

“Unraveled: When Humans Unravel God’s Plans for Justice”
Exodus 7:8-23

In thinking about how humans unravel God’s plans for justice, I pondered how we are often so surprised when someone who seems to be a decent person ends up being caught by the authorities for hurting or cheating others. The same goes for rulers and leaders who try to do the right thing for their people, but who end up abusing power. The pattern gets repeated in history so many times that we become cynical and suspicious of each other and of our own leaders. Why does God’s vision for justice seem to be so hard for humans to live by? There are certainly enough resources in our world for all of us to have enough. God created a world of abundance. There is also enough creativity among humans to find new solutions for our challenges. What often gets in our way is the hardening of our hearts to suffering. In our Bible story for this week, we hear about someone who unraveled God’s plans for justice because of the hardness of his heart. This is Pharaoh, one of the kings of Egypt. The Hebrew people went to Egypt during the time Joseph was there after a famine in their land. But as they fell on hard times there, they became slaves to the Egyptians. Slavery in the ancient world was one of the cruel ways people dealt with those who became indebted.

Because of reading this story from the perspective of the Hebrew people who were enslaved by the Egyptians, we tend to identify with their experience. We end up forgetting that the Egyptians were very spiritual people. They had so many temples and believed deeply in the power of the divine. They had a high concept of justice which they identified as *Maat*, which is personified as a goddess, the daughter of Atum, and after the 18th dynasty as the daughter of Re, who establishes Maat at the time of creation. “Maat is right order in nature and society, as established by the act of creation, and hence means, according to the context, what is right, what is correct, law, order, justice and truth. This state of righteousness needs to be preserved or established, in great matters as in small. Maat is, therefore, not only right order but also the object of human activity. Maat is both the task which a man sets himself and also, as righteousness, the promise and reward that await him on fulfilling it.” (Morenz, Siegfried *Egyptian Religion*, trans. A. Keep, London, Methuen, 1973, p. 113) The Egyptians sense of justice was central to their faith. Yet, in practice, their society was far from practicing justice. The fear of scarcity and competition for resources hardened their hearts to enslave others and to ignore their suffering. Their concepts about social justice only applied to those they deemed worthy of being treated as their equals. This is one of the ways our hearts are hardened as human beings. We justify the injustice through a sense of being better or more deserving than others. It is interesting that the Egyptians considered eating with the Hebrews to be an abomination (Genesis 43:32). Ancient Egyptians did not eat with foreigners because they were afraid of people who ate cows as cows were considered sacred by the Egyptians. That is one of the ways the sense of moral superiority asserted itself for the Egyptians. Judging something as wrong with the other is how we harden our hearts to them.

Moses and his brother Aaron go to the king and ask him to release the Israelites from slavery, his heart was already hardened to their suffering. In addition, the king’s fears over the wellbeing and wealth of his people depended on defending them from any foreign

threat. The king believed that he was acting in the best interest of his people. God gave Moses and Aaron some special abilities to show the king that they were being sent by a divine power, but the king's heart was not going to be softened through these signs as his priests were also able to do the same things. These signs were not that unique. Ultimately, the king had to be pressured in order to release the people because his heart was completely closed.

This is a challenging story for us as we look at injustice in our world today. Whether we identify with the side of power or the side of the oppressed, this story invites us to look at the hardening of the heart to the suffering of others. Our hardness of heart may not be so obvious to us as I am sure it was not obvious to Pharaoh and his people at the time. Seeing our hardness of heart in the midst of a struggle is not easy. As history shows, most of the great injustices in the world were not committed by people who were trying to be bad. They were often committed by people who justified what they were doing as right. And the sad part of this is that injustice ends up hurting all who are involved. When our hearts are hardened, our communities suffer and even our happiness suffers. Sometimes even those who are working for justice end up with hardened hearts because of their pain.

It is important for us to do "softness of heart" checkups for ourselves individually and collectively in order for us to not participate in the unraveling of God's plans for justice. With a soft heart, even when we slip up, we can recognize our mistakes and repent. I would like to suggest two ways for you and for all of us to do this heart checkup. First, check on your ability to feel pain and to grieve with deep compassion. When we ignore, numb, or insulate ourselves from pain, we lose the ability to be human and to be vulnerable like God is. In Jesus, we see how God's heart works in the world. It is in this pattern of vulnerability; of death and resurrection that we find the fullness of our human experience. Second, check on your tendency to scapegoat and to blame. The hardened heart always blames and scapegoats, while the open heart is about seeing ourselves as one with God and with others.

It is not enough for us to have a good belief or moral system in place as that itself could become a tool to blame others or to insulate ourselves from suffering. What is important is for us to allow God to keep our hearts open. This is especially important in this time of pandemic. We are all so tired after almost six months of going through this tough experience. The hardened heart tries to blame or to numb. Two examples come to mind: those who are finding an escape in conspiracy theories and those who are finding comfort in shutting the world out and focusing only on their needs. To stay openly and compassionately engaged in the struggles of our world for justice and peace may seem like an impossible dream. Yet, we know that with God nothing is impossible. We know that in the pit of despair, God does not abandon us. In Christ we see that even death is turned into new life through love. I invite you to pray with me today the prayer of the container of the heart by Joyce Rupp.

The Container of Your Heart

Hold a small bowl in your hands or bring your hands together in the shape of one. Notice the openness of your hands. The readiness of the space to be filled. The container of your hands represents the container of your heart. Reflect on each of the following aspects of a bowl in relation to your heart.

Blessing Bowl: gratitude for parts of your life that are fruitful and abundant.

Let it be a symbol of abundance.

Gather your many blessings and

Visualize them filling the bowl.

Offer thanks to the one who gifts.

Beggar's Bowl: where you lack energy, vitality; where you feel empty or wanting.

Let it be your beggars bowl.

Hold it out silently with trust

Believing that what you need

Will be given to you by the Holy One.

Bowl of Dreams: what longs to come to life in you

Let it contain your dreams.

Place within it your inmost hopes.

Unite in love with the Divine Dreamer,

The One who fills your spirit with a passion for life.

Bowl of Suffering: what wants to be relieved and healed

Place within it your own hurts and difficulties.

Remember others needing a release from suffering.

Bring into your bowl those from far and near

Who can benefit from your compassionate love.

Bowl of Spiritual Kinship: your connection with others

Remember those who have assisted your inner growth,

Those who nurtured and enriched you spiritually.

Fill your bowl with gratitude for them

Thank the Holy One for the blessing of kinship.

Set down the bowl and place your hands over your heart. Breathe a full, strong breath.

Sense it circulating through your body. Remember that your heart is a container of Divine

Love. Receive the strength and courage this Love brings. Be in quiet union with the gift

of divine resilience within you.

Prepare your heart to receive the gifts of Christ's love to awaken and soften your heart....Amen.