

SERMON ABOUT FRIENDHIP HOUSE

Standing here in front of you I am afraid. I have stood before church congregations hundreds of times before making appeals for education and nutrition programs serving children in Kenya and Malawi. So I am not afraid of public speaking. I have faced many scary things during my 33 years as a missionary in Africa. Last year robbers shot me in the stomach. In 2003 I survived a plane crash in central Malawi. I've had malaria four times. I was attacked by a crocodile in 2005. I've held down snakes with rakes, usually spitting cobras. I've been through earthquakes and floods. But today standing in front of you talking about the persecution of my gay brothers and sisters in Africa I am trembling... I shall push on though and tell you what I've come to say.

For 15 years of my missionary career, from 1981 to 1996, I lived and worked in Nairobi Kenya with women of the street. My brother Marianists and I ran a project called Maria House where we assisted women with counseling and job training and job placement. The women then were able to feed their children without losing their dignity. The crisis which most often made a woman decide to come to us was an unexpected pregnancy. At Maria House we helped her through the pregnancy and helped her with baby clothes, etc. through the child's first 18 months. When the baby was a year and a half old the mother would enroll full time in our job training program. Maria House still exists and is now almost 30 years old. It has assisted hundreds of women who were once sexually exploited to become free, to become the women God wanted them to be, to become self-reliant and proud of themselves.

In March 1996 Tonny Kimani, a CNN employee, asked me to walk with him down Kenyatta Avenue at 9pm because he said, "Peter, you only know half the story." During the walk down the main street of Nairobi I saw on every other street corner a male sex worker. Tonny knew each of them and would greet them and joke around with them. And they called Tonny, Cleopatra. The next day Tonny asked me, "Peter what are you going to do for these guys? You've helped the female sex-workers, so how now are you going to help the males? Aren't they also oppressed, Peter?" I was not able to answer that question right away. The ministry proposed by Tonny embarrassed me, took me out of my comfort

zone, confused me. I talked it over with my spiritual director, who was a Kenyan. He put another question to me, "Peter, how are you becoming liberated? You say that you are here to free us people in mission lands, but if you too are not becoming more free, what you are doing here is condescending, and in that case we don't need you here." Well, after praying some more about it I told Tonny I was ready to get involved. But I also told him that I didn't know what the men really needed.

I explained to Tonny that before we started Maria House I met with the women for six months and they shared with me their hopes and dreams, their problems and needs. "How can we meet with these guys?" I asked Tonny. "How can we get these guys together?" Tonny was quick to reply. His eyes opened wide, "A musical," he said. "We will write a musical about Cleopatra. And I shall be Cleopatra."

Cleopatra, the musical, was performed by Tonny and the male street walkers in 1997 at the Kenya National Theatre. Tonny arranged the music and I wrote the dialogue. In her throne room Cleopatra passed judgment on the land grabbers, corrupt politicians and others who exploited the poor. She also passed judgment on those who harassed and beat up gay people. A Play like this had never been staged before and it met with hostility. When the actors were walking home after rehearsals they were sometimes jumped and beaten by homophobic thugs. The car of the Play's Director was so often desecrated that she finally gave up and quit. Bomb threats were called in to the Manager of the Theater. Once we were tear-gassed. In spite of all this THE SHOW WENT ON!

Over a period of four months, whenever possible, I would sit down with the cast and ask them this question, "How can the church meet you pastoral needs?" Then I was able to record their hopes and dreams, their problems and needs. With this information I made a report to the Archbishop of Nairobi recommending that the church create a ministry to these men and to the whole of the Gay Kenyan Community. That was 15 years ago.. Unfortunately, I was transferred to Malawi, and no one else took up the cause None of my recommendations were implanted.

Francis Kamunya, a former Marianist Brother, like me, and a group of Gay-friendly Kenyans, registered two weeks ago an organization which will pick up where Cleopatra left off. It is called "Break Margins Africa," and has the mission of ending the marginalization of Gay People in Kenya. Like most African countries, Kenya is a country which arrests people suspected of being Gay and if the court proves that the suspect is Gay, the government locks them up in prison for five to ten years. Prison is physical marginalization. There is also social and economic marginalization.

"Break Margins Africa" is taking up a recommendation I made 15 years ago that we have a counseling and job training program for the male street walkers. It will be like Maria House which helps the female street walkers. The name is still being debated. Some suggest Mario House. But most of us think we should just call it Friendship House. Its goal is to end the social and economic marginalization of gay people.

Friendship House is going to be a drop-in centre where these young street walkers can tell their stories and can hopefully be restored to their families. It will respect the sexual orientation of everyone who comes. The aim of the counseling will be to help the young person to accept themselves and be proud of themselves, and to help their families to accept and love their sons.

So that the young men will have an alternative way of earning money, there will be a job training course of six months. And the course chosen by the young men is Hair Dressing. In Nairobi hairdressing is very marketable. The budget for the pilot year of this program is \$15,914. That covers the rent for the drop-in centre, the stipend for the counselor, the wages for the hair dressing teacher, and the materials needed for the hair dressing course. We wanted to start in September but so far I have only raised \$3,000. I am here today to ask your help. Today's second collection is for Friendship House.

A donation of \$250 can train a friend to become a hair dresser. Our goal this year is to train 20 young men, and get them in jobs earning an income and keeping their pride.

A donation of \$100 can provide counseling to a friend and reunite him to family. Our goal this year is to counsel eighty young men and to reunite them with family.

I ask you then to please be generous in the second collection. I know the economy in the USA is not so good, so whatever you can give shall be deeply appreciated. Your prayers will also be very appreciated.

Let me end with Our Lady's Magnificat. In the early Eighties when I was starting up Maria House I would meet the women in crisis pregnancies in the Marianist residence. They would always end the meetings with their favorite Gospel, the Visitation. "Look," they said, "these two Gospel Women, Mary and Elizabeth, are having unexpected pregnancies. What did they do? They did not hurt themselves or their unborn child. They cried out for social change. Bring down the mighty from their thrones, lift up the lowly, give good things to the hungry. Read Luke 2. In the Magnificat Mary and her cousin talked about making the world more child-friendly. And these lines from the Magnificat became the Mission Statement for Maria House.

When I reflect on Maria House I think the Magnificat can also be our Mission Statement. "Bring down the Homophobes from their thrones, bring in the marginalized, give the loved-starved true love, good jobs, and affirmation." The word Mary is Egyptian, is African and it means "Hope of Change." I believe that Mary, Hope of Change, wants us to make the world more human-friendly.

One year ago this Wednesday on the feast of Mary's Assumption I was shot in the stomach at my kitchen door during an armed robbery. The gunfire pushed me backward a few feet. I thought "I'm dead." When I lifted my night shirt I expected to see a big hole, but there was only a black and blue mark near my navel. I do not know what happened to the bullet! But I had a minute to thank God that I was still alive, then the door came crashing down and two men walked up to me, one with a gun and the other with an axe. They said, "Show us the money, Brother Peter." I had just arrived from the USA the day before, and I had \$5,500 my father had given me as part of my inheritance. I gave them all of it. Since 15th August 2011 I have been praying about what happened to me. I believe it was Our Lady of the Assumption who saved me that night. I've just spent 3 months in a monastery asking her this question, "Why am I still alive?" I have heard with the ears of

my heart an answer from Mary. Well, it's really a feeling... I feel I've been given a second chance to live, to live more honestly, at last to be myself, and stand up for people like myself who have known rejection, humiliation and marginalization. I want like Cleopatra, and Francis Kamunya, and Mary of Nazareth to break the margins and set free the captives.

So I am standing before you this day to tell you that in the process of setting the captives free, wherever and however you do that, you will also set yourself free.

Peter Daino, 3rd August 2012