



*Forum 1.8: There is a Balm in Gilead:
Song of Promise, Healing, Hope, and Liberation*

By Dr. Sharon Kimberly Williams

*"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?
Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?"—Jeremiah 8:22 (NRSV)*

There is a Balm in Gilead
19th Century African American Spiritual
Author: Unknown

*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.*

*If you cannot preach like Peter,
If you cannot pray like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus,
And say, "He died for all."*

In the Spirit of the Religion and Global Health Forum (the *Forum*) at Drew University, let us pause for a moment to reflect on these three critical questions presented by the prophet Jeremiah for our consideration: *"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?"* In doing so, let us also focus on the definitive response to the prophet which comes as a declaration found in the lyrics of the African American Spiritual, *"There is a Balm in Gilead."*

What is this notion of a balm in Gilead that the prophet spoke so urgently about, and the ancestors sang so passionately about and why does the core mission of the *Forum* embody this biblical precept so profoundly? Based on Genesis 31, Gilead is a mountainous region east of the Jordan River. Gilead was well known in the region for its precious healing balm derived from the balsam plant or tree. In

the Old Testament, Gilead was a region known for its physicians. In the text, Gilead serves as a metaphor for Jesus, the Great Physician. In this narrative, Jeremiah uses this metaphor of the balm and the physician skillfully as he grapples with themes of loss, corruption, oppression, false prophets, exile, and the fall of Jerusalem to Babylonia. During the final period of the Kingdom of Judah, the prophet asks these profound questions to the people of Judah who had turned away from God and who did not heed the warning of judgment to come.

Today when we reflect on Jeremiah's rationale for questioning the faith of his people in the Great Physician, it is up to us all, health advocates and health activists everywhere, to respond to the heart cry of the prophet with a renewed faith to continue the difficult work of eliminating health disparities globally. Our collective response to the prophet's plea should most definitely be a resounding "yes," a communal, powerfully affirmative response if you will, that echoes the message and the meaning of the spiritual, "There *is* a Balm in Gilead." The *Forum* prioritizes this liberating message expressed in the spiritual which serves as a definitive response to Jeremiah's question. Yes, in fact, "There *is* a Balm in Gilead" as the ancestral songwriter urges because no matter what suffering occurs, our wounds can be healed, and we can be made whole. Like the prophet Jeremiah, we proclaim to a suffering world that the virtues of healing, hope, and liberation are all in the balm—and Jesus is the balm!

June is African American Music Appreciation Month in the United States. Created by President Jimmy Carter in 1979, this month celebrates the African American musical influences that comprise an essential part of our nation's treasured cultural heritage of which the spirituals are a part of this legacy.

On Sunday, May 6th at the Global Health Catalyst Summit held at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, PA, the *Forum* honored both its mission and the legacy of the African ancestors by paying homage to the healing legacy of this sacred song, "There *is* a Balm in Gilead." The Religion and Health Session of the Summit opened with an overview by our Director, Dr. Kenneth Ngwa, followed by a creative presentation of the Balm in Gilead spiritual. As he reflected on Jeremiah 8:22, the Rev. Dr. Festus Asana, Moderator Emeritus of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, and the World Council of Churches shared his historical perspective and reverence for this spiritual with a personal story of growing up in Cameroon and learning from the elders about the importance of healing with balms and plant medicine.

The balm in this biblical narrative translates to a botanical cure that can counter the effects of sin. In the ancestors' adaptation of the text to create the lyrical content for the spiritual, the faith in the balm represents how the slaves were able to find healing, hope, and liberation from the depths of their spiritual, physical, and psychological wounds. By believing in the transformative power of a balm that heals like no other, the African ancestors were able to transcend the oppression and suffering that came with being enslaved through salvation in Jesus Christ. In this light, more than anything, the balm represents a path for our wholeness and deliverance. For the enslaved Africans, the music of the spirituals was a compass for their own survival.

From another analytical point of view, the song itself, "There *is* a Balm in Gilead" can be interpreted as spiritual medicine. Based on the reflections of renowned mystic and theologian, Howard Thurman, the hope for healing is symbolic in this particular spiritual which inspired the Civil Rights Movement. Thurman sets Jeremiah's questions in the context of his classic book about the spirituals entitled, *Deep River: The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. Thurman writes:

The prophet (Jeremiah) has come to a "Dead Sea" place in his life. Not only is he discouraged by the external events in the life of Israel, but he is also spiritually depressed and tortured. As a wounded

animal, he cried out, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is no physician there?” It is not a question of fact that he is raising — it is not directed to any particular person for an answer. It is not addressed to either God or Israel, but rather it is a question raised by Jeremiah’s entire life. He is searching his own soul. He is stripped to the literal substance of himself and is turned back on himself for an answer. Jeremiah is saying actually, “There must be a balm in Gilead; it cannot be that there is no balm in Gilead.” The relentless winnowing of his own bitter experience has laid bare his soul to the end that he is brought face to face with the very ground and core of his own faith.

Thurman further interprets the Scripture’s role in the spiritual:

“The slave caught the mood of this spiritual dilemma and with it did an amazing thing. He straightened the question mark in Jeremiah’s sentence into an exclamation point: “There is a balm in Gilead!” Here is a note of creative triumph.”

What we can glean from Thurman about Jeremiah is profound, to say the least. When I think of all of the health advocates and activities working from the “Dead Sea” places that deny quality healthcare to the poorest among us, Thurman’s words provide an essential hope for health advocates working today. Also, as we reflect on Thurman’s theological writings on this spiritual, he shows us how music can be understood as a form of medicine for the African American community and communities everywhere. In African American music, you find healing in our freedom of expression. Music is our storyteller that teaches first and foremost, about the healing, hope, and liberation of a people from a historic perspective.

“There is a Balm in Gilead” is among the best-known African American Spirituals in the canon of African American sacred works of music because of its timeless messages of hope and resilience. The setting for the song was inspired by the book of Jeremiah who is disheartened by the behavior of his people thus, proclaiming, surely there must be a balm and a physician to heal our communal trauma and address our suffering. Today, each time we contemplate our communal trauma and the deep grief and loss associated with our pain we must consider Jeremiah and this narrative of the healing balm. Each time this spiritual is sung, it renews our faith to embrace the highest level of optimism needed to sustain all the soldiers on the front line of change—the health advocates working to reform health policies, eliminate health disparities, and gain quality health care for all globally.

CONCLUSION: FAITH IN ACTION:

In closing, how do the spirituals promote healing? The spirituals were created by the African ancestors enslaved in the Americas to respond to violence in all its various forms—physical, spiritual, and cultural. When the prophet asks, “*Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?*” we begin to reflect on healing and the vast scope of terrain that covers. Healing for the mind, the body, and the spirit. When we think about healing, we think of it as a counterpoint to violence and trauma. Here are two examples of faith communities in action working to restore the health of underserved communities:

1. Comprehensive Cancer Center in the Cloud (C4) / RGHF and Global Health Catalyst:

In this partnership pilot program, churches will serve as access hubs in different communities where minorities can access holistic cancer prevention and treatment services or interventions via the *Comprehensive Cancer Center in the Cloud (C4)* technology. The interventions via the C4 will provide major increases in access to cancer care in neighborhoods for underserved communities. The work will generate behavioral data measuring the effectiveness of the C4 care delivery model powered by

artificial intelligence tools with an integrative approach to health that centers on the role of religion in enhancing prevention, treatment, survival, and resiliency.

Religion and Global Health Forum: The mission is to build a world where peoples of all socio-economic, racial, religious, gendered, geographical, cultural, and differently-abled backgrounds and bodies, especially the historically marginalized, have access to consistent, quality healthcare and dignity.

Global Health Catalyst: The mission is to eliminate health disparities and advance health system development in the United States and globally. GHC has a dream that one day cancer will be eradicated, and that people of all socio-economic, racial, religious, and cultural backgrounds will have access to quality health care.

2. Healthy Churches 2030 / The Balm in Gilead, Inc.:

The National Campaign is keenly focused on faith-based approaches to public health issues that support integrating cultural and science-based strategies within congregations throughout urban and rural communities. The campaign includes the Healthy Churches 2030 Conference and the Healthy Churches 2030 Initiative: Roadmap 2030.

The Balm in Gilead Inc.: This organization develops educational and training programs specifically designated to establish sustainable, integrated systems of public health and contribute to the elimination of health disparities among people of the Black Diaspora.
