

Keawala'i Congregational Church  
United Church of Christ (USA)

Third Sunday of Epiphany  
Kalaupapa Sunday  
Sunday, January 26, 2014

The Rev. Kealahou C. Alika

“God’s Call: A Challenge & A Gift”  
Matthew 4:18-23 & John 9:1-12

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 about 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.

I remember the day we drove to Kalawao. As we traveled along a graveled road across the peninsula ,Lon pointed to areas where there were thousands 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 (*sic*) 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.

The 35 men and women who were sent to Kalawao came from 15 of our Congregational churches – six on O‘ahu, one on Moloka‘i, four on Maui, and four from Hawai‘i island. They met to lay the foundation for the church that was to be known as *Siloama* – The Church of the

Healing Spring.

The name of the church was drawn from the story of the man born blind that comes to us from our reading from *The Gospel According to John*. The disciples question Jesus about the man's blindness and attempt to find fault in the man or his parents.

Jesus makes clear that his concern is not about the cause of the man's blindness. Instead he is more concerned about how the man's blindness provides the setting for God's work to take place.

Jesus' action and command (John 9:6-7) that the man "Go, wash in the pool at Siloam", has its parallel in the Elisha's cleansing of the Naaman the Syrian who was afflicted with leprosy or Hansen's disease. (2 Kings 5:10, Mark 8:23) It was Naaman who was told by the prophet Elisha to go and wash in the Jordan River.

That the first church on the Makanalua Peninsula should be called *Siloama* which also means "sent" is significant to me. Those who were "sent" 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 echo through peninsula and it is their voices that we hear.

Helen Keao was sent to Kalaupapa in 1942. She said, "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 so, 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 from Congregational churches throughout Hawai'i 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."

Over time, it would be that attitude of shame and disgrace, fueled by fear, that created the stigma and prejudice experienced by so many who were exiled to the peninsula. It would not be the first time that the church, as an institution bound by dogma and doctrine, would fail in its calling to care for the least among the people.

In 1869, 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 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 was that Helen Keao, Uwēle‘ale‘a, Rachel Kamaka Souza, Samuel Kauwalu, John Cambra and so many others took care of each other.

Like Peter, Andrew, James and John, those who were sent to Kalawao and Kalaupapa were also called by God “to proclaim the good news of the kingdom and to cure every disease and sickness among the people.” (Matthew 4:23) To proclaim the good news of the kingdom was one thing but to cure every disease and sickness seemed like an insurmountable challenge.

Yet as a consequence of their persistence, they became a gift to each other and to those who would come after them and for that we give thanks to God. Amen.