

August 26, 2007  
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Open Prairie United Church of Christ

“Got it Right, Lived it Wrong”

**Jeremiah 1:4-10**

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,  
'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'  
Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for  
I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me,  
'Do not say, "I am only a boy";  
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,  
and you shall speak whatever I command you.  
Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you,  
says the Lord.'  
Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,  
'Now I have put my words in your mouth.  
See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant.'

**Luke 13:10-17** Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.' But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?' When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

This past week I had the great pleasure of watching the DVD of Bill Moyers' keynote presentation at General Synod. I did not make it to the presentation in person, and have been anxiously awaiting the arrival of the recording. It will be available for you to check out soon, but I am not quite finished with it. I think I will have to watch it a few times to take in the breadth of what is being said. I would like to share with you one of the stories Mr. Moyers told in his presentation, as it is a fitting companion with today's scripture passages.

"Half a century ago, in America it seemed our Declaration of Independence had let loose in the world the radical notion of equality in the sight of God and under the rule of law. Eleven signers of that Declaration were members of UCC predecessor churches. Those words can still cause the heart to race on the verge of at last getting it right:

We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Once those words were abroad, every human being who could hear them could imagine another world possible. They could think differently about the value that society had assigned their life.

Yes, it's true. Slavery still exercised a malignant hold over our young generation, but that couldn't last long, once those words were loose in the land. The man who wrote those words knew it couldn't last.

As a Southerner, Thomas Jefferson saw no political or social alternative to the peculiar institution, but he knew well that slavery degraded master and slave alike, and that any society that permitted half of its citizens to be despots over the other half was doomed.

"I tremble for my country," he wrote, "when I reflect that God is just, and that His justice cannot sleep forever." Jefferson knew from his own experience the perversity of owning another person as chattel. For the hand that wrote those words, "All men are created equal" also stroked the breasts and caressed the thighs of a slave woman named Sally Hemings. It is no longer a secret: this learned, philosophical and far-seeing founder had a long-term sexual relationship with his slave, who bore him several children. DNA confirms it, and even the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation in Virginia accepts it.

Jefferson never acknowledged those children as his own. And as he grew older, he relied more and more on slavery to keep him financially afloat. When he died, his slaves were sold to satisfy his creditors - all except for Sally. His probaters found in Jefferson's will an obscure passage, setting her children free. None of the others. Just the children of Sally Hemings.

Here's the point. Jefferson could not really think that the words on that parchment were markers solely for white men of privilege and property who liked port and politics. He had to know. That the flesh and blood woman in his arms was his equal. In her desire for life, her longing for liberty, and her passion for happiness.

But the law ... the law had been fashioned by white men of wealth privilege to keep her outside the gate of promise opened by the Declaration of Independence. She lay in his arms, the arms of its author, but could not travel with him to the Promised Land.

So all that Sally Hemings asked from her long sufferance was that her master let her children go. The oldest and most plaintive of human petitions: Let my children go.

And he did. But only upon his death. **Thomas Jefferson got it right, you see. But he lived it wrong.** He got it right for the same reason he lived it wrong: he was embedded in the human condition. Addicted to his own place and privilege, he could send the noblest sentiments winging around the world, but refused to let them lodge in his own home. So much a creature of his time, he could not rise above his times. **He knew the truth, and he lived the lie.**

So the authors of our freedom produced the Constitution that tolerated slavery and the cruel dispossession of Native Peoples who had been here all along. And we've been wrestling with the contradiction in our nation's soul ever since, the conflict between power and justice.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from the Keynote presentation at the UCC General Synod in Hartford CT. 2007. Bill Moyer's presenting, transcript available on the UCC website, [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org).

The conflict between power and justice, sound familiar? Getting it right, but living it wrong, can we think of any parallels? Let's start with the religious leaders in the scripture who chastised Jesus for healing on the Sabbath or moreover who chastised those who would come for healing on the Sabbath in the first place. Imagine that, those in power... blaming the victim... a present reality in the time of Jesus, in Jefferson's time, and surely even today.

I am sure you heard about the Mexican woman who was deported this week after having been kept safe in a Methodist church for over a year? She chose to march in an immigration reform rally, knowing that it could well mean her deportation. Can we blame her for coming to a country where she could work and raise a family? Can we blame her standing up for fair treatment of herself and others like her? The conflict between power and justice, blaming the victim verses certain inalienable rights; life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. Is it possible that we, like our forbearers, could be getting it right, but living it wrong?

Let me ask you this, with whom do we identify in Luke's text? We would like to identify with Jesus, I dare say. I will admit it; I would be more comfortable associating myself with the one who is doing the healing, rather than the one who needs healing or those casting aspersions at the healer. But can we really, at this moment in time, identify ourselves with the likes of Jesus? Scripture tells us that nothing could stop Jesus from healing, welcoming, and loving all. Can we as the church say that we are willing to offer healing, welcome and love at all costs?

Dare we compare ourselves with Jesus, when the ethnic cleansing in places like Darfur continues and AIDS in Africa is ravaging an entire continent. Dare we compare ourselves with Jesus, while women and children across the globe are still being sold into slavery in broad daylight, when natural disasters threaten the lives of people all over the world, and we in our own country have not been able to restore some semblance of normalcy for the people in Louisiana hit by hurricane Katrina two years ago this week. Dare we compare ourselves with Jesus, when statistics continue to show that one in every seven black males in this country will end up in prison? Or when teachers like Susan Hale have to buy their own classroom light bulbs because the school doesn't have the funds to replace them, and illiteracy is just one of the casualties stemming from the failed governmental fiasco known as 'no child left behind.' Are we getting it right but living it wrong? As repulsed as we may be by the religious elite of Jesus' day or Jefferson hypocrisy, are we not complicit in the modern day equivalents?

My point is this, when Jesus reaches out to liberate the woman who is bent over, it is not someone else who is in need of healing, it is us. Even though we made the decision to get out of bed this morning and come to church, even though we ourselves have felt the fierce sting of marginalization, even as progressive as we are... in our longing to fit in, in our addiction to place and privilege haven't we willingly chosen to hide our faces from what we know to be true.

Aren't we bent over and unable to face the injustice that surrounds us, continuing to live as if it did not exist, thinking that if we do not make eye contact it will all just go away and leave us alone.

But God finds us, God always finds us even when we try to look away. God lifts our faces, breaks into our world and shakes us to the core. We cannot deny it, knowledge is power and while we can't know what we don't know, we have come to learn that once we know it, we can't not know it.<sup>2</sup> In this morning's Gospel message we are set free to respond to God's call and to participate fully in the new awareness it brings. Each of us here this morning has the power to rise up, to stand tall, to demand that justice is not a privilege to be enjoyed by the elite of our country, justice is the right of all humanity to be shared in equal measure regardless of the day of the week.

And lest we say not me God, 'I am only a boy,' or 'I am only a bent over woman,' I do not have a job, I'm tired and over committed... God has heard those reasons before... and whatever we are, we are also Christians. Followers of the one who taught us not to stop at our own excuses, not to be satisfied with our own healing but to speak truth to power and wield the gospel of right relationship in the face of broken and unjust laws.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a common phrase used at OPUCC. The original is "You can't know what you don't know, but once you know it, you can't not know it."

Those within earshot of the sound of my voice... consider yourselves restored, consider yourselves touched by the Holy hand of God that heals no matter what the cost, touched by the hand that has given us hearts to know the difference between right and wrong, souls set ablaze with the conviction that all God's children are to be free. Rise up people of God. Let us rise up and follow the way of Jesus the justice doer, the compassion giver... Let us rise up and have the courage to not only to get it right, but to live it right! Amen