

Soulforce Presents...



Rev. Gilbert H. Caldwell and Rev. James Lawson address the issues of racism and homophobia in the United Methodist Church.

The United Methodist Church: *it's déjà vu all over again*

By Rev. Gil Caldwell

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Soulforce is proud to present this short collection of writings from Rev. Gil Caldwell. Rev. Caldwell is a true champion of civil rights for all people, and we are beyond blessed that he speaks out boldly on behalf of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. With his wife Grace at his side, Gil educates many people as his gentle yet strong spirit helps change hearts and minds across the nation. Please feel free to make copies of this document and share it with others.

Photos courtesy of Reconciling Ministries Network and Soulforce.



Introduction

In recent years, I have put my thoughts on paper and shared them with others whenever possible. I make no claim of having unique wisdom or insight. Nor do I claim to have rich writing gifts. I believe that whenever a person has strong feelings about acts of injustice, he or she is compelled to speak and/or write. Silence in the presence of injustice is a “silence gives consent” approach that not only allows injustice to continue unchecked, but becomes a political cowardice that I have been unable to live with.

My open advocacy of civil and religious rights for LGBT persons and same-gender couples flows from my commitment to racial justice. I believe that if I were not an advocate/ally for gay persons, I in some retrospective way would be invalidating the integrity of my long commitment to racial justice. How could any person who has a history of advocacy for racial justice be silent, and in some cases an adversary of rights for LGBT persons?

I am particularly bothered by African American colleagues who have been and are strong supporters of rights for black persons who now have become opponents of same-gender unions and marriages and civil and religious rights for persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Many of those persons who are active in the Church have become Biblical literalists in their condemnations of gay persons while at the same time denouncing those who have used the Bible to support slavery and racial segregation. They, in their efforts to point out the differences between the oppression of black persons and the oppression of gay persons, allow injustice against gay and black persons go unchecked while they are resisting comparisons between the two struggles.

I have not understood persons who acknowledge that although Scripture has not changed, the use of Scripture to endorse slavery, support racial segregation and forbid the ordination of women is something they have denounced. They believe that it was a corruption of Scripture to use it to support slavery, segregation and denial of ordination to women, yet, **THEY BECOME APOLOGISTS FOR THE USE OF SCRIPTURE TO Demean, SEPARATE, SEGREGATE AND DENY SAME GENDER COUPLES AND LGBT PERSONS, RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL RIGHTS!**

We have wasted so much time in our efforts in church and society to limit and restrain the rights of gay persons. This wasted time has not only contributed to a slowness in efforts to combat heterosexism, it has contributed to the continuation of racism and sexism. We have spent so much time in restricting and limiting the rights of gay persons that we have failed to be vigilant and effective in continuing our struggles against racism

and sexism.

Most of these writings were written in an effort to influence the actions of the United Methodist General Conference held in Ft. Worth, Texas in late April and early May 2008. Some of these writings became hand-outs that were given to delegates as they went into the sessions of the General Conference. Some were e-mails that I shared with colleagues and the press. May they be read with a spirit of openness and may they contribute to the reader's thinking and action vis-a-vis civil and religious rights for all.

I conclude with my paraphrase of those oft-quoted words of Martin Niemöller: **“When they came for the Jews, Catholics, Trade Unionists and Gay persons, I did not speak out because I was not one of them. But, then when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out.”** How sad it is that when any person or group of persons have sought and needed allies/advocates for their struggles, and have been pleased when they appear, then they themselves are not supporters of the struggles of gay persons. The unwillingness to be advocates of others almost renders those who are unwilling unworthy of having advocates for their own struggles.

—Rev. Gil Caldwell, June 2008



Rev. Gil Caldwell speaking at a Soulforce event in Colorado Springs, May 2005

1. UNITED METHODIST CHURCH “(Our) Arms Too Short to Box with God”

On December 22, 1976 a play opened in New York City at the Lyceum Theatre. Its title: *Your Arms Too Short to Box with God*. It was based on the New Testament book of Matthew and the music and lyrics were written by Alex Bradford and Miki Grant. The play was directed by Vinenette Carroll, who became the first African American woman to direct for Broadway theatre. Jennifer Holliday made her Broadway debut in the play.

The play closed on January 1, 1978 after 429 performances, but the theme of the play is as old as history and will be a theme that will endure until God wills that time will end. But, it seems that the United Methodist Church in 2008 still may not understand that it cannot “box with God.” It cannot now, it has been unable to do so in the past, and will not be able to do so in the future.

The predecessor bodies of today’s United Methodist Church “boxed with God” when some Methodists thought that the enslavement of Africans “was compatible with the Christian faith.” In 1939 at a “Unification Conference,” three branches of Methodism merged, believing that the establishment of the racially segregated Central Jurisdiction “was compatible with the Christian faith.” For many years Methodists believed that not allowing women to be ordained as ministers of the Gospel, “was compatible with the Christian faith.” On Easter Sunday, 1964, two Methodist Bishops, James K. Mathews and Charles F. Golden, one white, one black, sought to worship at Galloway Memorial Methodist Church in Jackson, Mississippi. They were denied entrance as one of the church officials read a “Church Policy” statement: **“It is not un-Christian that we prefer to remain an all white congregation. The practice of the separation of the races in Galloway Memorial Church is a time honored tradition.”**

Time has proven that our Methodist predecessors who sought to “box with God” by justifying slavery, creating and establishing a racially segregated church structure, the Central Jurisdiction, practicing “the separation of the races” in local churches, and refusing to ordain women into the ministry, “boxed with God.” **But they lost!**

Again, a United Methodist General Conference will have the opportunity to extend religious rights to LGBT persons, after society has already begun the process of extending civil rights to them. In each of the instances of discrimination I have mentioned above, the state preceded the church as it extended civil rights to those who were being denied. It is crystal clear that society has begun the process of extending rights to LGBT persons and to same-gender couples. My prayer is that the United Methodist Church in its 2008 General Conference will be led by God, not the state, to extend religious rights to those it has so long denied.

Bishops Mathews and Golden, as they left Galloway Memorial Methodist Church on Easter Sunday, 1964 left a letter with those who turned them away. In the letter were these words: **“There cannot be any true Christian worship at all which is not intercession on behalf of all mankind. . . for Jesus Christ died and rose again for all.”**

We as Christians are supposedly, “an Easter people living in a Good Friday world.” How long will we “box with God” by denying some persons access in our United Methodist Churches, in pews and pulpits, to the “Jesus Christ who died and rose again for all?”

Those before us “boxed with God” and lost. The delegates at the General Conference in Ft. Worth have the opportunity to reverse our losing streak with God by deciding that none of God’s people are, because of who they are, “incompatible with the Christian faith.” I believe this General Conference will be ABLE, if it embraces rather than boxes God. “Lord we are able.” Do we have the will?



2. Op-Ed published in The Fort Worth Star-Telegram, April 30, 2008 Of Rites and Rights

—Rev. Gilbert H. Caldwell

Eight years ago, at the age of 66, I was arrested at the United Methodist General Conference in Cleveland.

To be accurate, I was arrested twice: first as part of a demonstration outside the meeting place, and later with my fellow United Methodist clergy and lay persons who disrupted the legislative session inside. This was by no means my first demonstration at General Conference. But in the past, issues of racial justice motivated my protest. At the 2000 conference, I joined many others in seeking justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.

Standing up for LGBT rights did not always come easily to me.

As a young “foot soldier” in the Civil Rights movement, I was inspired by the writing and Civil Rights activism of Malcolm Boyd, a white Episcopal priest who wrote *Are You Running With Me Jesus?* One day I read that Reverend Boyd had come out as a gay man. As I digested the news, I discovered some unsettling emotions. Although I was deeply committed to civil and religious rights for black persons, I realized that I had reservations about those rights being granted to gay persons. I wondered to myself, “do I deny the impact his life had upon me, burn his books, turn from being an advocate to an adversary?”

After a day of reflection and prayer, my faith, reason, and common sense came alive! I could not and would not deny his influence. Just as so many white persons became allies of the Civil Rights movement for racial justice, I determined that I would be a black, straight advocate of civil and religious equality for LGBT persons.

These issues came to the forefront at the 1972 General Conference, when new legislation affirmed that “homosexuals no less than heterosexuals are persons of sacred worth.” When this proposal reached the floor, a last-minute amendment added the words, “...though we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”

In the decades that have followed, the “incompatibility amendment” has become the basis for undermining the very equality that was affirmed in 1972, and lesbian and gay people have gradually been excluded from the life of the church—first from

ordained ministry (1976), then from marriage (1996), and finally from membership (2006).

Since I received my first ordination as a Deacon in the Methodist Church in 1956, I have seen us move from racial segregation to racial integration, and from excluding women clergy to ordaining them. In each of these instances of progress, the state preceded the United Methodist Church in extending equal rights.

Today, slowly but surely, civil rights for lesbians and gays are becoming a reality. Civil unions are legal in many states, and marriage equality is the law in Massachusetts.

And whole denominations now affirm the equality of gay and transgender people. The United Church of Christ declared full equality five years ago and recently announced growth in both membership and giving for the whole denomination.

Equality is possible—in churches and society. But to get there, we must quell our fears that the church or society will collapse if we treat others fairly. To get there, we must die to old ideas.

In 2000, I literally nearly died from a brain tumor. I survived with a nerve-damaged leg, a cane, and a drive to use my time well. Since that time my ministry has centered on writing and speaking about the connections between different forms of discrimination. Simply put—my message is about justice.

Some ask if I will get arrested at this General Conference. I tell them, I don't know, but I do know that I will act in the tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Now, more fervently than ever, I pray that this General Conference will lead the way in doing justice for those it has so long denied.

Rev. Gilbert H. Caldwell is a retired United Methodist Minister and an active member of Soulforce, which is a national LGBT social justice organization. He is a former chairperson of Black Methodists for Church Renewal and a co-founder of United Methodists of Color for A Fully Inclusive Church. Caldwell attended high school in Texas, and his father was Pastor of St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Dallas.



2. April 30, 2008 - A "Bitter-Sweet" Day at General Conference

Since returning home from General Conference, I have spent considerable time at my computer seeking to read what was taking place at General Conference. This morning I discovered a remarkable but sad contrast in the proceedings on April 30th. My long-time friend and colleague Bishop Violet Fisher preached an amazing and powerful sermon on the "Sin of Racism." As I read the UMNS story written by Clona D. Rouse, I read that Bishop Fisher, quoting Bishop Leontine T.C. Kelley, asked the delegates to proclaim with her, "Racism does not belong in the church!" I wish I had been there in the visitors' gallery to repeat those words with the delegates. From far away I wonder how loud was the chant? Was it recorded so that it might be played in every church in the United Methodist connection?

But, after reading about Bishop Fisher's message, I read of the decision of the delegates to re-affirm the long-standing "incompatibility of homosexuality" language in the Book of Discipline. Racism does not belong in the church, BUT heterosexism does!!! Apparently a majority of the delegates felt that the sacred worth of persons of color ought protect them from racism, but the sacred worth of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender persons was not of sufficient "sacred worth" that the delegates could say and vote, "Heterosexism does not belong in the church."

It is impossible for me to believe that a majority vote of the delegates meeting in Ft. Worth in 2008 repeated the same kind of hypocrisy that was committed by the delegates who attended the "Unification Conference" in 1939 that created the racially-segregated Central Jurisdiction. After a long struggle over the rightness/wrongness of slavery, three branches of Methodism united, but with the compromise of creating the racially segregated Central Jurisdiction. Black folk were of "sacred worth," but not to the degree that all of their churches and pastors could worship and work in geographical Jurisdictions. In Ft. Worth again, a General Conference goes through the charade of declaring the sacred worth of LGBT persons, but then says they are, because of who they are in gender identity and sexual orientation, "INCOMPATIBLE" with the Christian faith!

I have often quoted and written the words of the Black South African Pastor who said during the days of the racism of apartheid in South Africa: "I AM FEARFUL THAT BY THE TIME WHITE FOLK WILL HAVE GOTTEN



Methodist Civil Rights leaders Rev. Gilbert H. Caldwell and Rev. James Lawson address the issues of racism and homophobia in the United Methodist Church at the Soulforce event in Fort Worth, April 2008.

AROUND TO LOVING US, WE SHALL HAVE GOTTEN AROUND TO HATING THEM.” Who of us could blame any lesbian, gay man, bisexual or transgender person in the United Methodist Church who would say today; “I AM FEARFUL THAT BY THE TIME “STRAIGHT” (Heterosexual) FOLK WILL HAVE GOTTEN AROUND TO LOVING US, WE SHALL HAVE GOTTEN AROUND TO HATING THEM.”

I remember when some white Methodists, through their actions and their words, declared that “Black folk were incompatible with the Christian faith.” Many had reservations about saying it openly, but they had no reservations about segregating me and my African American community from them. Segregation was a practice imposed upon me in response to assumptions of the “incompatibility” of my Blackness. If the delegates who voted to retain the “incompatibility” language do not see the parallel, they do not understand the depth and breadth of Scripture, they have no grasp of the evolutionary nature of tradition, their Christian experience has not rid them of prejudice, and they have sacrificed reason for irrationality.

It is not too late; there is always the possibility that 100 plus delegates could change their minds and vote to acknowledge differences in the opinions of persons who love the Lord and would be Disciples for Christ. Many of us who are not in Ft. Worth are praying that would happen; that is my prayer. But until that happens, some of us must say on matters of race and sexual orientation; “The more things change, the more they remain the same.”

How sad that so many of my brothers and sisters in Christ have tarnished the “Future” and “Hope” with their voting on April 30, 2008. Historians who write of this General Conference will not be kind to them! Reinhold Niebuhr speaks for and of all of us as he wrote in *The Irony of American History* words that I paraphrase: “MOST OF THE EVIL IS NOT DONE BY EVIL PEOPLE, BUT BY GOOD PEOPLE WHO DO NOT KNOW THEY ARE NOT GOOD.” Why do people who are “good” do so many things that are “not good?”

Shared in the name, spirit and hope that is in Jesus Christ!



3. Heterosexism in the United Methodist Church is dying or already dead . . . !

Colleagues,

Congratulations to all of you who waged such a significant nonviolent struggle against those who in their distorted definition of “scriptural authority” worked to retain the “incompatibility with the Christian faith” language in the Book of Discipline.

Martin Luther King once said of segregation: “Segregation is dead, it is just a question of how long and expensive some folk want to make the funeral.” It has been impossible to calculate the cost in spirituality, credibility, mission, ministry, finances and emotional well-being the long night of racial segregation/racism that we have experienced as a church and as a nation has cost us. As I read the words of Bishop Mel Talbert as he made the comparison between the

Central Jurisdiction and the un-named “Jurisdiction” in which we have placed our sister/brother LGBT persons, I wept! How long O Lord, how long?

We are saddened because by a vote margin of 84 persons, the General Conference continued the charade of pretending that there was not a growing number of persons who found the incompatibility phrase “incompatible” with their understanding of Scripture, the Wesleyan tradition, and the mission and ministry of the Church. They have chosen to extend and finance the funeral of heterosexism even though we know that it is on its deathbed or even now dead although some do not know it.

But, let us not despair or give up. Rather, let us press on in our diverse ways. Some can no longer accept the lie that God does not call LGBT persons into ordained ministry. Thus, they will respond in their own ways. Others, at the sessions of the annual conferences this spring and summer, will pass legislation that proclaims at the conference level what General Conference could not proclaim at its level. And all of us will embrace our LGBT colleagues and ourselves, as we day after day walk and talk the fact that “WE ARE FAMILY,” even though the legislation of the United Methodist Church does not understand that.

The Scriptures reminds us “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.” I pray that many of you, as tears were streaming down your faces, saw the morning joy that is coming despite 30 plus years of violating the integrity of Scripture and the meaning of God’s presence in Jesus Christ.

P. S. I have not found words nor the emotional strength to respond to my African brother who spoke the awful words that he spoke. Does he not know nor remember that there was a time and still is, when all of us of African descent were/are thought to be less than—in worth, value, humanity, spirituality, intelligence and integrity? Why is it that those whose history has been that of demonization and demeaning by those who think themselves superior, dare to



A crowd listens to Methodist Civil Rights leaders Rev. Gilbert H. Caldwell and Rev. James Lawson address the issues of racism and homophobia in the United Methodist Church at the Soulforce event at General Worth Square, Ft. Worth, Texas, April 2008.

turn around and demonize and demean LGBT persons? I will seek to pray for him and for those who told him about a God and a Bible who condones this blasphemy. This is neither my God nor my Bible, why is it his?



4. When the present majority becomes the minority, what do they expect?

Colleagues, a follow-up to my earlier epistle. It is clear that the present majority that supports “incompatibility” will become the minority. Certainly they do not expect to be treated any differently from the way they have treated us?

If we dare look to the future with hope, let us begin to talk about that. Unfortunately those who for years and years rendered, legislatively and otherwise, black folk as incompatible—when the tide turned, really all they said was, “sorry about that.” That offers no corrective to their desecration of Scripture, Jesus, or Creator God. We can no longer hurt, harm and diminish people and then, when the change comes, act as though we have not done what we have done. Words of sorry, repentance, asking for forgiveness are like Bonheoffer’s cheap grace: they are cheap! We will never rid ourselves of *-isms* if we do not offer correctives to the mis-readings and mis-interpretations that have justified oppression and much more. What do you say? But, more importantly, what does God say?



5. African delegates: pawns or partners? “The Lord is using the Africans to preserve our church”

—Mark Tooley, *UMAAction*.

In my old age, words have a way of “jumping out” at me. In this sentence, of course, “the Lord” resonates with me and my spirit. I am reminded of the Scripture that begins, “they that wait upon the Lord, shall.....” But then the word “using” penetrates my consciousness in ways that bring back memories that are not too pleasant. My African ancestors were “used” to provide free slave labor to build the USA. African American men and women were lynched in an effort by their lynchers to “use” their broken bodies to intimidate African Americans to “stay in their place.” In the North Carolina and Texas of my youth, some black persons were “used” to maintain the myth of the rightness of racial segregation. **I do not believe the Lord “uses” any group of people to oppress another group of people!** It is difficult to believe that the Lord on whom we wait “uses” any of us to deny civil or religious rights to any group of people whom the Lord has created; the Lord who in Jesus Christ expressed love, the Lord who is “the light of our lives,” does not “use” some people to demean other people.

“Preserve our church”: In 1939 the racially segregated Central Jurisdiction was created to “preserve” the newly created Methodist Church. That “new” Church was not the Lord’s Church, it was the Church of racially prejudiced women and men. When Galloway Church in Jackson, Mississippi, passed a resolution that said it was “not un-Christian” for them to “remain a white church,” they chose not be the Lord’s Church, but rather a Church that existed to preserve their segregated “way of life.” Too often, at the local and denominational level, those who say, “our church” are not

speaking of the Lord's Church, but rather of an institution that reflects "their" prejudices.

When the Ethiopian eunuch asked for someone to get into his chariot to guide him in his interpretation of Scripture, I am sure he did not want, would not have appreciated, and would have rejected any interpreter/interpretation of Scripture who suggested God wanted to use him to oppress others.

How sad it is that my brother Mark Tooley has such a small and narrow understanding of the Church and would then claim that his use and the use of others, Africans and those who are not, to exclude some baptized Christians from the Church, is the work of the Lord! This is not the Lord who is the light of my life.

The Hymn begins, "Lord, speak to me, that I may speak in living echoes of thy tone..." (#463). I am fearful that on some matters, when it comes to the Lord, my brother of UMAction is tone-deaf.



6. Words that every General Conference Delegate ought ponder and then pray!

"I have been disappointed, to say the least, to find that the Bible becomes the first refuge of those who are unwilling to reconsider the extra biblical prejudices against homosexuals in the full life and ministry of the church. I had hoped that, as has happened with women and racial minorities, our predominantly Christian culture would recognize that God's children, the homosexuals in our midst, cry out for compassion and acceptance. In this decade alas, exactly the opposite has happened. Positions have hardened and homosexuals have been demonized, condemned to a "lifestyle" rather than involved in the household of faith. It amazes me that any thoughtful homosexuals would continue to want any part of a community, religious or otherwise, that in the name of God has behaved toward them with such contempt."¹



7. A Response to the Negative Respondents

Already we have heard the words of resistance to the decision of the California Supreme Court that in a 4-3 vote affirmed the civil right of same-gender couples to marry. The words used by those who respond negatively are "traditional marriage," "our way of life," "destruction of family values," "there is no equivalent comparison between civil rights for gays and civil rights for blacks," etc., etc.

I remember when these words were used to resist racial integration. "Traditional marriage" was not a marriage of a black person and a white person. (More about this later). "Our way of life has been segregation." I will always remember when the Governor of Alabama George Wallace, stood in the door of the University and said, "Segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." Governor Wallace, like so many, felt that segregation was "a way of life that should never be changed." "Family values" were rooted in the way things were, the way they had always been and the way they could never be. Some white churches developed policies that proclaimed: "it is not un-Christian for us to remain segregated."

¹ *The SCANDALOUS gospel of JESUS: What's So Good About The Good News?*, Peter J. Gomes, Harper One, 2007

Whenever I hear or read the words of “good people” who have allowed prejudice and bigotry to infect their capacity for goodness, I share my paraphrase of the late theologian Reinhold Niebuhr’s words: “most of the evil is not done by evil people, but by good people who do not know they are not good.” The negative respondents to the California Supreme Court decision are beginning to say and do “not good” things that now, and certainly in the future, will tarnish the good they do much, if not most of the time. This is what I heard, saw, and experienced in and through the actions of so many white southerners, as well as persons in other places, as they responded to me, my black family, and the black community. They allowed the history, heritage and culture of racial prejudice to tarnish their biblical interpretation, their theology, their sense of Christian mission and their understandings of the church. And, also, to tarnish their oft-spoken respect for the nation’s Constitution and Bill of Rights. Sadly, I have seen how the history, heritage, and culture of prejudice against LGBT persons and same-gender couples has taken the same course that racial prejudice has taken: using the Bible to justify their discrimination!

But today, more than ever before, we must remember and speak of interracial marriage. So many of the same religious and secular arguments against same-gender unions and marriages are the arguments that were used against interracial marriage! Mildred Loving, the African American woman whose interracial marriage prompted the arrest in Virginia of herself and her husband, died recently. Their case became the case that prompted the U.S. Supreme Court to declare bans against interracial marriage unconstitutional. On the 40th anniversary of that decision in 2007, Mildred Loving released this statement: **“the older generation’s fears and prejudices have given way, and today’s young people realize that if someone loves someone, they have a right to marry.”**

At the end of her statement she shared words that I wish every negative respondent to the California Supreme Court decision might read, pray about if they have a prayer life, and then so internalize that they become a force that releases prejudiced persons from the prejudices they were taught: “the people to love, the people to hate, by the time you are 7 or 8.” (from *South Pacific*).

“...black or white, young or old, gay and straight...

I support the freedom to marry for all. That’s what

Loving, and loving, are all about.” —Mildred Loving, June 12, 2007



8. A Win for Conservatives and Those who are Not!

The decision of the California Supreme Court to recognize the marriage of Troy D. Perry and Phillip Ray De Blicek, a same-gender couple, is one of those rare victories for persons who label themselves (or are labeled by others) conservatives, moderates or liberals. Today, wherever a person is on the conservative to liberal spectrum, they are able to applaud together a state Supreme Court decision.

Why do I suggest this? Since November 25, 2003 I have taken from place to place an op-ed article written by one of my favorite political writers, David Brooks. On that day, the *New York Times* published an article by Brooks, titled **“The moral**

case for gay marriage.” Among the things David Brooks wrote are these:

“Marriage joins two people in a sacred bond. It demands that they make an exclusive commitment to one another and thereby takes two discrete individuals and turns them into kinToday marriage is in crisis.... Marriage is in crisis because marriage, which relies on a culture of fidelity, is now asked to survive in a culture of contingency You would think that faced with the marriage crisis, we conservatives would do everything in our power to move as many people as possible from the path of contingency to the path of fidelity. But instead, many argue that gays must be banished from matrimony because gay marriage would weaken all marriage The conservative course is not to banish gay people from making such commitments. It is to expect that they make such commitments. We shouldn’t just allow gay marriage. We should insist on gay marriage. We should regard it as scandalous that two people could claim to love each other and not want to sanctify their love with marriage and fidelity.”

I have not understood why some groups, church groups and others, are able to affirm the presence, participation, expertise and professional and economic contributions of gay persons in their communities and organizations, yet stand in the way of their right to participate in marriage or civil unions. Gay marriages or Unions do not weaken heterosexual marriages, rather they contribute to the strengthening of marriage. Brooks, in his article, says, “Nearly half of all marriages end in divorce.”

Now that the California Supreme Court has spoken, may the Church and the state, say “Amen!”



9. Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero

Dean Robert Alan Hill, I want to thank you for inviting me to preach at this service. I spoke to my wife Grace who is at home in Asbury Park, New Jersey, and she said that she had found a program of the Memorial Service held at Hayden Hall, April 9, 1968, following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. As she read the contents of the program to me over the phone, she said that I was the speaker on that occasion. I had not remembered that. “God does continue to work in mysterious ways.”

This has been a great weekend at Boston University as we have remembered the living legacy of Dr. King. The University in its programming this week has allowed his legacy to continue to live among us. Vincent Harding in his book *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (the source of my sermon title) includes this poem by Carl Wendell Hines, titled, “Dead Men Make Such Convenient Heroes:”

“Now that he is safely dead let us praise him, build monuments to his glory, sing hosannas to his name. Dead men make such convenient heroes. They cannot rise to challenge the images we would fashion from their lives. And besides, it is easier to build monuments than to make a better world.” Rather than build another monument to Dr. King, Boston University continues to make his legacy live!

As Boston University continues to extend and expand upon the legacy of one of its most famous graduates, Martin Luther King, Jr., I offer a suggestion. Pamela Chatterton-Purdy of Harwich Port, Massachusetts, the wife of a long-time clergy friend is a gifted artist. She has created artwork titled: “Icons of the Civil Rights Movements.” Her artwork is on exhibit in Providence, Rhode Island during the month of April. It would be wonderful if some philanthropic person or foundation saw fit to purchase this artwork and make it a gift to the University as it continues to remember Dr. King.

Today as we remember Martin Luther King, I am wearing a stole given to me by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace of Elberon, New Jersey. I have developed an ongoing relationship with these Sisters and wearing their gift to me reminds me of the presence of Catholic Sisters during the Selma to Montgomery March.

Peter Gomes, Minister in Memorial Chapel at Harvard University has provided the text for my sermon today. Dr. Gomes has written, “Perhaps the most dangerous verse in all the Bible is the second verse of Romans 12: ‘And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good and acceptable, and perfect will of God.’” (from *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What’s So Good About The Good News?*) We are called to be non-conformists in a world of conformity. I believe fear is at the heart of our reluctance to be non-conformists.

In the Bach Cantata that we will be hearing today, the tenor in the second aria will be singing: “My faith knows the victory of the Savior, yet my heart is filled with strife and battle. My Savior, only appear!”

For many years during the Lenten Season leading up to Easter, I remind myself and those of us of the Christian faith, “We are an Easter People living in a Good Friday world.”

Martin Luther King sought to transform the fears of persons who were fearful of protesting the injustice of racial segregation. Rather than resisting the evil of segregation, so many of us sustained the culture of segregation by conforming to it. Reinhold Niebuhr in his *The Irony of American History* describes me—and possibly you—in these words that I paraphrase; “Most of the evil is not done by evil people, but by good people who do not know they are not good.”

I attended BU School of Theology because Duke Divinity School rejected my application because of my race. They sent me a letter expressing the hope that “I would find a Seminary that met my needs.” Boston University became that Seminary, and it was here that I first met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The leaders of Duke Divinity School at that time were not evil, rather they were good people who, on matters of race, did what was not good.

When I was a student at BU from 1955-58, I developed an interest in Jazz as I listened to Father Norman O’Connor, the “Jazz Priest” who hosted a Jazz program on WBUR. One of the Jazz musicians whom I have enjoyed is the pianist Billy Taylor. I got to know him as he played in a Jazz Series we developed at St. Marks United Methodist Church in Harlem when I was Pastor. Billy Taylor has written lyrics to a song that are appropriate for all us who would be non-conformists:

“I wish I knew how it would feel to be free. I wish I could break all the chains holding me. I wish I could say all the things I should say, say em loud, say em clear for the whole world to hear. I wish I could share all the love that’s in my heart. Remove all the bars that keep us apart. I wish you would know what it means to be me, then you’d see and agree that every person should be free. I wish I could give all I’m longing to give, I wish I could live like I am longing to live. I wish I could do all the things that I can do, though I’m way overdue I’d be starting anew. Well I wish I could be like a bird in the sky, how sweet it would be if I found I could fly. Oh I’d soar to the sun and look down at the sea, and I’d sing cause I’d know how it feels to be free.”

Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer and so many others were non-conformists who were free. They were, they are, our inconvenient heroes and heroines.

Martin Luther King provided universal lessons for all of humanity. One of those lessons was his acknowledgement of the reality of death. He said more than once, “If a person has not found something he/she is willing to die for, they are not worthy to live.”

In his last sermon, April 3, 1968 he said: “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life, longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And God’s allowed me to go up to the mountain....I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” Sometimes in the Church we say; “Everybody is talking about heaven, but nobody wants to die.” Martin King confronted that contradiction in the example of his life.

A second lesson of his was that of helping us understand the linkages among injustices. We engage in serial “Isms:” classism, anti-Semitism, racism, heterosexism, and militarism. Non-conformists are disturbing to the status quo because they point out the relationships between and among injustices. After Dr. King’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech delivered at Riverside Church a year before he was killed, *TIME* magazine wrote of the speech; “it was demagogic slander that sounded like a script from radio Hanoi...” *The Washington Post* had these words; “King has diminished his usefulness to his cause, his community and his people.”

So many did not understand his cause was an American, a human cause, his community was the national and world community, and his people were all of God’s people.

A third lesson was Martin Luther King’s ability to disagree with the opposition without demeaning or dehumanizing them. We live in a time when political and other discourse takes on an “eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” quality—therefore running the risk of making all of us blind and toothless.

In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” he wrote to the eight white preachers who wanted him to end his leadership of the protests in Birmingham and leave town, saying that he felt they were men of good will who were sincere. He accepted that in them, but then set forth in clear terms the reasons for the protests in Birmingham.

Poet Nikki Giovanni has been present on this campus as a participant in the Legacy Observances. In her poem, “The Seamstress of Montgomery - Rosa Parks” (In her book *ACOLYTES*) Giovanni writes:

“History may well show (you) did not need Martin Luther King, Jr. so much as he needed you. You were the spark, the flame, the answer. When you sat down, when you kept your seat, when you calmly gave permission for your arrest, you opened a window that had been closed an eternity ago.”

Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. had something within themselves that was essential to their ability to be non-conformists. I enjoy telling the story of a child’s experience with a toy. The child has become a little girl because, after my wife and I reared our now 40-something sons, we now have a little girl, a granddaughter whose name is Ashley!!! Little girls are like, but also so wonderfully different from little boys. The story:

A little girl got a birthday toy. It was the kind of toy that she could knock down and it would bounce back up. After playing with the toy one day, she went to her father to ask him why, when she knocked the toy down, it bounced back up. The father pondered for awhile and came up with no answer. Finally the little girl said, “I know why it bounces back up no matter how hard I hit it: because IT’S STANDING UP ON THE INSIDE!”

No matter how inconvenient it might be for us, or how inconvenient it might be for others, you and I—in response to the lives and legacies of Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks and hundreds of other persons—must be non-conformists who, no matter what, stand up on the inside for the cause of justice.



10. Early Morning Musings

It is Sunday morning, May 18, 2008. I am Dallas with the American Family Outing project of Soulforce. We are here preparing to visit the 30,000 member Potter’s House Church where Bishop T. D. Jakes is the Senior Pastor.

Jeff Lutes, the Executive Director of Soulforce, had the idea that if between Mother’s Day and Father’s Day an effort was made to visit some of the nation’s mega-churches with families—some same-gender, some not, some with children, some not—we might encourage those churches and their Pastors to acknowledge that “Family” means more than the narrow, sometimes prejudiced views that believe marriage and commitment can only be between a man and a woman and that family with children cannot be family if the parents are same-gender and have children!

As I anticipate our visit to the church this morning for one of the morning services, I have some of the same feelings of anticipation and uncertainty that I experienced as I with many others was in Brown’s Chapel AME Church in Selma, Alabama prior to the second phase of the Selma to Montgomery March after Bloody Sunday...It is the feeling that I felt when with Mel White and Soulforce in 2000 at the United Methodist General Conference we prepared to engage in civil disobedience and get arrested in Cleveland. I also felt this way later in Cleveland when some of us, led by Greg Dell, prepared to disrupt nonviolently the proceedings on the floor of the Conference. There is a profound

sense of “rightness” about what one is going to do, not knowing what the response will be.

Grace and I are here with a wonderful group of Soulforce volunteers. We for this day are a family made up of persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender and straight. Grace and I are like those white advocates/allies who were with us the Civil Rights Movement for racial justice many years ago. We are in the minority with our “straightness,” just as those whites were, but we could be in no other place, experiencing the amazing solidarity of these moments!

I have loved the song, “We Are Family.” The Church claims to follow a Jesus who, as the story goes, with his family was not allowed to be with us in a place of lodging with others, but, instead, was consigned to a lesser place. **WHY MUST SO MUCH OF TODAY’S CHURCH ASSIGN LGBT PERSONS AND SAME-GENDER COUPLES TO A LESSER PLACE?** My prayer this morning is that Bishop Jakes and the Potter’s House as we visit and dialogue with them, will begin to understand Family in its deepest dimensions! **WE ARE FAMILY**, but sadly some followers of the Christ exclude some as the family of Jesus was excluded many years ago.



11. May 18, 2008 – A Visit to The Potter’s House

My hesitations about going to the Potters House Church in Dallas as a participant in the Soulforce, “American Family Outing” were quickly transformed as Grace and I and the other participants began to experience the warm hospitality of the leaders and members of the 30,000 member Church. Years ago, Grace and I “discovered” the Senior Pastor of the Potters House, Bishop T. D. Jakes as we tuned into religious TV. We could not help but be impressed by his communication skills that came garmented in the finest of preaching in the black tradition. As we often say, “he was able to tell the story” (of what God has done in Jesus Christ) in a way that embraced the listener. His use of the persons and personalities of the Bible in a way that made them our companions and sisters and brothers in our faith walks was powerful.

Bishop Jakes was unable to be present and meet with us, but our visit was a rich experience.

There were a few moments when my paranoia made me momentarily suspicious of the quality and quantity of the hospitality at the Potter’s House . . . I remembered that old story of the Psychiatrists attending a professional meeting who passed each other while walking one morning. One said “Good Morning” to the other. As they passed, the recipient of the “Good Morning” said to herself, “I wonder what he meant by that” . . . For a moment I wondered if the hospitality was a deliberate effort to take from us our commitment to the rightness of same-gender couple-led families....but my spirit would not allow my suspicions fed by paranoia to take over.

I have known “campus churches,” but I have never seen a campus like that of the Potter’s House’s huge building and parking lot. Bill Carpenter, long-time Soulforce staff and participant who was the “minister of transportation” for us,

demonstrated an amazing ability to disarm security personnel as he drove into the parking lot and told them, with a smile in his voice, why we were there and who was waiting to receive us. (The next time I am driving in an area noted for the danger of DWB, (Driving While Black), I will wish that Bill Carpenter was with me. Not because of his whiteness, but because of his person.)

As we entered the building we walked and walked and walked....which was made more difficult because of my limp and my cane (next time I will remember to bring and wear my leg brace to such an event). We received orientation and were given the opportunity to ask questions as we waited for the service to begin. The service: music and dance, music and dance, “my, my, my” how rich and splendid, despite the repetition. In addition to the dance, the highlight of the service for us was seeing clips from the movie *One night with the King* (The story of Esther), with the wife of the visiting preacher singing the song as a slice of the movie was projected. (This was the finest “Bible Movie” Grace and I had ever seen. We recommend it!). Before the service was over, those of us who were designated to meet with some of the staff of the Church left for the meeting.

The Meeting: Early on, I sought to set forth the “why” of my commitment as an ally/advocate of LGBT persons and same-gender couple-led families...I attempted to link my Civil Rights experience for racial justice to that of the justice struggle for gay rights, but soon realized that our hosts were unwilling to engage in give-and-take on our disagreements....They sought to impact us by their ministry to people with HIV/AIDS, but were unwilling to acknowledge that they acknowledge same-gender persons as such, ill or not. All of our group raised questions and/or made helpful comments. Their expressed willingness to engage in further conversation will, I hope, receive a positive response from us soon. At the end of the meeting, Jeff Lutes had a telephone conversation with Bishop Jakes. Sitting next to Jeff I was able to hear and “feel” the affirmation expressed by Bishop Jakes for our willingness to dialogue, rather than confront. I did hear the Bishop express a concern that I have heard from other black pastors that anti-hate legislation might curb their right to preach and teach their understandings of “Biblical Truth” as they interpret its meaning for same-gender loving persons. I think over and over again how we must help all preachers understand how their negative “Biblical pronouncements” about gay persons harm and hurt gay persons and give some violent persons rationale for their violence against gay persons. It was the same for those preachers who preached racial segregation as being legitimated by Scripture. Many of them could never comprehend how their words from the pulpit energized the verbal and physical violence of the KKK against black persons.

My first hand experience with the “American Family Outing” of Soulforce at the Potter’s House in Dallas confirmed my belief that the reality of “Family” in all of its many configurations, when shared and experienced, has the capacity to break through the walls of prejudice and bigotry. Years ago as a boy in North Carolina, I used to hear my Mother speak of a woman “with child” as being in a “family way.” On Sunday, May 18th, representatives of Soulforce and the members of the Potter’s House experienced a taste of the authenticity of what it means to be in a “family way.”



Soulforce is a national civil rights and social justice organization. Our vision is freedom for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people from religious and political oppression through the practice of relentless nonviolent resistance.

For more information, visit www.soulforce.org.