

Some of our young people went to Worship-4-Youth at Bethelwoods last Sunday and heard John O’Kain sing a song about Howard Gray. Howard Grey is not a fictional character although his name was changed for the song. This song was written by a man named Lee Domann about a bullying experience he took part in as a young teenager.

Domann took part in this bullying experience that he came to regret. So he decided to turn his embarrassment into a folk song. After we hear this song I am going to follow up with the rest of the story about Howard Grey that the youth at Bethelwoods last Sunday did not get to hear about.

**Play song “Howard Grey” from YouTube clip or have it sung.**

Martin Luther King once said that “whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.”

I said that there is another piece to this story that the youth who attended the Worship-4-YOUTH last Sunday did not get to hear. And it is this.

Lee Domann says that for many of us, December 8, 1980 is a day remembered with sadness. It was the day John Lennon, of the Beatles, was murdered. Domann, like many “children of the ‘60’s,” grieved the passing of an icon of that generation.

That night, as he thought back on those days, he found his mind moving further into the past. An unexpected memory suddenly emerged. It was that of a classmate from junior high school whom he had been guilty of laughing at as other students ridiculed and abused him. His name was Howard Ray.

Domann had not seen or heard of Howard Ray in twenty years. A deep remorse came over Lee Domann. That night he wrote the music and lyrics to the song, "Howard Gray."

I share this song because of the passage we read from First Corinthians. First Corinthians is the story of a community that cannot get along with each other. But that's really not surprising when you hear about how the town came into being.

The city of Corinth had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC. It was then rebuilt by the Romans in 44 BC and the Romans sent the dregs of society to Corinth. These included recently released slaves and displaced peasants. Corinth quickly developed into a hub of activity and became a major hub of business activity. It was the Trade and Tryon of its day or Atlanta's Hartsfield/Jackson airport.

Corinth was also the first major urban center that Paul brought his mission. Paul was in Corinth for 18 months and with several co-workers like Timothy and Silvanus, Priscilla and her husband Aquila he taught in several house churches. Occasionally these various small house churches would come together as an assembly and share the Lord's Supper together.

Paul writes this letter which we know as 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians as a response to a report he has received about the conflict which had been occurring in the Corinthian Church. We get a hint of that conflict in the scripture which we read today. Paul tells them that they are to be in agreement with one another and that there should be no division among them.

He tells them to be united in the same mind and the same purpose. But Paul hears that they are quarreling with one another. Some are claiming to belong to Paul while others are saying they belong to Apollos while others are saying that they belong to Cephas while others are saying that they belong to Christ.

But Paul says that they do not belong to one group or to another group. Paul says they all belong to Christ.

When Lee Domann picked on Howard Ray when they were Junior High kids, he knew what he was doing was wrong. And I think the reason he knew it was wrong was because somehow he knew deep down inside himself that Howard Ray was a child of God just like he was.

And in bullying Howard Ray he was taking part in an attempt to make Howard Ray less than so that he could be more than. That's what we do when we say mean and hurtful things about another. We are trying to tear them down in order to build ourselves up.

But Paul reminds us that tearing others down to build ourselves up is a shallow endeavor. Whenever we bully or gossip or seek to tear another down with our words we are working against the way that God sees the world. God sees us as God's children. Beautiful, precious children.

There is another piece to the story of Howard Ray. Lee Domann decided that he wanted to try to locate Howard. The song that he had written was gaining popularity and Lee Domann was worried that Howard would feel victimized by the song. So he wanted to contact him and let him know about the song before he heard it and figured out it was about him.

About a week later, Lee Domann's parents called to tell him that they had just seen Howard's father on the town square in their small town in Kansas.

Domann's parents told him that Lee was trying to find Howard. Shortly, Lee had his address and phone number. Howard had been living in Topeka, KS for many years.

Domann then recorded a “letter by tape” to Howard on his cassette player. Cassette players were what we used before iPods and YouTube. Domann told Howard who he was, where he lived, and about the song.

Domann wondered if Howard would remember him or the incident. Domann was scared to contact him, since he didn’t know what Howard’s reaction would be. Would he be angry? Hurt? Would he ask Domann to stop using the song? Would he want to sue? Beat him up? Domann didn’t know what Howard would do.

A few days later, Domann received a phone call from one of Howard’s relatives. She said Howard was very shy and had asked her to call. Howard had, indeed, received the tape and was deeply moved. He had cried, she said.

Howard had quit school as a result of those kinds of experiences and still could neither read nor write. His life had been a difficult one. Yes, he remembered Domann and the incident. She told Domann that Howard was very glad that his painful experience was having a healing effect on others.

Then she said the one thing Domann had not anticipated: “Howard says to tell you that he forgives you.”

Paul writes to the Corinthians to tell them to stop dividing themselves. A house divided against itself cannot stand.

I pray that we remember the story of Howard Gray. A story of bullying. A story of a hard life because of being bullied.

But also a story of forgiveness toward the people that do you wrong. AMEN.

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-Domann, Lee, info found from his website at

[http://www.leedomann.com/howard\\_gray.html](http://www.leedomann.com/howard_gray.html)

-Info on Corinthians from The New Oxford Annotated Bible: NRSV

-Given: January 26, 2014 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

-Text: 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1: 10-18

## **HOWARD GRAY**

By Lee Domann

Most every one I knew put the whole Gray family down  
They were the poorest family in that little country town  
Howard always looked too big for his funny ragged clothes  
The kids all laughed at him and Jimmy Jones would thumb his nose  
Howard sat across from me in seventh grade at school  
I didn't like it much but mama taught the golden rule  
So when the spitballs flew at him I never would join in  
I guess that was the reason Howard thought I was his friend  
And after things would quiet down sometimes I'd turn and see  
The grateful eyes of Howard Gray lookin' back at me

Howard Gray, Howard Gray, somehow they got their kicks  
Out of treatin' you that way  
Deep down I kind of liked you but I was too afraid  
To be a friend to you, Howard Gray

One day after lunch, I went to comb my hair and saw  
They had Howard pinned against a locker in the hall  
They were pokin' fun about the big hole in his shirt  
They had his left arm twisted back behind him 'til it hurt  
To this day I can't explain and I won't try to guess  
Just how it was I wound up laughing harder than the rest  
I laughed until I cried but through my tears I still could see  
The tear-stained eyes of Howard Gray, looking back at me

Howard Gray, Howard Gray, I can't believe I joined them all  
Treatin' you that way  
I wanted to apologize but I was too afraid  
Of what they'd think about me, Howard Gray

From that moment on after I made fun of him  
He never looked my way, he never smiled at me again  
Not much longer after that his family moved away  
And that's the last I ever saw or heard of Howard Gray  
That was forty years ago and I still haven't found  
Just why we'll kick a brother or a sister when they're down  
I know it may sound crazy but now and then I dream  
About the eyes of Howard Gray lookin' back at me

Howard Gray, Howard Gray, I've never quite forgiven us  
For treatin' you that way  
I hope that maybe somehow you'll hear this song someday  
And you'll know that I am sorry, Howard Gray

We'll probably never meet again, all I can do is pray  
May you and God forgive us, Howard Gray