

**Huck Finn - A Message for Gay Youth
A Sermon**

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Before I begin, in recognition of the theme of today's sermon and of the tragedies in our world today, please join me in or contemplate a prayer, by St. Francis of Assisi:

"Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

To be consoled as to console,

To be understood as to understand,

To be loved as to love;

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

It is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

Amen.

First let me point out that the title of these remarks is Huck Finn - A Message FOR Gay Youth, rather than a message TO Gay Youth. I mean it to be a message *especially* to gay youth and for that matter to anyone struggling with their God-given identities (sexual or otherwise) in a hostile world of spiritually myopic

people, but also for all of us as well, as what I am about to say is, I hope, in the tradition of liberal and liberationist thinking that may help all of us remember who we are as members of liberal religion, and be more secure and sure in our own strong moral convictions about what is truly right and truly wrong in our world, and why we must turn a good deal of traditionalist thinking on its head in order to set matters aright for those who are suffering and those in need of our understanding, rather than our cruelty, disregard and disenfranchisement. For in my religion, anyone who is suffering merely because of where he finds himself or herself in this life is what the Gospel account calls “the least of these.” And it is, after all, in that same Gospel that we are reminded that “what we do to the least of these” will determine whether we have truly lived-up to the message of love which is the cornerstone of liberal religious thought, be it Jewish, Christian, Unitarian or other.

And while we are on the Gospel account, let me point out that there is no place in any of the four canonical Gospels where we find any suggestion that offering a cup of water to parched lips is precluded where the receiver is a tax collector or a Samaritan or even a prostitute or adulterer, despised categories of persons in the first century in the places where the historical Jesus did his work; nor, in my mind, for anyone wishing to follow that example, may we in good conscience withhold a cup of water, metaphorical or literal, from the parched lips of our brothers and sisters being persecuted today and who by are actions are seen as equally despised -- the working poor, the oppressed, the racialized minority, or our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. But to understand the moral and spiritual ground on which we stand and to truly understand the message of love that it is incumbent on us to live out, we must dig deeper into ourselves and into the meaning of true spiritual and religious insight, insight available to all who would do the work of transforming the mind and the heart and the soul.

The message of enlightened religion, of critical religion (critical in the sense of constantly challenging itself as to its conclusions and constantly reflecting on the meaning of its commitments) is that human beings do not yet recognize their capacity to do good, while fully aware of our capacity to abandon ourselves to evil, as in war or the persecution of others, whether through pogroms or lynchings, or through the withholding of our recognition and affection.

The constraint from doing ill requires three things that are often in short supply. These three things are effort, time, and remembrance -- and each of these three things is only possible if we first understand the radical nature of transformative love. The effort that I am speaking of is the effort to curb our appetites to sacrifice The Other, the supposed Stranger who is really us in disguise, on the altar of our own opinions and need for settled belief and for the comfort that this often brings. The time I am speaking of is the time it

takes to engage in the reflection that would turn us from our course toward cruelty, and steer us instead toward good-Samaritan-like love; and the remembrance I refer to is the need to remember the moral and spiritual lessons that we have tried to inculcate in ourselves in places like this and elsewhere. Failure to do these three things will cause us to backslide, to become, eventually and if not careful, part of the blood-thirsty or heedless mob or, just as bad, to become the mob's guilty bystander, the betrayer of our deepest professed commitments. There are many names for this triumvirate of practices – effort, time and remembrance - across faith and philosophical traditions. The Muslims have the five pillars of their faith, including *Jihad* - the constant struggle against the self's animal appetites so as to build a proper vessel of Allah. Aristotle, in his ethics, called the struggle *Arete*, the practice of virtue, the struggle to build proper characters toward the end of excellence of mind, body, spirit and civic duty. In Judaism, it is the peripatetic injunction of the Prophet Micah to walk with God each day, and of Solomon to remember God in the days of our youth and beyond; it is *Shebat* where there is gathering together to remember on a day set aside for remembrance; and in Christianity, the daily devotional, the mass, the service, the *imitatio dei* or the attempt to imitate the Divine attributes in the form of love, care and friendship.

The idea that there is a need to struggle to be truly moral and/or to imitate the Divine, rather than be followers of custom and slaves to rules and tradition, is one that the mytho-poetic language of the various faith traditions have about right at least in some respects. Where they have it right is in their recognition that our egos incline us to ill because we do not yet know who we are - do not know our capacity for good. It is though we were composed of two selves, or two halves of one self, which war against each other. In his dialogue *Phaedrus* Plato, in describing the nature of the human soul, speaks mythically of two-winged horses yoked together, one full of appetite and bent on what is injurious, the other bent on the pursuit of the beautiful and the good, and the horses pulling in different directions, and requiring the constant struggle of the charioteer, the rational principle, to make the soul perform for good rather than evil, to lead the soul upward and to wholeness. This idea of a divided self is played out elsewhere. In the Christian tradition the apostle Paul, whose injunction about love we just heard, spoke of the good that his soul wished to do but does not do, and who spoke of a thorn in his flesh that vexed him deeply and which would not leave him.

Now, I want you to hear between the lines, as Peggy Schlecter always reminds our youth. For such language as I am using could easily be used down at Liberty Baptist Church or by other of our fundamentalist friends, but I mean instead to reclaim faith and love and spirit and morality from those who would claim to own it and who would use them as weapons of division, and I mean to turn the message of religion around on those who equate faith with judgment and tradition and literal and idolatrous attachment to texts that do not always have relevance in the modern world. The struggle of the soul is not the struggle

they think it is or say it is, for some kind of narrow ethical purity, but the struggle is the struggle to love our fellows as ourselves, a love that casts fear outside.

Think of yourself as Plato's charioteer, always trying to control two natures; one that is destructive and that leads to ill; the other a nature that would lead onto the heights of spiritual maturity, in the direction of the lights of reason, of constructive faith, of beauty, of God, of love. We all have a choice to make, moral choices, and at times such choices require a great deal of courage, even when reason and truth are on our side. Sometimes, we need the courage to stand-up to our traditions and shake the tree of our own beliefs in order to yield the nourishing fruit that will help us to grow. For the objective of faith is seeing, learning about who we really are, more deeply, and more deeply until the scales begin to fall from our scales, and the final scales from our eyes, and we become Awake.

When I teach ethics, I always try to squeeze in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, since it is there where we find one of the most striking examples we can find of moral courage. It's in chapter 31. It revolves around Huck's crisis. Now, a crisis is defined as "a crucial or decisive point or situation; a turning point." In his crisis Huck wrestles with the idea that it is time for him to change his ways, to reconcile himself with God and his society as he understood them. For the first time in a long time he would try to pray and reconsider his association with Jim, the run-away slave that he was helping to keep safe and who had become his traveling companion, benefactor, and friend. Here we find a veritable boy on the threshold of moral manhood.

In this crisis moment of repentance for the life he has lived and for harboring Jim, he decides to perform acts of reconciliation by the lights of his day, and one such act would be informing Jim's owner, Miss Watson, of Jim's whereabouts. The rest I will have to read to you from the text:

Once I said to myself it would be a thousand times better for Jim to be a slave at home where his family was, as long as he'd *got* to be a slave, and so I'd better write a letter to Tom Sawyer and tell him to tell Miss Watson where he was. But I soon give up that notion for two things: she'd be mad and disgusted at his rascality and ungratefulness for leaving her, and so she'd sell him straight down the river again; and if she didn't, everybody naturally despises an ungrateful nigger, and they'd make Jim feel it all the time, and so he'd feel ornery and disgraced. And then think of *me!* It would get all around that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom; and if I was ever to see anybody from that town again I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame. That's just the way: a person does a low-down thing, and then he don't want to take no consequences of it. Thinks as long as he

can hide, it ain't no disgrace. That was my fix exactly. The more I studied about this the more my conscience went to grinding me, and the more wicked and low-down and ornery I got to feeling. And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman's nigger that hadn't ever done me no harm, and now was showing me there's **One** that's always on the lookout, and ain't a-going to allow no such miserable doings to go only just so **fur** and no further, **I most** dropped in my tracks I was so scared. Well, I tried the best I could to **kind-er** soften it up somehow for myself by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I **warn't** so much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, "There was the Sunday-school, you could a gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learnt you there that people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire."

It made me shiver. And I about made up my mind to pray, and see if I couldn't try to quit being the kind of a boy I was and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn't come. **Why** wouldn't they? It **warn't** no use to try and hide it from **Him**. Nor from *me*, neither. **I knowed** very well why they wouldn't come. It was because my heart **warn't** right; it was because **I warn't** square; it was because I was playing double. I was letting *on* to give up sin, but away inside of me I was holding on to the biggest one of all. I was trying to make my mouth *say* I would do the right thing and the clean thing, and go and write to **that nigger's** owner and tell where he was; but deep down in me **I knowed** it was a lie, and **He knowed** it. You can't pray a lie -- I found that out.

So I was full of trouble, full as I could be; and didn't know what to do. At last I had an idea; and I says, I'll go and write the letter -- and *then* see if I can pray. Why, it was astonishing, **the way I felt as light as a feather right straight off, and my troubles all gone**. So I got a piece of paper and a pencil, all glad and excited, and set down and wrote:

Miss Watson, **your runaway nigger** Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville, and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send.

HUCK FINN.

I felt good and all **washed clean** of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and **I knowed** I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking -- thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell.

And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see **Jim** before me all the time: in the day and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of **his'n**, **'stead** of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around and see that paper [the letter to Mrs. Watson].

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I **knowed it**. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

"All right, then, **I'll go to hell**" -- and tore it up.

It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about **reforming**. I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up **wickedness** again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter I would go to work and steal **Jim** out of slavery again; **and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog.**

It's funny, isn't it, how the terrible social force turned Jim, the friend, into "that nigger" -- nameless, faceless, an object, inhuman, like dying Iraqis, like dying Tutsis and Hutus, inhuman, like gays and lesbians who are our fellows and whom we force to cower in closets and whom we humiliate with jokes and stigma. Like Huck Finn, we all have a choice to make, and make in our daily lives. The choice between a false wickedness and a true wickedness; between a false good and a true good; between dead scripture, and living words; between false sin, and true sin. We can be open, or we can be closed to human contact and possibility. We can have circles of loyalty, love and commitment that are narrow, or ones that are broad and even expansive like the oceans, where there is care for more than the immediate family, the immediate community. The less open we are and the narrower the circle, the more separation we live-out, and that separation is the true sin, not the sort of separation that Huck was worried over, the mere separation from

the immoral customs of the day.

Shrinking the circle of loyalty is sin; it is closing off communion with our brothers and sisters, other traditions, other ways of loving and being loved, other notions about that in which the good life consists. The closing is presided over by our ignorance and need for comfort, the comfort of fitting in, the same kind of comfort that Twain's Huck Finn felt appealing in a moment of weakness - - in his case the comfort of narrow beliefs and conclusions, even if wrong, even if it meant turning a friend into an object of scorn and derision, his friend Jim into "that nigger."

The dark horse of our natures is hopelessly addicted to such comfort, when the work of salvation and spirit in this world requires just the opposite. It requires Jihad, daily Jihad, the daily Mitzvah, the daily imitatio dei, commitment to increasing our ability to love and to widen our circle of loyalty, to add another room to the mansion of our minds and hearts so that another stranger can dwell there, received with hospitality as part of our household, as part of our family, that we may extend our concerns to her or to him, and assume the burdens that caring always and inevitably brings. To live a life of love is to live a life of care and struggle, which is the essential meaning of the Sacred Heart as our Catholic brothers and sisters teach. But where we want comfort, a quiet mind free from quandary, free from doubt, settled in beliefs that may not stand the stresses of scrutiny, we are in sin. And what we do to those we push outside the circle, the circle of our love and care, is likewise sin.

Of course, the mind creates many circles as useful conceptual categories that help us navigate the world. Such circles are abstract ways to partition off our affairs and to prioritize our activities. For example, we place mechanics in one circle and medicine in another, thus to see the body of things we must study more clearly. We place the private in one circle and the public in another, thus to make room for the activities of free exchange in the one, and for the governance of people in the other.

But the circles that we draw around **things and concepts** and which do us much good in our effort to focus our energy and resources - - these same circles become abominations when we draw them through the souls of our fellows, cutting arcs through the hearts and organs needed for both life and a happiness. When we make circles of blacks and circles of whites; circles of true believers and circles of infidels; circles of straights and circles of gays or of those who the Native Americans called those with two spirits, we violate the law of love. It is a violation of the law of love to take inconsequential features concerning our bodies, or our loving activities, or the sincere commitments of others, and make them essential to their humanity and as excuses to withdraw our love and concern and friendship.

First and foremost we are not liberals or conservatives, northerners and southerners, urban dwellers and suburbanites, straight or gay. We are first and foremost human. This is forgotten when we focus too much on the labels, and not enough on what is underneath them. Underneath all peoples, are people, and underneath that moniker, are the sons and daughters of nature's God by whatever name you use. Underneath all traditions and customs, are those served by them. Thus we read in one sacred scripture, "I seek mercy and not sacrifice" – the injunction to place people ahead of tradition. In another place, "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." Where what we do in our customs and traditions causes the destruction of our honest fellows, we must push these customs and traditions aside as the thing that morality requires. This is no easy task, and we must be prepared to burn in the hell that the society keeps stoked for those who would push at the posts which hold aloft *the lintels of lovelessness*, as Samson at the temple of Ba'al. Gandhi showed India the immorality of its treatment of its so-called untouchables, as he showed the way for so many other things, and he burned in the hell of his society's traditionalist thought, and was murdered. The same with Martin Luther King, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran minister who stood up to the Nazis and was hanged for living out his own words: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." The dark horse is constrained by the charioteer only with great effort and daily care, and there is the trail of martyrs and broken bodies of those, *both religious and non-religious*, who labored to bring that beast under control through a message of reconciliation.

We are a country riddled, still, with both the most retrograde and abominable practices at the same time that the better angels of our natures are in the dugouts of our souls, waiting to enter and take the field. We are racists, we are sexists still. And, dozens of years after Kinsey and Hite, we deny our sexual selves in ways that the ancients and even the not so ancients would have thought laughable. Our Gay brothers and sisters we have labeled queer, a moniker which many have taken and have owned. We worry about the queerness of types of human eroticism, love and commitment, while the dropping of bombs on babies in places like Vietnam and Iraq are not queer deviations from the ethic of love that is supposed to undergird the messages of Abraham, of Jesus, of Mohammed. It is queer, it is said, for a woman to commit her heart and her body to another woman, or a man to do the same to a man, though this has gone on from time immemorial; it is not queer to ride the Sunday morning sermons and homilies into Mondays filled with hatred for our neighbors next door to us or in other lands across the seas -- or to work in organizations that steal from the public without our protest, or turn out products that destroy and harm with blithe disregard! This, I suppose, is not queer! It is queer for two women to walk down Main Street hand in hand, but it is not queer to have nuclear missiles pointed at cities across the oceans perched to incinerate millions!; it is queer to see two young men lying in each others' arms on a beach, but it is not queer to have Native American nations languishing on partitioned lands lacking the resources which they and their people are due by the demands

of justice! It is queer for two men to journey through life together, in a fast homo-emotional bond, but it is not queer to see brown Palestinians pushed out of their homelands at the hands of imperial powers, in the name of a land called holy, when what is taking place there is anything but holy! This is *not* queer, we are to suppose. Queerness, it seems to me, is in the eye of the beholder, in the eye of the beholder with an agenda in one hand and a mask of purity and righteousness held up to his face to despise the diabolical grimace.

Some could argue that the comparison drawn between war and being Gay is fallacious. For I am not really addressing the moral claims made against our Gay brothers and sisters, e.g. that their conduct is unnatural and unbiblical. Well, I am dubious of the sources of morality when those sources lead me to hate, to persecute, to commit cruelties. In terms of our interfaith commitments, those traditions that lead me to do these kinds of things are no part of my morality, no part of my religion, and are but old relics of backward and arid theologies, and I join Huck Finn in saying that if the cost be hell for me, then I'll *go* to hell. Paul, who decried homosexuality for reasons of ancient Levitical purity and a literal Christology that we now reject, was as backward as he was a font of magnificent historical change. We reject Paul, as we keep Paul. We do not think it fitting punishment to crucify in our times, as was common in Paul's world, nor think it unproblematic to vest women with lower status, as was common in Paul's world, nor do we worry about the length of a man's hair (Paul's world); or condone slavery, as Paul did. We ply experiment where once dogma settled our questions; the legitimacy of authority comes not from primogeniture or blue blood, but from proof of good ideas and characters fit for leadership in the modern world. By the standards that we employ today there likely would have been no Israel, no Rome, no Mecca. And yet the men of Israel, of Rome, of Mecca would be our literal and sole beacons for a 21st century morality and faith? I think not. We must reject Israel, Rome and Mecca, even as we keep them. And as for the fear of hell, I am tempted that my response to our bible thumping literalists be, "After you." Yet the good steed of my nature reminds me that they need my love, not my judgement.

A light dawns in the breast of a youth. An attraction is noticed. The heart speeds up. The palms sweat. There is a yearning to be near, to another like himself. How can this be? Why me? Fear. Panic. Tears. Disorientation. Unworthiness. Perhaps I should no live. At 15 or 16 he says, "Perhaps I should not live"? The abomination is not in him. His is the sweet longing for sexual union, of companionship with another like himself, herself. His desire grows naturally, springing forth from his nature. He is a threat to no one. He joins the throng of those all over the world, like himself.

To the Christian, to the Muslim, to the Jew who among their own ranks, in the churches, the mosques and synagogues are found millions of men and women just like our teen, in hiding and fear, I say put down your

old books. Your old books have made you **idolaters!** You revere thin sheets with old edges, and your answer to your children suffering a burden you have put on them is a shrug of the shoulders or an order to leave the household and never return.

A book of essays that I have is entitled, *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent*. Is it intelligent to drive vibrant youth into a closet? The imagery of “coming out of the closet” is interesting. No one is born in a closet. If our children are in closets, somebody put them there, to hide in the darkness, to live in fear, to not reveal themselves to the *living rooms* of the house where there is exchange, laughter, acceptance, rest. It is a cruel and sick thing that we do. It is the opposite of the law of love, and over something so minor, so insignificant and mild – the taking of bodily pleasure with another human being as they see fit, and forging emotional bonds no different that those between people whose genitals happen to differ.

The label Gay is itself an absurdity, but perhaps a necessary one for the moment. The category that the word represents should be of no moment; no more moment than the category of those who like Coffee, or of those who like to drive, or of those who like to work with their hands. We can slap a label on any box, any circle, and turn it into a thing, turn it into an issue, a puzzle to be solved, a disease to be eradicated. But I say we take the label Gay and rethink it. For what so-called Gay people do is so uninteresting in point of fact that it merits no special moniker or notice, and by maintaining it we pay homage to the gods of hate and division, the gods of comfort who need the world to be in their image, or in no image.

I have little if any time left, but one point about the origins of the persecutions we visit on our gay youth. It is within the early Church itself that we have the creation of The Homosexual. It is not that homosexual contact and homo-emotional bonds were not known throughout history. They surely were. But the category “homosexual” and “gay” are of more recent construction, created when some in the early Church tried to turn sexual practices into litmus tests for salvation. I urge you to explore this history for yourselves, as in knowing it there is more liberation, and more clarity concerning this cancer of homophobia that afflicts our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters of all ages.

I end with the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but with my own twist: "When love calls a man, he bids him come and die." That we have Bonhoeffer's courage to do the transformative work demanded of us, regardless of the cost.

