

***"To Make the Wounded Whole"***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
World AIDS Day/Christ the King Sunday, November 25, 2018  
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**Holy Scriptures: 2 Corinthians 4:1, 7-18 (NRSV)**

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.

<sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. <sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. <sup>11</sup> For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup> So death is at work in us, but life in you.

<sup>13</sup> But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and so we speak, <sup>14</sup> because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. <sup>15</sup> Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.  
Living by Faith

<sup>16</sup> So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, <sup>18</sup> because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

## ***There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole***

*A balm is an aromatic, medicinal substance derived from plants.*

*Gilead was an area east of the Jordan River,  
well known for its spices and ointments.*

*The "balm of Gilead" was a high-quality ointment with healing properties.*

*In the Holy Bible the term "balm of Gilead" is used metaphorically  
as an example of something with healing or soothing powers.*

*In [Genesis 37:25](#), as Joseph's brothers contemplated how to kill him,  
a caravan of Ishmaelites passed by on their way to Egypt from Gilead.  
In their cargo were "spices, balm, and myrrh."*

*[Jeremiah 8](#) records God's warning to Judah of what Babylon would do to them.  
Upon hearing the news, Jeremiah laments. "Is there no balm in Gilead?" (verse 22).  
His question is a poetic search for hope—a plea for healing.*

*"There Is a Balm in Gilead" is an African-American spiritual  
that compares the healing balm to the saving power of Jesus,  
the one true treatment that never fails to heal our spiritual wounds.  
—Got Questions.org Website*

## **To Make the Wounded Whole**

A few years ago our congregation decided to allow a non-profit agency  
to utilize a former classroom space on the second floor.

Some of us went upstairs to clean out the classroom,  
which happened to be filled with ancient wheelchairs and crutches.

Friend of the church John Sabine was in the cleaning party.

John looked at the collection and exclaimed,

*"My God! What happened, the church held a revival and did healing?!"*

Too often we think of healing as personal, as an individual experience.

Let's broaden our minds; let's widen our horizons.

Communities and cities, cultures and peoples

can be broken, fragmented, become ill;

we can also become well, healed, restored.

We speak of communal trauma and communal healing.

*"Sometimes the tissues of community can be damaged*

*in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body,  
but even when that does not happen,  
traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals  
can combine to create a mood, an ethos—a group culture, almost—  
that is different from (and more than)  
the sum of the private wounds that make it up.  
Trauma, that is, has a social dimension.”*

- Kai Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community," pg. 185 in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth

We are living, coping, dealing with a communal trauma of HIV and AIDS.  
Trauma has a social dimension; we are all touched, affected and effected.  
We are gathered to seek the balm of Gilead God offers and provides,  
**to make the wounded whole.**

Tom Hanks played a lawyer in the movie "Philadelphia".  
His character was stricken with AIDS, and when his law firm found out, he was fired.  
He hired an up-and-coming attorney played by Denzel Washington to represent him.  
Great story, script, cast, and director,  
offering the gift of dignity to families and individuals and cities  
suffering from AIDS and HIV.

When Tom Hanks won the Academy Award for Best Actor, he said:  
*I would not be standing here if it weren't for two very important men in my life...  
Mr. Rawley Farnsworth, who was my high school drama teacher,  
who taught me to act well the part, there all the glory lies.  
And one of my classmates under Mr. Farnsworth,  
Mr. John Gilkerson.  
I mention their names because they are two of the finest gay Americans,  
two wonderful men that I had the good fortune to be associated with,  
to fall under their inspiration at such a young age.  
I wish my babies could have the same sort of teacher, the same sort of friends.  
And there lies my dilemma here tonight.  
I know that my work in this case is magnified by the fact  
that the streets of heaven are too crowded with angels.  
We know their names.  
They number a thousand for each one of the red ribbons that we wear here tonight.  
They finally rest in the warm embrace of the gracious creator of us all.  
A healing embrace that cools their fevers,  
that clears their skin,  
and allows their eyes to see the simple, self-evident,  
common sense truth that is made manifest  
by the benevolent creator of us all  
and was written down on paper  
by wise men, tolerant men,*

*in the city of Philadelphia two hundred years ago.  
God bless you all. God have mercy on us all. And God bless America.*

## **To Make the Wounded Whole**

What is the character of the Ruler of the Universe  
is the fundamental core question of the Kingdom of God.  
Our answer to this core question should then guide our response to AIDS, HIV,  
and how to live with and love one another.  
God has mercy, and every soul is a beneficiary of God's mercy.  
The nature and nurture of the Ruler of the Universe is to include every soul.  
Those cast out of our community or culture or church  
are welcomed home by God.  
We continue to grieve for the incredible, senseless loss  
of so many wonderful souls who have died far too young due to AIDS and HIV,  
including a childhood friend who rescued me from drowning at age 14,  
and a childhood friend of Betty's, and our neighbors the world over.

As the Apostle Paul shared with the Church in Corinth and here in Atlanta:

*<sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;  
perplexed, but not driven to despair;  
<sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken;  
struck down, but not destroyed;  
<sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus,  
so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.  
<sup>11</sup> For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake,  
so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.  
<sup>12</sup> So death is at work in us, but life in you."*

The glory that Paul speaks of resides in us, in the earthly, clay jars of our bodies,  
in you and me and all of us together.

The good news is the treasure.

The treasure is the Good News,

and this Good News of God's love

is carried, borne, shared in the earthen vessels of our bodies,

earthen vessels like the earthy ministers like Paul who go to prison

for civil rights and religious rights and human rights;

earthly pastors who work because they must

and preach when they can;

earthly prophets who stand on the Watchtower

and tell us of the night,

proclaiming truth and justice and civility

in the midst of mayhem, monsters, &

madness.

But Paul's teachings go beyond the clay jars of the priesthood;  
he speaks of the priesthood of all believers, of truthsayers,  
of folks who wonder who this Jesus is  
and might like to learn some more.

There is treasure in the earthly widows and widowers  
who carry on, who persevere.

Treasure overflows in earthly teenagers who, on their school holiday,  
show up to help a community church unload trees from a truck.

Treasure is made real in earthly families of all shapes and sizes from one to many,  
folks who hold and comfort the afflicted,  
folks who are bold to afflict the comfortable.

### **To Make the Wounded Whole**

Communal trauma has a social dimension. There is certainly a spiritual dimension.  
They say the church is the only army that shoots its wounded.

Far too often we reject or neglect or subject those who need love the most.

Shame on us when we fall into the traps of hate and rejection,  
and good for humanity when we do as God wills, to love unconditionally.

We have this hope that we can make a world of difference.

We can start with ourselves.

We can start by turning away from the ways of hate and harming each other  
and toward the ways of teaching and practicing *shalom*,  
the wholeness God intends for us all.

The Good News is that we have this hope.

Rev. Patricia Case proclaimed from this pulpit,

"May we run out of time before we run out of hope."

### **To Make the Wounded Whole**

Thanks be to God, we can communicate in a nanosecond  
with family and neighbors around the globe.

We can soar above the clouds and bring light  
into the deepest seas, canyons and caves.

And whenever we bend our will to the will of God, we can make a difference.

If ever there was a need for the Church to step up, step out, and step forward,  
now is the time.

The Church has historically been hesitant to stand up for justice and mercy.

We were slow to respond to the Civil Rights Movement,  
Women's Liberation Movement and Gay Rights Movement;  
slow to react to genocides in Europe, Asia and Africa;  
and slow to walk alongside those with HIV/Aids.

Let us not be tardy again.

As members and friends in the Church  
we bear the Cross to take social responsibility

to be agents of healing and hope in a fragmented world.  
Here is what we can do.  
Pray for our neighbors in Africa, Atlanta, and anywhere  
that a soul is stricken by AIDS.  
Thanks to the grace of God,  
prayer has the power to overcome isolation, despair, evil intent,  
demons, separation, disease and, yes, death.  
Prayer yokes us, one to the other, through the power of love.  
We will pray for healing,  
and we will pray for stronger backs to bear whatever loads we must.  
Focus on what works.  
Advocate for resources to be provided  
wherever our help is most needed for succor and support.  
Make charitable gifts to reputable agencies that will go directly to aid those in need.

Here is what we will not do.  
We will not panic or despair.  
We will not be afraid.  
We will not give in to fear.  
We will not forget.  
We will not participate in hysteria or hyperbole,  
nor will we attempt to use this or any tragic disease and human suffering  
for political gain or put-downs.

Now is the time for all good people to come together,  
to work and serve on a united front,  
to set aside petty differences and discern common ground  
so that we might save lives and build healthier communities.  
With the help of God,  
we will do this in remembrance of Christ,  
in such a time as this.

### **To Make the Wounded Whole**

Beth Zemsky of Minneapolis is an activist  
for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights.  
She shared on National Public Radio this past Tuesday a part of her life experience.  
At StoryCorps Atlanta, [2]  
Beth told fellow activist Kierra Johnson about an experience  
that deeply affected her back in 1987  
at the March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.  
Beth Zemsky had hoped her twin brother Bob  
would join her at the March on Washington,  
but he called at the last minute and said that he had a high fever,

that he had come down with the flu.  
In her body she knew, she knew that he did not have the flu,  
that he might be HIV positive and have AIDS.

That day was very cold in Washington, DC.  
She and thousands of others were in the Metro Station  
waiting for their trains to arrive.  
Beth looked up and saw above them on an upper level a row of policemen  
wearing thick gloves and holding long batons,  
repeatedly beating the batons against their hands, making a steady beat.  
Beth looked beside her and saw a young man sitting on a bench  
who was very cold  
despite being wrapped in a blanket and held closely by a friend.  
She noticed how thin he was, and worried that he might not have long to live.  
The young man started singing a Holly Near song:

*"We are a gentle, loving people,  
and we are singing, singing for our lives." [3]*

It got very quiet except for his voice.  
The police stopped banging their batons.  
Soon people began to join in the song,  
and soon the whole platform of travelers were singing in one voice:  
*We are a gentle, angry people,  
and we are singing, singing for our lives  
We are a justice seeking people,  
and we are singing, singing for our lives  
We are young and old together,  
and we are singing, singing for our lives  
We are gay and straight together,  
and we are singing, singing for our lives  
We are a gentle, loving people,  
and we are singing, singing for our lives*  
A train arrived at the station,  
and people boarded the train still singing, still singing for their lives.

Beth Zemsky's brother Bob passed away soon afterward.  
She said, *"Now I am half a twin.  
When I get really discouraged or despairing, I think about that moment,  
about what it is like to be a community who loves each other,  
and who hold each other up when we are most desperate and dying.  
That is the moment that is most inspiring to me."*

We have this audacity of hope that maybe we can make a world of difference.  
We simply, purely, faithfully want to help and heal, to behold and be held.  
We're at our best when things are at their worst.

Maybe we have to start where we are, right here and now.  
And maybe, just maybe, we can start by practicing what it is like  
to be a community who loves each other,  
who hold each other up as we move toward home.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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[1] *Rev. Patricia Case, March 23, 2013.*

[2] *StoryCorps Atlanta is in partnership with the Atlanta History Center. Beth Zensky's story was recorded at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Creating Change Conference.*

[3] "We Are A Gentle, Angry People" by Holly Near