hats and Jamaican dreadlocks, in Madison Avenue mink and Fourteenth Street felt. Whatever the style, it is almost certainly the most elegant its owner can afford. Appearances at Saint Paul deceive. The man who wears pin-



stripes on Sunday may own no other suit. The woman in silk may have saved for months to buy it at the outlet mall in Reading. Yes, there are doctors and lawyers and executives, but more commonly there are packers and mailmen, secretaries and mechanics. The clue is in the hands. Saint Paul is a church of coarse hands, of oddly bent fingers and callused palms and broken nails with bruises beneath the polish, for even those hands that can now linger over a balance sheet or a computer keyboard in childhood probably picked tobacco in the Carolinas.

Normally, following the song, Reverend Youngblood would declare that each member “share the good news with your neighbor,” but today the congregation needs no such cue. Instantly the sanctuary resembles an immense indoor square dance as people hug, kiss, and clutch, all the while stepping in cadence with the song. From opposite ends of the room, siblings or spouses or friends fall together in embraces so desperate and enveloping they look like newly united survivors of a shipwreck. By threes or fives, others sink to their knees in communal prayer, the urgent sound of “Bless you” rising like steam from their midst.

Steep swells of music wash forward and back. Somewhere in the maelstrom a tambourine beats. Somewhere an old man dances a jig. Somewhere a voice cries, “Thank you, Jesus.” And before the last “Hallelujah” has faded, Reverend Youngblood shoots Eli a glance, and Eli deflects it toward the choir, and the next spiritual commences its slow, inexorable ascent.

*From the back row of the choir, all but eclipsed by the bodies swirling around his, peeks out the white face of Tom Approbato. Between his blue eyes and his bristly red beard, his mouth opens wide in song. He rocks on his heels like the baritones beside him. He is not a white man pretending at negritude. He is just one more sinner seeking redemption.*

*Once, growing up Roman Catholic in the 1950s, awed by a God who could be approached only in Latin, he had thought of becoming a priest. Puberty and the English mass ended that aspiration, and slowly he drifted away from religion itself. Then one night seven years ago something terrible happened, and he found himself on his knees asking to be forgiven. And not long after that, he fell in love with a black woman, who brought his reborn faith to Saint Paul.*

*They laid odds, the church's ministers, on whether the white man*

*would stay. They wondered when a visiting preacher launched a fiercely racial exegesis of the Creation. They wondered when Tom parted with his lover. Not only did he stay, he joined the choir. Not only did he stay, he volunteered to teach a night-school course. Not only did he stay, but he entered a seminary, having heard the call.*

"Together," Reverend Youngblood tells the congregants, "let's sing 'Happy Birthday' to our Savior." Accompanied by James Jones on piano, they do. "And let's give God the Father a hand for sending his Son into the world." There is vigorous applause. Reverend Youngblood leans forward, both arms resting on the lectern, in a posture of intimate conversation. "You know, I have discovered there are only two good reasons why anybody should be here this morning. One is that they believe in Jesus—and all who do, may I see your hands, that you may witness." Hundreds of hands push upward. "And the only other good reason for folk bein' here is they lookin' to believe in *some-thin'* and everything they got is fallin' down and crumblin' around 'em. And we just want you to know you're in the right place and you're lookin' for the right one." He straightens. "How many visitors do we have today? Could you please stand up."

A dozen people rise. The rest clap. Reverend Youngblood, as he usually does, calls on a Saint Paul member to welcome the visitors. Today he beckons Sean Blanks, the son of Rochester "Rocky" Blanks. Both men are Saint Paul success stories, Rocky a district supervisor for the Chock Full o'Nuts coffee company before becoming financial manager of the church at a fraction of the salary, Sean at age twenty-one a recent graduate of Syracuse University bound for advanced studies in hospital administration. Like most of the weekly greeters, young Blanks tells the first-timers they are attending "Church Unusual," the slogan of Reverend Youngblood's that is emblazoned on Saint Paul's stationery, bulletin boards, and vans. By "unusual," Reverend Youngblood means, don't be surprised to see cheerleaders or modern dancers involved in service, or to find dusty traditions like fried-chicken dinners absent from the calendar, or, for that matter, to observe hundreds of men like Rochester and Sean Blanks at worship.

*Few members would strike a visitor as more unusual than Robert Sharper. Even some fellow congregants have whispered of him, "Why's he*

*wearin' those hats in the sanctuary? Why's he keepin' his hair that way?" They refer to the knobby beginnings of dreadlocks and to the kente hat from Ghana that covers them, the very elements that to Robert himself symbolize rebirth.*

*More than almost anyone in the pews around him, Robert embodies the theological idea of resurrection. In Christmastimes past, he would have put his carpenter's pay into wine and cognac, heroin and cocaine. And if he had already spent the money, as he so often had, then he would have charmed some sucker into a loan or a free taste.*

*Even now, clean and sober for several years, he respects the temptations of what he calls "the threefold"—Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Eve. And he worries not only about himself. Having been saved, Robert came to understand the reason why: so that he could help rescue others. They call themselves the Wounded Healers, and they meet every Saturday at Saint Paul.*

*The powers of persuasion Robert honed in twenty years of addiction he now devotes to teaching the twelve steps of recovery. Each week is one step, and the cycle never ends. In this season of spiked eggnog and warmed brandy, of plentiful excuses to indulge, Robert knows terrifyingly well the meaning of the phrase "One day at a time."*

In the church of Reverend Youngblood's New Orleans childhood, as in so many other black congregations, the male presence consisted of boys shy of puberty, elderly uncles and grandfathers, and gay musicians. Even the pastor was a woman. The larger part of the neighborhood's men, the robust ones, the potential leaders, ventured no closer than the front door to drop off their women. Their sexuality made them blasphemers, and church was for the holy.

To Reverend Youngblood, however, God needed precisely those men. Christ's disciples, he often preached, were not sissies, and for his own disciples he wanted men who still harbored the warrior spirit. "This country is not going to live up to its potential," he often said, "until the black man lives up to his." He attracted them with a concept of church rule by an all-male board of elders. He attracted them with an all-male ministry, called Eldad-Medad after two of Moses' aides, which combined Bible study, group therapy, and lodge camaraderie. He attracted them, most of all, with his distaste for moral hypocrisy. He might be a prophet, he would have his men know, but

he was no saint, and that was all right, because the church was not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners.

Now, with the visitors seated, Reverend Youngblood asks all the men to stand. This they obligingly do—the ushers at their stations throughout the sanctuary, the high school students in their cluster in the last few pews, the tenors and baritones and basses of the choir, the elders in their block of folding chairs just off the altar. “My men,” Reverend Youngblood calls them. “My men.”

*One man is missing, one who worshiped last Christmas Eve and the thirteen other Christmas Eves of Reverend Youngblood’s service and thirty-eight more before that, back to his own boyhood. His name was Stephen Kelly, and he was the kind of lifelong member people called a “child of the church.” What absented him today was nothing less than death, death from the barrel of a police officer’s gun.*

*It had happened about a month after the last Christmas Eve, during an argument over a parking space. Kelly was unarmed. The officer, who was off duty at the time, was forty years his junior. Still, it was said, he had pistol-whipped Kelly before shooting him. Even Mayor Koch and the district attorney made it sound like a case that would be swiftly and justly closed.*

*Where Kelly no longer stands, two women sit. Annie Nesbitt was Kelly’s companion for the last seven years of his life. Inez Simpkins is his sister. The two hardly knew each other until that January night, but in the succeeding months they have become the closest of friends, partners for Bible class and trips to Rockefeller Center, united not only by affinity but by a kind of crusade.*

*They have gone to court, often with Kelly’s sons, seven times since the killing, and still the prosecution seems barely to have begun. The officer remains free on bail, and the only inquiry pressed was whether Kelly was sober on the night he was shot. An insulting question, the women thought, since everyone knew Stephen Kelly never drank.*

*Annie had always attended Saint Paul with Kelly, but Inez had departed from the church in antipathy a generation earlier. Only when she returned for her brother’s funeral did she realize how much she had missed it, and only when she heard Reverend Youngblood did she see that at least one preacher was not a fraud. Her Bible is open to Matthew this morning, but her mind, like Annie Nesbitt’s, never strays far from Job.*

\* \* \*

Each Sunday at Saint Paul serves, among other things, as a town meeting. Reverend Youngblood begins it by mentioning upcoming services, events, and classes, and then he turns personal, identifying easily and intimately individuals from his vast flock. He introduces a woman turning seventy-five, and she is applauded. He points out an usher whose family is buying a low-cost home built by the coalition of Brooklyn congregations that Reverend Youngblood chairs. He announces the thirtieth wedding anniversary of one of the church elders and his wife. "You see Barbara?" he adds, referring to the elder's wife. "When she sat down, she had a look of relief. Like, 'They said it couldn't be done.'" The assemblage roars, and the pastor himself buckles with laughter. "I'm so glad I can joke with y'all," he says. "Otherwise I'd be directin' a mortuary."

Then Reverend Youngblood locates atop the lectern a letter from a vice-president of Pratt Institute, a college in a different section of Brooklyn. Before beginning to read, the pastor adds that he has never met this man, as if to validate the praise about to be heard. "Saint Paul is the first church I have noticed, Baptist or otherwise, whose commitment to youth seems to be developing a measurable impact," Reverend Youngblood intones. "I can honestly state that your work has had as much impact here in the Pratt area, by virtue of the attitude, commitment, and philosophy of your membership, as any church in this neighborhood. I salute you and your members for your commitment to youth, and for the development of a sustained emphasis on the ever-increasing need for stronger roles and higher visibilities of black men in the development of youth.... We as a community can and will reclaim our young people."

*A stocky woman in red taffeta has reclaimed far more than her share. Her name is Kathleen Wilson, but all her grandchildren call her "Gram," the fourteen tied to her by blood and the two dozen others bound by love alone. Some stay with her for a summer, some for several years. Few have made a deeper claim on her than the teenaged boy living with her now, Ali Nurse, who was teetering on the brink of homelessness until she appeared.*

*She rouses him most Sundays at six o'clock for church, with the simple adjuration, "Let's get with it, Ali." He happens to be visiting relatives in*

*North Carolina just now, but when he returns he will find Christmas has been waiting. He will see how Kathleen decorated the apartment door with wrapping paper and ribbons like a package, and beneath the tree he will discover presents—a pair of wool gloves and a bottle of cologne and a matching pullover and slacks.*

*Then he will return to high school and what Kathleen prays will be his last term. The deal she made with her husband demands that Ali graduate in June, even though that means taking twelve classes this spring. She will support Ali but not protect him, for she is teaching him, like all who came before, that her love must be matched by his responsibility.*

Reverend Youngblood leads another prayer, a brief one, and then launches into a subject he dreads—debt. All his life he has nurtured a healthy wariness of the credit system and the black family's dependence on it. He remembers how the bills arrived in his parents' mailbox each Thursday evening, because the merchants knew Johnny's father would be paid the following afternoon. He remembers most clearly the day two white men drove away with his father's black Chrysler, the first car he had ever owned, repossessed because a workman fell two months behind in his payments.

In building Saint Paul to a membership of five thousand and a full-time staff of fifty-one, Reverend Youngblood naturally enough had to enter the mortgage and loan markets, and he always paid on time. The church itself operated on unforced philanthropy, not only the dollars dropped into wicker baskets at each service, but the tithes of ten percent of their annual salaries that eight hundred members gave. In Church Unusual, each donor even received a computer print-out at year's end for tax purposes.

Recently, however, the system had fallen short. Saint Paul had missed a \$145,000 mortgage payment on the property it was buying for a youth center, one of the pastor's central projects for the 1990s, and the bank in turn raised the interest rate to a punishing 21.5 percent. Today Reverend Youngblood wants to cull at least \$45,000, enough to assure the bank that the church intends to meet its obligations. Beyond this immediate crisis, the pastor must collect by May \$1.5 million already pledged for the new sanctuary. All of this comes above the donations that support a \$4 million annual operating bud-

get. The business of dunning plainly pains Reverend Youngblood, but the specter of dispossession haunts him even more.

"I've made known a need to you," he tells the worshipers, "and we come today to meet that need. We have an indebtedness that must be met. We have five thousand people on our rolls, and we are the wealthiest poor people in the world." Laughter echoes from the pews. "It is not that we do not have the money. I refuse to believe black folk do not have the money." His severe tone hushes the crowd. "They just do not want to use it for the Kingdom." There are murmurs of assent. "If we would forget the Christmas trees and forget the liquor cabinets, we would have enough money to liquidate our debt."

To Eli's organ underscoring, worshipers move up the aisles to the basket before the altar. "Bless you," Reverend Youngblood says to one. And: "I like that." And: "She brought a hundred dollars from the Lindenwood Diner. Said she robbed 'em."

Then the sacrifice turns personal. Reverend Youngblood receives no set salary, only the money that members seal in envelopes marked "Pastor's Love Offering." It is his way of saying that he leads at the congregation's sufferance, of measuring in an eminently quantifiable fashion his standing. Now he asks anyone with a donation for him to contribute it instead toward the mortgage. "I have a house," he says. "I have enough food. I have folk to take care of me." He pauses, then shouts. "But we will raise this \$45,000!"

*A young man with thick spectacles and a morning coat made the journey to the altar both times. He is not wealthy—far from it. Hobbled by slight retardation or a learning disability, at least according to the public schools that graduated him from high school with third-grade skills, he works the midnight shift as a security guard, earning less than \$250 a week, even with hours of overtime.*

*But Randy Murphy knows the definition of sacrifice, of struggle. He carries in his wallet a handwritten list entitled "My Goals," ranging from buying contact lenses to taking a vacation to developing discipline. Most of all, he aspires to live as he has never lived in his twenty-six years, independently.*

*Randy has already surprised his doubters many times, by holding a job, by helping the church, by winning the love of a college student, even if that love ended in betrayal. Still, there seems a gap between his grand*

*dreams and his ability to make them real, and Randy's spirit has survived only by denying that chasm exists.*

As a delegation of men carries the collection into the pastor's study, Eli Wilson moves his music stand into the center aisle to conduct the choir in Pergolesi's "Glory to God in the Highest." Reverend Youngblood sinks into his chair, attending closely, moving one hand now and again as if hitting a particular chord. His eyes close in contemplation of the sermon to come and, it is hard not to imagine, in worry and fatigue. He wipes an open hand across his face, almost kneading the flesh. After a few unmoving moments he reopens his eyes, spreads his arms wide, and brings his palms loudly together. He repeats the motion twice, moves to his feet, urging on both the choir and himself.

The program in each worshiper's hand announces that today's sermon is entitled "Thank God for Joseph." Most of the listeners know it represents the final link in a trilogy of yuletide sermons, sermons that even by Reverend Youngblood standards have been bracing, controversial, and revealing.

The cycle started exactly two weeks ago, with "Christmas in the Raw." What was raw about Christmas, Reverend Youngblood declared, was that the holiday marked not simply a birth, but a pregnancy, and the sexual act that leads to a pregnancy. He knew he was treading treacherous ground, and he stopped several times to ask for prayers and amens "because there are some people out there wanna shoot me already." Virgin birth and immaculate conception, he went on, were not biblical truths, but Roman Catholic interpretations. To believe Mary had been born without original sin, to believe Mary could conceive without the act of intercourse, raised Mary to a dangerously sacred plane.

"And when they do that," Reverend Youngblood had thundered, "they take away the Gospel for the ghetto. For me, when they lift Mary to these heights where can't nobody touch her, and then they change the Trinity into a quartet—meaning the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and Mary—you ladies are left out. My mama is left out! My wife is left out! And the good news of Christmas is that God got with an ordinary woman. And she conceived."

Reverend Youngblood had always appreciated the manner in which the ancient Greeks perceived their gods, as emotionally complex



and physically hungry beings, and part of his intent in the sermon had been to force a freer discussion of sexuality. He wanted, too, to argue for the divinity of pregnancy, regardless of the conditions surrounding it. Mary, he reminded his audience, was an unwed teenaged mother in a religious society that forbade birth out of wedlock. The Savior was born not to the sounds of cheerful carols but amid the grunts of labor and the stirring of livestock. And if that peculiar pregnancy could bring forth Jesus Christ, then it was clear where he and Saint Paul stood on abortion.

But even that was only part of the point. For, as always with Reverend Youngblood, scriptural exegesis carried with it painful autobiography:

Don't look at me funny. Please don't look at me funny. Cause, y'all, I went to college, and I didn't spend all my times in the boys' dormitory. Oh, it's good to get this stuff off your chest. And, yes, I've had some frightening moments. And even now, when I prepare this message, I can't prepare a message where I'm clear, where I'm in the clear and I'm straight and I tell y'all what y'all oughta do.

This thing is a two-edged sword. It whips back and cuts the hell out of me and then comes forward and cuts y'all. And the truth of God's word is not predicated on my lifestyle. It is predicated on God's word itself. He sends sinful men to preach to sinful men. I'm just another beggar, tellin' other beggars where to find bread.

After the service had ended that morning two weeks earlier, Reverend Youngblood had gone directly to the telephone in his office and dialed a number in New Orleans, his hometown. "How you doin', Doc?" he had asked the man of twenty on the other end. Then he had heard a silence of surprise in the receiver, for it was usually the young man who telephoned Reverend Youngblood. "I guess you're wonderin' why I called," the pastor had gone on. "Well, I just preached a sermon, and the sermon I preached made me think of you." They had spoken for a few moments more, and before hanging up, the young man had told Reverend Youngblood, "I love you."

The young man, at least according to his mother, was the pastor's