

*Is There a Balm in Gilead?*

Jeremiah 8; 1 Timothy 2:1-11

Whitefish UMC

Sunday, September 19, 2010

- † Patrick stepped up to the pulpit and began to sing. His beautiful baritone voice intoned the words to the familiar spiritual—Balm in Gilead. An African-American singer with the Lyric Opera of Chicago, Patrick had been asked by the pastor to sing at my sister Penny’s memorial service.
- † Next to me in the “family row” right up front were my mother on one side of me and my nine-year old niece, Anya—now an orphan—on the other. We were numb with grief and exhaustion—and so many questions.
- † The words of the prophet Jeremiah: “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.  
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?’ ...  
‘The harvest is past, the summer is ended,  
and we are not saved.’  
For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,  
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.
- † Is there no balm in Gilead?  
Is there no physician there?

Why then has the health of my poor people  
not been restored?

† 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!"

† These words were surely appropriate for how we felt that day. And yet it was the African American spiritual that arose from Jeremiah's lament that I had chosen for my sister's service.

† *Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work's in vain,  
But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.*

*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;  
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul.*

† *If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul,  
You can tell the love of Jesus and say, "He died for all."*

*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;  
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul.*

† *Don't ever feel discouraged, for Jesus is your friend;  
And if you look for knowledge, He'll never refuse to lend.*

*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;  
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul.*

† The truth was—I needed to be reminded, perhaps convinced, that there was a Balm in Gilead—something that would heal the pain we were experiencing. As Patrick sang the familiar spiritual—without words or music in front of him—I must have locked eyes with him so intensely, with such longing for

assurance, that it caused him to lose his place in the song. A professional, he was able to press on without noticeable hesitation.

† But later, after the service, he came up to apologize to me for mixing up the verses and the words. “I got lost in the song,” he explained. And I could relate.

† In the prophet Jeremiah’s day, there was a balm in Gilead—literally. The book of Genesis recounts that in the vicinity of Gilead, the ancients extracted a resin from balsam trees. Travelers came from all over to obtain this salve.

† Thomas Troeger, the wonderful hymn writer and professor at Yale University, gives some interesting ideas about the effect of this balm and its properties. There are three things to note about a balm. First, it is not a single element, but a mixture of resins, oils, and other material that work together, somewhat mysteriously.

† Second, a balm is not an instant healer—not some magical potion that immediately makes everything well. It is a soothing substance or presence without offering an instant cure.

† Third, a balm draws upon the natural healing ability of the body to bring about wholeness and health—it calls forth blood to the wound, energy to combat the injury.

† For African American slaves, suffering immense abuse and pain and grief, there was also a balm in Gilead—their faith and hope in God’s deliverance. “The abuse of the slaves, the breaking up of their families, the suppression of their cultural inheritance—all worked together to create in them an intense spiritual hunger for freedom, for respect, for some larger meaning that could redeem their suffering. The spirituals arose, then, in an age of religious violence and spiritual hunger.

- † The three qualities of a balm are all present in this profound song of sorrow and hope—Balm in Gilead. First, there is the mixture of elements that flowed from ‘a creative blend of African traditions and Christianity, creating a new, transformed religion different in form and substance from the religion of the slave holder.’ It was a Christianity that with daring and creativity rejected a narrow biblical literalism for a broader, more integrated and visionary faith.
- † And there is a balm-like power to soothe without offering an instant cure. For the spirituals provided a means of combating the potentially destructive internal psychological damage that could be inflicted by the experience of prolonged enslavement.
- † Finally, like a balm, the spirituals drew forth religious energies for wholeness and health as they helped to empower the freedom movement culminating in the civil rights struggle. The Balm in Gilead was the spiritual itself: the mixing of diverse elements, the finding solace in the midst of suffering, the drawing forth of wholeness and healing.” (Troeger)
- † When the slaves sang the spiritual, they felt the balm in their hearts. The act of singing confirmed what the words declare: “there is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.”
- † But what about us, living in our Gilead? The word Gilead means “rugged place.” Each of us has a place of Gilead, too—a rugged, ragged landscape of woundedness and spiritual longing.
- † Are we, like the poet/composer of the spiritual, able to move from the question—Is there a balm in our Gilead—to the affirmative declaration: “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole?”
- † As I sat in the family pew at my sister’s memorial service, recited the prayers of the faithful, sang the hymns, and heard the Gospel message of

resurrection hope, I wondered. What about all those prayers for healing uttered? All the efforts of the medical personnel involved in her heart double lung transplant? The sacrificial care my mother and our family gave my sister?

- † Certainly Paul urges us to “pray without ceasing” and to “give thanks in all circumstances,” (I Thessalonians 5:17f). He tells the Christians in Rome that this is exactly what he does for them (Romans 1:9). And this is echoed in today’s reading from Timothy: “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone...”
- † But what if those prayers don’t produce the desired healing, the reconciliation, the peace we long for? It has taken me a long time to learn that intercession and petition to God are not matters of cause and effect, not a straightforward mechanism, not a matter of putting in a request to God and having it answered depending on whether or not God is having a good day.
- † As Geoffrey Hoare writes: “In the economy of God these prayers are rather more like throwing a stone into a pond and watching the ripples affect the whole environment. I came to realize that things do not happen in the world because I pray. But things do happen in the world when I pray. I am changed as I discover the deepest desires of my heart and the world is changed in some way to do with the might and majesty and mystery of the One who made us, the source of light and life, the ground of our being, the lover of our souls who brings universes into being. This realization has allowed me to pray again such that today intercession and petition have become the heart of my own prayer life.”
- † Beautiful words, to be sure. But might there be something like what is at work in the singing of the spiritual Balm in Gilead also happening through prayer? Prayer doesn’t heal a situation on its own, but combined with other

elements—action, learning, resolve, commitment—it provides a balm, a salve, for our wounds, our pain.

- † Prayer is not meant to be a quick fix, but rather a soothing of our spirit, a transmitting of spiritual energy of hope so that we can begin again, even when our worst fears are realized. Looking back, that’s what happened in our family after my sister’s death. It wasn’t easy, and it still isn’t, but prayer makes it possible, for without it—without God’s spirit in us, we couldn’t do it on our own.
- † Finally, prayer brings forth what is within us to bring about healing. In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus says: “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”
- † Prayer connects us to the divine healer God created in us, in God’s image. That is why we pray—to change ourselves, as C.S. Lewis so famously wrote. We also pray to connect to the God who mourns for God’s people when they suffer and longs for the wholeness promised by Jesus in the realization of God’s kingdom.
- † And so, will you pray as we sing together the wonderful spiritual, Balm in Gilead.
- † May it be so. Amen.

Sources:

Thomas Troeger, Wonder Reborn: Creating Sermons on Hymns, Songs, and Poetry. Oxford, 2010.

Geoffrey Hoare, “Intercession,” <http://day1.org>

