

GILEAD SABBATH
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
September 20, 2015

OPENING WORDS¹

Today, as we observe this Gilead Sabbath, we lift up the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people in Africa and across the globe.

We give thanks for the diversity of their sexual gifts, and we acknowledge the realities of their daily lives...lives involve bold commitments to love, surprising sources of hope, and the joys of kindred community.

We affirm their wholeness, dignity, and worth. At the same time, we lament the pain, violence, and injustice they experience based on their sexual or gender identities, and the discrimination and persecution their governments impose.

Let us, as people of faith, answer their calls for support.

Let us vow to break our silence and to use religion as source of justice and love.

Let us pray that we may ALL one day live in a world where all people are celebrated and loved, where their rights are secured, and where their sexual and gender diversity is valued.

Come, let us join in this bold venture together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES

Red: A Crayon's Story

~ Michael Hall

(A red crayon can only colour blue. This story tells of his experiences and interactions as all learn to embrace his 'true' colour.)

RESPONSIVE READING²

Reader: We recognize sexuality as central to our humanity and integral to our spirituality.

All: We celebrate the goodness of creation, including our bodies and our sexualities.

Reader: We speak out against the pain, brokenness, oppression, and loss of meaning that many experience about their sexuality.

All: We yearn for a world that welcomes, affirms, and fully includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people across the globe.

Reader: We are called to witness the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people in African countries.

All: We recognize that too many people are ostracized, assaulted, or persecuted for their sexual or gender identities.

Reader: We affirm the dignity and worth of all people. We acknowledge the beauty and wisdom of sexual and gender diversity.

All: We pray for a world where difference is recognized and celebrated.

¹ <http://www.religiousthought.org/gilead/pray/>

² <http://www.religiousthought.org/gilead/pray/>

Reader: We acknowledge that much of the violence, discrimination, or persecution against LGBTQ people in Africa has been done in the name of religion.

All: We dedicate ourselves to using religion for justice, healing, and love.

Reader: We pledge to respond to the calls of African LGBTQ people.

All: We commit ourselves to responsibility and humility in our justice-making action, following the leadership and guidance of African LGBTQ people.

Reader: We gather on the side of the marginalized, the poor, and the persecuted to learn, to pray, and to act.

All: We long for that balm in Gilead – that the wounded would be made whole, the ailing would be healed, and the discouraged would be revived in hope.

MESSAGE

There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul. A balm in Gilead. Balm...a fragrant ointment used to heal or soothe.

When I was a little girl, I imagined that I might be a doctor when I grew up. I remember sitting on our gravel driveway, finding bits of soft limestone, which I then crushed in crude mortar and pestle fashion. I stirred and mixed that crushed stone with water, creating a gray mush that I imagined to be a healing poultice...smearing it on my scraps and cuts...and declaring that I had discovered a miracle. My brothers would have none of it; my sister was skeptical, but at least allowed me to smother her with my curative 'balm of Ramsey, South Dakota.'

Now, my muddy poultice never gained the status of the balm mentioned repeatedly in the Hebrew Bible. Historians of antiquity tell us that when the Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon some 3000 years ago, one of the gifts she brought was a balm made from a balsam tree that grew in her land...modern day Yemen. Apparently Solomon was so impressed by its healing qualities that he asked the Queen to send him seeds and young trees of plants from which the balm was taken, and he then created a grove of those trees near Jericho...in a place called Gilead.³

Those trees and the balm that was made from their sap became quite famous. Many healing properties were attributed to it...from relieving menstrual cramps to assisting with conception...from being an antidote for snakebite and pneumonia, to curing vertigo and epilepsy.⁴

A balm in Gilead...has become a figure of speech signifying a universal cure, such as is called for in the song we just sang...an African-American spiritual of unclear origins and with many versions, but sung well before, and in longing for, the Emancipation Proclamation which freed black slaves in the States.

³ <http://eastshoreunitarian.org/~eastshor/images/stories/2014.01.12MontagnesSermon.pdf>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balm_of_Gilead

A balm in Gilead. Would that there was a balm that we could slather on the societal wounds of hatred and prejudice. Would that there was balm that could heal violence and persecution.

Gilead Sabbath is an initiative of the Religious Institute, a multifaith organization founded by UU minister Debra Haffner dedicated to advocating for sexual health, education, and justice in faith communities and in society. I have followed the Religious Institute since seminary days in part because they provide some of the sexuality education and training that's required for UU ministers-to-be.

And so, through their emails, I became aware of the Gilead Sabbath Initiative, which was created to support faith communities in 'helping to end the violence, discrimination, and persecution that LGBTQ people face around the world.'⁵ I was a little surprised to see that the materials they provided focused primarily on Africa; it seemed a little narrow given the 'around the world' mission of the initiative. Of course, like you, I have heard the news stories about current events in Nigeria and Uganda, but I guess I imagined them as islands of intolerance. But now, having spent some time in research for this morning, I am a bit ashamed of my lack of awareness.

I certainly don't presume that you are as ignorant as I, but let me tell you a bit of what I have learned.

- In 2015, out of the 55 states on the African continent recognized by the United Nations, homosexuality is outlawed in 34, and 2 others have laws which apply to heterosexual and homosexual individuals differently.⁶
- In Mauritania, Sudan, and northern Nigeria, homosexuality is punishable by death. In Uganda, Tanzania, and Sierra Leone, 'offenders' can receive life imprisonment for homosexual acts. Nigeria's anti-gay law goes so far as to make it illegal to even be an ally...convicted of such support could mean a 10-year jail sentence.⁷
- The president of Gambia, Yahya Jammeh, whose Operation Bulldozer seeks to eradicate homosexuals from that country,⁸ has said that homosexuals should be decapitated.⁹
- The president of Zimbabwe recently told a rally that his country could never accept homosexuality, and that gay people are 'worse than pigs, goats, and birds.'¹⁰
- In Cameroon, following the recent torture and murder of a colleague, gay rights activists have announced that they will stop their work until they are given the protection of some international agency.¹¹ They are scared for their lives.

⁵ <http://www.religioustheology.org/gilead/>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_in_Africa

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_in_Africa

⁸ http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/josh-d-scheinert/gay-persecution-in-africa_b_1911459.html?

⁹ http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/01/13/nigeria-anti-gay-law_n_4592108.html

¹⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/30/gay-rights-world-best-worst-countries>

¹¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/30/gay-rights-world-best-worst-countries>

- South Africa is the only state in Africa which recognizes same-sex marriage and the only state where an LGBT person can serve in the military or adopt a child.¹²

Given these statistics, it is clear why the Gilead Sabbath Initiative has chosen to focus on raising awareness about rights in Africa.

Still, and sadly, Africa is NOT the only place where LGBT rights are worsening. In Iran and other Middle Eastern countries as well, homosexuality is punishable by death. In Russia and the Ukraine, violence against LGBT people is rising. Africa is NOT the only place in the world where LGBTQ persons face considerable challenges, including social stigma, homophobic violence, and high rates of HIV/AIDS infection. Here in North America, homophobic violence continues to plague our society, and suicide rates have not abated.

My soul is sick. Where the hell is Gilead?

Where is Gilead for the real life people and the people who love them who are behind these atrocious statistics? Where is Gilead for those who are living with daily persecution and violence simply because of who they are?

Sin isn't a word that slides easily across the lips of any Unitarian. But if there is anything that can be called sin, in my book, it is synonymous with structures of power and oppression that breed hatred and fear and violence...inciting us to see difference as a thing to be squelched and uprooted. With such an understanding in mind, I can easily speak of my sin-sick soul. I am so darn sick of this kind of sin...sin precipitated by governments who treat people differently, spreading habits that insidiously creep into individual hearts and take up residence, hearts that are as capable...more capable, I believe...to love. Where is the balm for this?

Poe fans might remember this lovesick lament in "The Raven:"

Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil! – prophet still, if bird or devil! –
 Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
 Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted –
 On this home by Horror haunted – tell me truly, I implore –
 Is there – is there balm in Gilead? – tell me – tell me, I implore!"
 Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

Is it really so hopeless?

Ever heard of Jeremiah? He was one of the Hebrew prophets, and like many prophets, hadn't really asked to be a one. See, the job of a prophet is to interpret what's happening in society...and then to make a loud noise...warning us that there will be consequences if we don't change our ways. Not a fun, or always safe, job.

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_in_South_Africa

But call it the voice of God, or a passion for justice, or the still small voice within, Jeremiah couldn't turn his back on the call to prophesy. He couldn't, and didn't, choose to sit down and be quiet.

But, the people did not want to hear what he had to say. They didn't like him shaking up the power structure. They did not want to change their ways. So they starved him and beat him and nearly killed him.

And Jeremiah cried out in hopeless agony. "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician? Oh that my head were waters and my eyes a fountain of tears that I may weep day and night."¹³ Is there no balm in Gilead?

Modern day Jeremiahs are the appalling news stories from around the world that try to wake us up. Modern day Jeremiahs are the human rights NGOs who work so tirelessly for an end to persecution. A modern day Jeremiah is the Gilead Sabbath Initiative, exposing the 'sins of the world.' President Obama was a Jeremiah when he lectured Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta about his country's gay rights record in June.¹⁴ Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird was a Jeremiah when he spoke out strongly against Russian President Putin's anti-gay laws.¹⁵ Let us hear these Jeremiahs...Jeremiahs who are speaking directly to us...calling on us to join them in raising our voices in opposition to human rights violations. These Jeremiahs are speaking directly to us...calling on us to examine our own personal prejudices and the structures of oppression that exist in our own culture. These Jeremiahs are asking us to be that balm in Gilead.

This is a critical moment for LGBT rights in Africa. As advances are happening in rights around the world...in Argentina and Uruguay and Columbia and Vietnam and Malawi and the United States...backlashes happen in other places, with 'give them an inch and they'll take a mile' kind of response.¹⁶ African leaders make the case that gay rights go against their culture and religious values system, and that they will resist all pressure to change as simply more 'western imperialism,' which is an understandable reaction, given our shared history. Josh D. Scheinert, a lawyer practising international law in Toronto, writes passionately about LGBT rights in Africa, having served as a visiting lecturer with the Faculty of Law at the University of The Gambia. In Jeremiah-style essays, Scheinert calls on African leaders to stand up at the UN and claim a more just and moral way for their nations. He writes: "LGBT advocacy in Africa is a steep, uphill battle. No one is disputing that it will take a great deal of time and effort to win hearts and minds. However, there is a stark difference between tolerating gradual cultural evolution that affords the best prospects of success, and permitting active persecution of LGBT individuals."

¹³ Jeremiah 8:22

¹⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/25/politics/obama-kenya-kenyatta/>

¹⁵ http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorials/2014/05/25/let_africas_activists_attend_gay_rights_conference_editorial.html

¹⁶ ¹⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/30/gay-rights-world-best-worst-countries>

We must not tolerate active persecution. But what can we do? The 2015 Uganda Report of Violations Based on Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation¹⁷ makes three recommendations to the international community...to us:

1. Call on [oppressive] governments to improve and expand rights for LGBT individuals
2. Use quiet diplomacy to sensitize leaders on LGBT issues and to influence the adoption of non-discriminatory legislation
3. Support initiatives aimed at creating public awareness on sexuality, sexual and health rights, and violence and discrimination...initiatives aimed at influencing policy that ensures service provision [and rights] for LGBT persons.

Call oppressive governments on the error of their ways. Help them to understand our common humanity. And support work that raises awareness and changes policy.

I think we forget how much power and privilege we have as citizens of a free democracy. We forget that we have the power of influence and voice as citizens of a nation that can choose to be a world leader. We forget that as a faith community, we can be modern day Jeremiahs who take a stand for justice.

The on-the-ground battle for gay rights in Africa must mostly be fought by members of those societies, says Scheinert, but there is nothing culturally insensitive or neo-colonial about standing with them, and demanding that the persecution comes to an end.¹⁸ Human rights are human rights everywhere.

Remember the concept of *ubuntu*?...a Nguni Bantu term which means literally "human-ness." Since the transition to democracy in South Africa, the concept of *ubuntu* has become more widely known, most notably popularized by Desmond Tutu. Ubuntu, human-ness, is seen as the interconnection of self with the community, and the understanding that the success of each is tied to the success of the other.

Perhaps cultural roots in *ubuntu* helped to form prophet Martin Luther King Jr who wrote these words from the Birmingham Jail: "In a real sense all life is inter-related. All [people] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... This is the inter-related structure of reality."

I believe there is a balm in Gilead, and that that balm lies in our ability, our call, to listen to the voices of the LGBT community in Africa and around the world and to stand in solidarity with them.

I just saw this on FB last night...something that serves as an example of the power of 'standing with.' As you may know, many UU congregations in the states have posted banners and signs

¹⁷ http://iglhrc.org/sites/iglhrc.org/files/15_02_22_lgbt_violations_report_2015_final.pdf

¹⁸ http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/josh-d-scheinert/africa-gay-rights_b_1795598.html

that read “Black Lives Matter.” And, many of those signs have been repeatedly stolen and defaced. In a recent statement, a coalition of black UUs wrote this: “To the Unitarian Universalist congregations who are standing strong with Black Lives Matter — We see you and we thank you. You are the ones that bolster our strength in the waking nightmare of the global phenomenon that is anti-blackness.”

Standing beside, walking in solidarity with, people who are living the waking nightmare of oppression and violence can be the balm in Gilead that provides much needed strength and affirmation. There is a balm in Gilead.

In the name of all LGBTQ people around the world...in the name of love, in the name of peace, in the name of freedom...let us stand with them.

So be it.

READING *UFP's 2008 Welcoming Congregation Resolution*

In 2008, when we became a welcoming congregation, we passed a resolution about our intentions and commitments.

Resolution of the Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough April 2008

We do hereby resolve to:

- Be inclusive and expressive of the concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, and
- Nurture ongoing dialogue among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and heterosexual persons and to create deeper trust and sharing, and
- Celebrate the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and all people and our diverse ways of expressing love for each other, and
- Advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons and to promote justice, freedom, and equality in the larger society,

And therefore declare our intention to be known as a welcoming congregation.

CLOSING WORDS

Steven Biko, who died while in police custody, is known for fighting South African apartheid in the late 60s and 70s. These are his words. “We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us, But as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life.”

Let us, as people of faith, answer this call to be a community of brothers and sisters.

Let us, use our faith as source of justice and love.

Let us pray that we may ALL one day live in a world where is person is celebrated and loved, where all rights are secured, and all sexual and gender diversity is valued.

Go, and help to make it so. Blessed be.