

“Imagine a Love Balm in Gilead”  
B, Pentecost 2; Psalm 81:1-10  
June 3, 2018; 10:00 am  
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO  
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### I. ONCE UPON A TIME – A CALL TO LOVE

Once upon a time, a prince and a princess fell in love and had a son. And that son grew up and fell in love as well. And a huge wedding was planned, and people came from throughout the land the beyond to the big event.

And that big event was held in a biiiiiggggg church! Called a “chapel” it’s more like a *cathedral*, actually, and thousands of people came to watch the dearly loved couple tie the knot and become: not a Prince and Princess of England, but the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. (Royal history and naming is really quite fascinating if you’re in to this stuff!)

At that big event –deemed by some to be THE biggest event of the year anywhere – in the big chapel with the big crowd all around, there was much pomp and circumstance and fancy clothing and fancy words.

But there was also.....a really profound, prophetic sermon! At a wedding, in a chapel, by an African American Bishop who told it like it is and didn’t just wax poetic about romantic love and bless the day.

I don’t know about you, but I was rather impressed by this! And it’s been the buzz ever since that day, way back on May 19<sup>th</sup>. A rousing, challenging, make-you-think sermon was one of the highpoints of a royal wedding ceremony. Go figure!

The other highpoint (as I’ve heard anyway, as I don’t have TV and did not watch the whole event) was a song. “Stand by Me.” Sung like never before by a gospel choir – belting out those also-prophetic words we all could hear more of:

#### Stand By Me (John Lennon)

When the night has come  
And the land is dark  
And the moon is the only light we see  
No I won't be afraid  
No I won't be afraid  
Just as long as you stand, stand by me

As we kick off our Summer Song Series, I wanted to share part of that sermon and the songs he leads us to explore –it’s a powerful look at the power of love.

Bishop Michael Curry – Royal Wedding, May 19, 2018: The late Dr. Martin Luther King once said, and I quote, “We must *discover* the power of love, the redemptive power of love, and when we do that we will make of this old world a new world. For love, love is the only way.”

There's power in love. Don't underestimate it. Don't even over-sentimentalize it.

"We were made by a Power of love. And our lives are meant to be lived in that love. That's why we are here. Ultimately the source of love is God himself, the source of all of our lives."

"There's power in love to help and heal when nothing else can. There's power in love to lift up and liberate when nothing else will. There's power in love to show us the way to live."

"If you don't believe me, well, there were some old slaves in America's antebellum south who explained the dynamic power of love, and why it has the power to transform. They explained it this way. They sang a spiritual, even in the midst of their captivity.

It's one that says there's a *balm in Gilead*. A healing balm, something that can make things right. There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul."

## II. ONCE UPON A BALM IN GILEAD

**Balm of Gilead** was a rare perfume used medicinally, that was mentioned in the Bible, and named for the region of Gilead where it was produced. The region was known for having skillful physicians and this balm they applied was believed to have miraculous powers to heal the body.

The Balm of Gilead is interpreted as a spiritual medicine that is able to heal Israel and people in general. The phrase "balm of Gilead" is taken most directly from Jeremiah 8:22:

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Is there no physician there?

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

God tells the people of Israel that though many believe in the mysterious healing power of this balm, they can't trust in those powers for spiritual healing or as a relief of their oppression.

In 1907, brothers Frederick and John Work published a book called *Folk Songs of the American Negro*. Doing careful research, the Work brothers sought to preserve the traditional Spirituals of the earlier slave population, songs that had been passed on orally, and never written down.

Many of the slaves received Christian teaching, and embraced it. They identified with the Israelites in their years of bondage in Egypt. And they looked with faith and hope to the compassionate Savior who welcomed and forgave sinners. One of their songs was based on the words of Jeremiah 8:22. But, whereas the prophet framed his words as a sorrowful and almost despairing question, the Spiritual expresses an affirming positive.

As with many of these songs, it underwent changes and additions over the years. The third verse was added later:

Don't ever feel discouraged,  
'Cause Jesus is your Friend,  
And if you lack for knowledge,  
He'll never fail to lend.

### III. BALM: MEDICINAL OR COSMETIC?

In the history of the song and the scripture, a key point leaps up. This balm of Gilead was and was to be used for healing. For medicinal purposes with truly restorative powers and *not* cosmetic use. The balm of Gilead that heals the soul is not a “topical ointment.”

This has profound implications for our world today. It applies to *us* –not just a nice old-time song to sing once in awhile at church – but a prayer; a marching order; a proclamation of faith. For what do we pray when we sing this song? How do we soothe and heal our land and one another's hearts with *true* balm, penetrating love – not just a topical, surface, shallow swipe? Not just a pretending that everything is okay and people just need to get over it.

People ask me how I feel and think about what's going on in our world today. What I think is happening to us as humankind, as humanity gets more and more divided and out of touch with itself and each other. As

lines are drawn over and over, bigger and wider between those who are in and those who are on the outs.

As the chasm grows between the haves and the have nots, and borders of all kinds – be they race, gender, nationality, religion, or even philosophy on the environment – seem to be ruling us far more than the power of love and a sense of shared humanity and human kindness. As the sparks fly far faster than the flames of the spirit of dialogue and civil discourse.

My immediate answer is I think we have been living under a false veneer of progress. We have applied a **topical salve** to ourselves as human beings, to our tribalism, our racism; to our environmental endeavors on this shared earth.

Since the abolition of slavery happened, and then the Civil Rights Movement brought us somewhat forward, equal rights movements of all kinds gradually changed the world, and countless other signs of progress happened all around us, we thought we'd arrived. We were evolved as a species; had arrived.

And then. The surface salve wore off. We realized there was no balm in Gilead among us. No true, deeply-penetrating healing and transformation going on –at least as much as we'd hoped. The wounds of “othering” – of seeing others as *different* from us and to be feared and kept separate – opened up again in

recent years. Because they had never truly been lanced, the scab taken gently off and allowed to heal.

Bishop Curry picks up this song again, and applies it with the power of love:

“One of the stanzas actually explains why. They said, ‘If you cannot preach like Peter and you cannot pray like Paul, you just tell the love of Jesus how he died to save us all.’ Oh that’s the balm in Gilead.

“Love is not selfish and self-centered, love can be sacrificial, and in so doing, becomes redemptive, and that way of unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive love, changes lives. And it can change this world.”

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

1. Some times I feel discouraged,  
And think my work’s in vain,  
But then the Holy Spirit  
Revives my soul again.
2. If you cannot preach like Peter,  
If you cannot pray like Paul,  
Just tell the love of Jesus,  
And say He died for all.
3. Don’t ever feel discouraged,  
For Jesus is your friend;  
And if you lack for knowledge,

He’ll ne’er refuse to lend.

#### IV. IMAGINE

Bishop Curry, in his royal preaching message, concludes this theme of the power of the love balm with an invitation to imagine that changed world.

“If you don’t believe me, just stop and think or imagine.

“Think and imagine a world where love is the way. Imagine our homes and families when love is the way. Imagine neighborhoods and communities where love is the way. Imagine governments and nations where love is the way. Imagine business and commerce when love is the way. Imagine this tired old world when love is the way, unselfish, sacrificial redemptive.

“When love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook.

“When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary. When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside, to study war no more. When love is the way, there’s plenty good room, plenty good room, for *all* of God’s children.

“Because when love is the way, we actually treat each other, well, like we are actually family. When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all and we are brothers and sisters, children of God.

“Dr. King was right, we must *discover* love. The redemptive power of love. And when we do that, we will make of this old world a new world.”

Imagine. Imagine a whole new world. Shared by all. In a brotherhood and sisterhood. Also by John Lennon (like Stand By Me), a prayerful hope for just such a world.

#### Imagine (John Lennon)

Imagine there's no heaven; It's easy if you try  
No hell below us; Above us only sky

Imagine all the people living for today  
Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do; Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too

Imagine all the people living life in peace, you  
You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope some day you'll join us  
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions  
I wonder if you can  
No need for greed or hunger

A brotherhood of man

Imagine all the people sharing all the world, you  
You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope some day you'll join us  
And the world will be as one

Imagine—a song that has become a part of our vernacular – has been criticized a great deal. It is seen by some as simplistic, a bit hokey, and definitely counter-productive to the cause of peace on earth. Some believe Lennon and Yoko Ono, his wife and co-writer, were actually imagining a utopia where no *people* lived and then the earth would *really* be in good, untouched shape!

But, I'd say it *still* sings a message that we can cling to.

“All you need is love” is not Pollyanna, but calls on the power of true, justice-and-equality-seeking love—AGAPE that Jesus was all about and the scriptures testify to the power of.

Imagining that the power of love truly came over us—humankind and creation alike—does mean imagining that we wouldn't need to fight over things. Wouldn't need to keep drawing lines: of religion, of race, of nationality, of scarce resources.

You may say I'm a dreamer (or that John and Yoko were!) but doesn't this sound a lot like the Kingdom of God as Jesus describes it?

Imagine that “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength.” Imagine that “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” That you might “have life and have it abundantly.” That all God’s children would have a place in the choir and a seat at the Table.

That there would be a whole lot less greed, hunger, war and fighting and a whole lot more: “Stand by me!!”

That the power of love would permeate and propagate, and that we would discover that love all around us, in us and among us every day—and the world would live as one. Royals, young couples in love, and everyday “the rest of us” people alike! So be it. Amen.