

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said,

“When you enter a synagogue or a church, you know it is one that is prayed in, because it has the odor of sanctity about it. You also can tell when you’ve entered a happy home—there’s something in the atmosphere. If there has been continual fighting, even the smiles that are put on for you won’t fool you. And so the pain must be addressed.”¹

On a day when we welcome new members, celebrate a baptism, and begin a new, forward looking chapter of ministry in the birth of our Stephen Ministry and in welcoming a new ordained staff member to assist us in the growth of our youth and young adult programs, it is only right to stop to look at where we are.

A colleague once wrote about her six rules for knowing when she was in the wrong church. Her criteria went something like this:

1. Make sure the church doesn’t have gun racks on the back of the pews.
2. Check to see if the Bible they use is the “Dr. Seuss Version.”
3. The choir wears leather robes.
4. Worship services are B.Y.O.S. or, “Bring Your Own Snake.”
5. There’s no cover charge, but Communion is a two-drink minimum. *And,*
6. The members of the Women’s Quartet are all married to the pastor.

The criteria for being in the right church is different for everyone, I suspect, but for me, it is about finding community in a shared vision that best represents how our lives mirror what the message of our faith tells us to be true. It is about standing for that vision even when the world and the institutions that support the message of the status-quo tell us we are wrong-headed and on the outside. And, it is about being a place of hope and healing that reflects the teaching, healing message of Jesus.

I was very proud to be a member of this church last week. Were you? It was a day when we showed our true colors. I heard from people from all over the place this week, some of whom I had never heard of, who wrote glowingly about how IUCC provided the right note at the right time in standing against prejudice, fear and for the embrace of our neighbor, in this case our Muslim neighbor, but in line with the love of whomever the neighbor it is that has been marginalized.

It's funny what happens when you draw a line to keep others out. Jesus is always standing on the other side of the line. On what side of the line do we stand”

Attending a wedding for the first time, a little girl whispered to her mother, “Why is the bride dressed in white?”

“Because white is the color of happiness. Today is the happiest day of her life.” The child thought about this for a moment, and then said, “So why is the groom wearing black?”

What are your true colors, church?

When Desmond Tutu talked about the odor of sanctity in the church that is prayed in, he also talked about the pain that must be addressed—pain that bubbles to the surface in so many unhealthy ways and in laments heard today in response to the conditions in which we find ourselves in the world.

This particular lament expressed in Jeremiah's distress at some unidentified calamity which had befallen Israel had bubbled up once before. Widespread suffering afflicted the nation. The prophet mourned with the people, the poor in particular. He spoke for them by asking the unanswerable question: "Is God not in Zion?" Feeling deserted by Yahweh was a natural reflection of their dire straits.

The exact nature of the disaster Jeremiah experienced can only be conjectured. There are some clues, however, in the prophet's words. Verse 20 tells us that the harvest had been gathered and the summer had ended. Verse 22 speaks of the continuing ill-health of the people who are identified as "my poor people." From these hints one can draw the reasonable conclusion that the harvest had failed, possibly the result of prolonged drought. The prophet's vision of his head as a spring and his tears as a fountain also suggests this. The hopes of the common people, who often lived in the edge of starvation, had been dashed. Hunger had turned to famine. The most vulnerable poor were dying as if slain in warfare.

In the 19th and 20th centuries the words "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" became the symbolic inspiration for a moving African-American spiritual. It may have been a healing oil from east of the Jordan in Gilead, or it may have come through there in the trade caravans from Arabia or East Africa where such substances still grow in the wild. It is said to have had antiseptic, counter-irritant and general medicinal properties.

Jeremiah's metaphor of something that will heal the spiritual malaise that had enveloped the nation strikes an emotional response in every sensitive heart. Although referring to people of Judea in the early 6th century BCE, it can also be very meaningful to a suffering individual.

Lectionary Commentator, John Shearman, tells a personal story: "My mother-in-law was diagnosed with inoperable cancer. One Sunday in September, unable to join her husband at worship as she had done most of her life, she turned on the radio and heard a soloist singing the spiritual, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" Afterward she said that while she listened a deep, abiding peace came over her and she knew that all would be well. She died in December of that same year, sooner and with much less pain than anticipated."

Who today are the bringers of such healing balms, not only to people in personal or physical pain, passing slowly out of this world, but to the very culture around us that perhaps feels as if it is dying? Can we be such agents of healing to one another in a very personal and quiet way, as well as in the positions that our faith calls us to take together—stands for equality and justice that strengthen and heal even us as we perform them?

UCC theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, said that "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love."²

In 1 Timothy, the theological and historical situation implicit in this passage point to a much later date than the 50s C.E. when Paul carried on his ministry to the Gentiles with Timothy as a co-worker. It is a letter honoring Paul as a pastor to pastors, writing to the developing institution we will finally call, "the church."

Questions can be raised about the use of the word "ransom" in vs. 6. It is used in a new way to debate the growing Christian gnosticism that believed in a more universal salvation involving a knowledge of God deep within, rather than being a saving instrument from afar.

The issue is still very much alive. Bishop John Spong re-ignited it by proposing a much more radical interpretation of the Christ-event in his book, *Christianity Must Change or Die*. He believes that we must rid ourselves of the whole concept of Jesus as Rescuer which has dominated

the theological and doctrinal attention of the church since Paul's time. Spong, like many more progressive thinkers, believes that we are the hands of Christ that follow him in order to be the healing balm for the world today—a world and a culture that continues today to suffer, and to compound that suffering in actions that demean their imagined enemies, thus debasing themselves.

If, as Tutu stated, “When you enter a synagogue or a church, you know it is one that is prayed in, because it has the odor of sanctity about it. You also can tell when you've entered a happy home—there's something in the atmosphere,” then can we together become healing balms to our family, our community, our country, and even the world, when all we hear around us is the pain of where we find ourselves today mirrored in the prejudice and scapegoating of our neighbors everywhere?

And what of the times when we ourselves are suffering? Joyce Rupp, writing in, *Praying Our Goodbyes*, wrote about what she called “creative suffering.”

“Suffering in itself has no value,” she said. “It is what we do with our suffering that makes the difference. Suffering can be beneficial when it leads to some kind of ‘resurrection’ in us, when a strength or a sleeping energy in us is aroused, when talents heretofore unknown are recognized, when a clarity about life's purpose and direction becomes keener for us, when a stronger sense of compassion for others deepens in us. There is so much within us that needs to come to life. Moments of suffering, times of goodbye can cause us to peer inside our own tombs of unfinishedness or incompleteness and we can discover vast storehouses of resiliency, vitality, fidelity, love and endurance.”³

In a world that is clearly suffering, and in times when we ourselves suffer as well—church: what are your true colors?

Playwright and former Czech president Vaclav Havel, said of this, “I am not an optimist because I am not sure that everything ends well. Nor am I a pessimist because I am not sure everything ends badly. I just carry hope in my heart ...Life without hope is an empty, boring and useless life. I cannot imagine that I could strive for something if I did not carry hope in me. I am thankful to God for this gift. It is as big a gift as life itself.

Carry hope into this world—it needs it now more than ever. The healing balm in Gilead is in your hands, for there is no other.

Sermon Resources

General: Exegesis Material: John Shearman's Lectionary (online)

1. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as quoted in Colin Greer, “Without Memory, There Is No Healing; Without Forgiveness, There Is No Future,” *Parade*, January 11, 1998, 6.
2. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner, 1952).
3. Joyce Rupp, *Praying Our Goodbyes* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1988),

Scripture for Sunday, September 17, 2010

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

18 My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. 19 Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?” (“Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?”) 20 “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” 21 For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. 22 Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the

health of my poor people not been restored? 9:1 O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!

1 Timothy 2:1-7

1 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. 3 This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, 6 who gave himself a ransom for all —this was attested at the right time. 7 For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.