

The Rev Dr Scott Everett Couper
Wednesday, June 3, 2020
Wednesday Facebook Pastoral Devotion Podcast Broadcast
Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Friends, I originally began these Facebook recordings because I knew that with the office and the sanctuary closed due to COVID-19 you would see a lot less of me. Perhaps, for many of you that was actually a blessing! Ha! But, for those of you who wished for a pastoral presence during this time, I tried to ‘show my face’, as it were, and speak a message half-way through every week so as to help ‘get us through’ to Sunday. Because the office is now open (and provided we sanitize our hands, wear a mask, and keep physical distancing protocols), I invite you to meet with me in my office so we can talk, listen, and pray together. Therefore, this will be my last COVID-19 Wednesday Facebook podcast broadcast.

I will confess that during these COVID-19 broadcasts, I perhaps have been more ‘prophetic’ than ‘priestly’. That is, I have been speaking to issues of justice more than I have to issues more devotional in nature. For this, I apologize. Jesus also wrestled with this balance. Jesus was devotional: “Do not let your hearts be troubled...”. I would argue Jesus, more often than not, was prophetic: “Love your enemy as yourself”. Sometimes Jesus was downright insulting: “You brood of vipers!” I believe Jesus struggled between *urging* his disciples and *comforting*

them. After the tumultuous week following the murder of George Floyd, I think we are all in need of urging *and* comforting.

I was physically sickened when watching the video of Floyd's extrajudicial execution at the hands of men who were employed to protect and serve. As the week continued, a profound sense of unease welled-up in my gut as I watched people rage against yet another unarmed Black man killed. They destroyed, looted, broke, shattered, and set-on-fire because nothing but that seems to be heard and nothing but that seems to result in any political will for reform. Then as the week progressed, I became depressed hearing from the wife, the son, the friend, the mother of George Floyd as they were finally able to pour-out their grief before the cameras. Then I read incendiary tweets, calling for more violence and directives for governors to show force, strength, 'domination', and, incredibly, the shooting of their own citizens. I became deeply anxious, praying we are not headed for a civil war. I am so sick after this week. I need medicine. I need relief. I need a balm.

"There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole, there is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin sick soul. Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work's in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again".

It is a beautiful song, is it not? A White can feel guilty singing it. I do. Technically speaking, it is what is referred to as 'cultural appropriation'. The

lament “There Is a Balm in Gilead” is an African-American spiritual – and it has been gifted to us as a spiritual inheritance, although as White male person of privilege, I am not anyone who deserves it. I assume the song’s origins came from slaves, brought to this country since 1619, who had every reason in the world to commit suicide (and often did) because their existence was so oppressed. Yet, somehow, in the faith of their oppressors, they discovered a balm.

The spiritual is inspired by Jeremiah 8:22. Jeremiah graphically described the rape, pillage, and murder of the people of Judea at the hands of the Babylonians. In my Bible, the previous chapter is actually entitled “The Valley of Slaughter”. Cheerful, eh? Jeremiah described snorting horses, venomous snakes, a ravaged land, and a people fallen. Jeremiah lamented, “Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me” (8:21). Not a lot different than this week following the crushing of Lloyd’s neck under the knee of White cop. Jeremiah then asked, “Is there a balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?” (8:22). Aren’t we asking the same things today? Sadly, the prophet Jeremiah answers negatively to the question. There is no balm in Gilead that can heal the wounds of his nation.

Gilead is a place east of Jordan. In ancient times, and perhaps today too, the location produced a resinous gum from its trees. When compounded with oil, this

gum was used as a ointment for wounds.¹ Famous as a product from Gilead, balm is said to have been exported far and away to Egypt. Sources suggest that the balm was used where skin had been removed in the hopes that it would grow back and it was also used as a “soothing salve”.²

So, our spiritual doesn't quote Jeremiah who actually asked a question, “Is there a balm?” and then says, ‘No, there is not’. Instead, our spiritual answers the question with ‘There is a balm in Gilead’. It is not a question! And it gives an affirmative answer! There is a balm! Why there is an affirmative answer perhaps can be found in the Christian scriptures, in the Christian faith of the African-American slaves.

“Don't ever feel discouraged, for Jesus is your friend, who, if you ask for knowledge, will never fail 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.”

May the balm of Gilead heal the wounds of my brothers and sisters of color. And may the balm of Gilead heal the systemic racism that is endemic to this nation's soul.

¹ Stanley Brice Frost, “The Book of Jeremiah”, *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1971), 381.

² Richard Jones, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Vol. 1, A-C), David Noel Freedman, editor in chief, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 573-574.