

Kalaupapa Sunday
Hawai'i Conference – United Church of Christ (USA)

The following sermon was presented at the Opening Worship of the 'Aha O Nā Mokupuni 'O Maui, Moloka'i ame Lāna'i on Saturday, April 27, 2013. The message was based on the reading from John 9:1-12 and the theme "Hidden Histories Revealed, Hidden Histories Shared."

In the Desolation

I accepted *Kahu* Lon Rycraft's invitation : "Come to Kalaupapa," he said. "You will have a chance to rest." *Kahu* served as the pastor of the Siloama Church in Kalawao and Kana'ana Hou Church in Kalaupapa from 1993 to 2005. I knew very little of the history of the settlement where more than 8,000 men, women and children were sent when they were diagnosed with Hansen's disease or leprosy.

In preparing for our time together today, *Kahu* Jack Belsom wrote: "We hope your congregation will prepare a three-minute history that you would be willing to share with everyone during the meeting. Perhaps we can have our 'Hidden Histories Revealed.'" And then he added, "Actually they are more likely histories that have not been shared rather than being 'hidden.'"

In a way, that could be said about Kalawao and Kalaupapa. No longer is the history of what happened hidden. It is now being shared.

I still remember the day we drove to Kalawao. Along the graveled road, Lon pointed to areas where there were hundreds of unmarked graves.

Lon suggested that we spend the first day at Siloama Church. He warned me that the ride would be a little bumpy. When we arrived at the church, I was struck by its simplicity. It looked like an old one room school house.

I noticed the plaque on the wall that listed the first 35 members of the church and below the words of dedication: "Thrust out by mankind these 12 women and 23 men crying aloud to God, their only refuge, formed a church, the first in the desolation that was Kalawao."

Outside, it was a clear day. The sun was out. The sky was blue. The trees stood tall and green. It hardly seemed like a desolate place and yet we know it was in that first winter of 1866.

Those who were sent into exile have left us a record of their thoughts, their lives and their insistence on justice for those who were deprived of their families, their homes and their basic rights as human beings. Although almost all have died their voices remain and it is their voices that we hear.

Helen Keao was sent to Kalaupapa in 1942. “I have read and I have heard many stories about Kalaupapa and of the people that lived at Kalawao . . . that the people who lived here were bad, that the land was without law and the people were lawless, immoral and they were engaging in a lot of wickedness. But, I don’t think, in fact I don’t believe that all the people were bad because I feel if that was true, then there would not be a church called Siloama, which was the first church to be built here at Kalawao.” (*Adjourned With a Prayer: The Minutes of Siloama & Kana’ana Hou Churches*, Judd, Silva, & Law, *Ka ‘Ohana O Kalaupapa*, 2011)

Such stories about lawlessness, immorality and wickedness in the early years is what may have fueled the leadership of the Hawai’i Evangelical Association at its annual meeting in 1873 to insist it was their duty to help the public realize that the segregation of those afflicted with leprosy was the “only salvation for the Hawaiian people.” It was at that meeting that the delegates concluded that without such action, the work of the mission would mean the “shame, defeat and disgraceful overthrow to all that is promising and fair in the nation.”

Perhaps it was that attitude, fueled by fear, more than anything that created the stigma and prejudice experienced by so many who were exiled to the Makanalua Peninsula. In 1869, William Humphreys Uwēle’ale’a had sent a letter to the Hawaiian language newspaper *Ka Nūpepa Kū’oko’a* four years earlier on behalf of the congregation of Siloama Church.

He wrote: “You must not think that all of us here are living in sin and degradation. That is not so. Our greatest longing is to make a memorial to God here. Perhaps this can be likened unto the bathing pool of Siloam in our Lord’s time. Therefore we are minded to put up this church and to call it by the name of Siloam’s healing pool . . .” (*Op. cit.*, page 10)

Helen Keao reflected on the experience of those like Uwēle’ale’a: “When they came here, you can just imagine – I being a patient can just imagine how they must have felt – being taken away, cut off, from their family and their home, friends and their church. What else did they have left, except that one refuge, God?” (*Op. cit.*, page 7)

The stories of Kalawao and Kalaupapa are stories to be shared. They are stories about suffering and sorrow; abandonment and anger; despair and death. But they are also stories about family and faith; hope and healing; love and life.

I remember the day Lon and I made that drive to Kalawao. It is true that I was able to find solace and rest. I slept so well throughout my stay. It is also true that my faith was strengthened and renewed.

In the years after the church was established, thousands more would follow. They would be “sent” to Kalawao and later to Kalaupapa. For those fearful of the disease segregation and separation was essential.

But something miraculous occurred. Rachel Kamaka Souza was sent to Kalaupapa in 1931. She recalled, “To my mind, God did not separate us. He put us together, and then we learned from one another. We tried to help one another” (*Op. cit.*) – there “in the desolation” that was Kalawao and Kalaupapa – they were together learning and helping one another.

Jesus said, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35) So it is that we give thanks for the faithful witness of Helen Keao, Uwēle'ale'a, Rachel Kamaka Souza, Smauel Kauwalu, John Cambra and so many others.

Mahalo ke Akua.

E pule kākou: As we gather here in Mākena this day, O God, we give thanks for those who have gone before us. We are especially grateful for the faith and faithfulness of the men, women and children of Kalawao and Kalaupapa. We lift our prayers to you this day knowing as they did that you are our only refuge.

Come now and be with us in our time together. Encourage us with your love that we may commit ourselves anew to live as those who belong to you; through the grace of Jesus Christ. *E ho'oikaika mai me kou aloha i ho'oia'i'o iā mākou no i ke ola hou, i lilo mākou nou ma ka ke aloha o Iesū Kristo. Amen.*