

2008: Sermon on a Promised Land

My father was a survivor of Dachau Concentration Camp, so I am the son of a slave. His liberation from Nazi persecution, and the freedom he cherished so deeply every day of his life thereafter, were American-made gifts he embraced with all his heart for the rest of his life.

But I was born in this country; my father's freedom from physical bondage meant less to me, and his liberation from the spiritual bondage of modern Egypt, nothing at all – until I came to see that I, too, was a slave that yearned to be free.

The Israelites of the Old Testament equated ancient Egypt with more than physical bondage. The word "Egypt" in Hebrew is "Mitzrayim." And the word, "mitzarim" comes from the same root and means "narrow places" or "limitations." The Exodus of the Bible is a metaphor for every journey out of bondage. And everyone who travels its path becomes one of the Children of Israel.

My gay journey out of the closet has been an exodus that has nothing to do with sex. It has to do with the freedom to love and be loved as I am. But even in me there was a pharaoh's voice enslaving me with guilt for how God made me. My Egypt was within. It was self-hatred that kept me from advancing on my journey of the heart. And the cruel master's voice I could hear in my mind could only be silenced with the deepest inner resolve to love myself and have faith in God's eternal goodness.

In my youth I got involved with alcohol and drugs and then attempted suicide three times, all in an attempt to run away from the lessons of self-love that were destined for me. I tried to get out of being just as God created me. I wanted to be anyone but me. But my real sin was in being afraid to be authentically me.

To atone for wishing to be other than I was, God inspired me to dispatch a prophet unto myself to teach me to love myself. I became my own Moses, and led myself out of the bondage of my mind on my own journey to the heart. Life sent me on a journey of forty years, wandering through a desert of other people's disapproval until I was ready to enter my inner Promised Land spiritually cleansed and free from self-hatred.

But in the desert of everyday life I saw many die from alcoholism, drug abuse and AIDS. And there were others who just gave up the fight to settle for indiscriminate pleasures of the flesh rather than hold on to their faith in the lasting power of love.

Mental institutions didn't break my spirit. There was no sorrow that could extinguish my hope of finding my faith in love. I'm a gay Moses leading myself on an exodus out of my own Egypt to an Israel within, and I'm simply never going to give up my dream of getting there.

The word Israel means, "struggle with God." But I've had to struggle with the interpretation of my Bible that declared my way of loving as sinful, just as others have had to struggle with literal interpretations of the Bible, such as the right to own slaves.

In Leviticus, the third book of Torah, written for the priestly class, Torah makes the claim that it's an "abomination" for a man to lie with another man. But few people realize that that passage is part of a greater portion of Leviticus intended for single men who have come to the priest to seek the blessings of marriage. God is describing to the priests the sanctity of marriage, and the depth of the challenge for a husband to be faithful and responsible to his wife.

Some married men will try to evade an exclusive physical, emotional and spiritual bond

with their wife. Not all young men will be able to fully appreciate the opportunity for spiritual depth that can be found through fidelity. The importance of keeping one's word and living up to all promises are the lessons being given here. And so, God instructs the priest to warn the potential bridegroom of the unseen challenges to sexual fidelity.

The priest begins his argument by bluntly condemning the young, potential bridegroom for harboring a secret desire to sleep with his future mother-in-law. The clever reader can almost hear the remonstrations of every young man between the lines of text, indignantly proclaiming that he has absolutely no wish to sleep with any of his future wife's family, let alone her mother!

But the priest turns a deaf ear and then goes on to forbid him from having sexual relations with animals in addition to in-laws. And any bridegroom from antiquity to today would look at a priest in shock at the very idea of bringing bestiality into a discussion of fidelity and marriage. But Torah is making the point that young men marry in haste for sexual gratification and don't see the pitfalls to the family if they break the vows they're committing themselves to. A man's mind will seek novelty and relief from sexual monotony. He rarely looks into his heart as his source of strength.

Lastly, the priest ends his argument declaring that the groom will not only not be able to sleep with in-laws and animals, but he will no longer be able to enjoy homosexual liaisons once he is married either.

This is the spirit in which Torah declares that the sexual union between men is abominable, but given this fuller explanation of the context in which the prohibition is given, the ban on homosexuality is easy to understand and accept.

Homosexuality is an abomination for married men because of its blatant disregard of the vows of monogamy he has sworn himself to. The ban against homosexuality in the Bible is part of the ban against all forms of adultery for married individuals. This ban is intended to strengthen the bonds of matrimony, protect the family and inspire the spiritual transformation that true love allows.

The adamancy against homosexuality in the Hebrew Testament isn't persnickety or prudish. Torah isn't taking a moral position on homosexual acts between unmarried men or women. Nor is Torah trying to keep homosexuals from participating in the joys of love through matrimony. It's an explanation of the depth of the promise of fidelity expressed in the Seventh Commandment.

The Sixth Commandment prohibits murder. The Seventh prohibits adultery because adultery is figurative murder; adultery kills the love between two people. And the Eighth Commandment prohibits stealing, recognizing that once you've stolen a person's heart, it's so easy to then steal their possessions.

Another of the other great misunderstandings of The Old Testament lies in the little-known fact that the Israelites left Egypt going east and arrived forty years later facing Israel moving west. They wandered through the Sinai and Negev deserts to present day Jordan, turned toward the west, looking back in the direction of where they'd come from, as they made ready to cross the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land.

God positioned them to face in the direction of Egypt literally so they would figuratively face their previous forty years of hardship in the desert as well as the entire four hundred years of hardship as slaves in Egypt. God wanted them to look at their struggle with oppression with forgiveness and an open heart as they reached with outstretched arms for their Promise Land realized.

Like the Israelites, I, too, have had to forgive myself for the forty years of my youth that were so difficult. I, too, had to forgive my parents' oppressors in Europe, while, at the same time, never forgetting what had been done to them.

I've had to learn to replace hate with love. I've had to learn to love others in ways that are appropriate to the times I live in. The Bible is a living document through metaphor, but it can destroy the world when interpreted literally.

The mysteries of God's eternal love are being revealed through those who know what it's like to feel enslaved. We're all prophets in the new age.

I, too, have been 'buked, and seek loving shoulders to cry on. I seek friends who understand the depth of my suffering because I understand theirs. I, too, have been enslaved by hatred and have worked to become deserving of love.

Only once I'd completed my forty-year journey traveling east out of youth, could I turn back in middle age toward all I'd struggled through for the sake of gay liberation. Only then could I see that the ridicule and humiliation society had hurled upon me wasn't my burden to carry. I leave all that on a bank of a river of tears when I cross over to my Promised Land. I don't need scorn and humiliation where I'm going.

From where I stand, I can see the olive branches of Zion reaching up through the light of the setting sun. In my heart I can say I know the milk of loving kindness, and in my soul, I know the honey of wisdom that comes from experience. I've been so sustained and nurtured along the way.

I'm no longer a Moses down in Egypt's land following in the path of other great and loving prophets like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I'm a Moses now unto myself, singing my spiritual song within as I near the end of my journey. This sermon of mine is also a prayer begging you and God to support the love of equal rights within arms' reach of the next generation.