

“If We Open Up Our Hands” Rev. Michele Ward
Psalm 105:1-6, 23-38; Exodus 5:1-2; 7:8-23
Sermon Series “Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apart”
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church, Baltimore, MD
July 12, 2020 15th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Over the last ten weeks, we journeyed through our sermon series together, “Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apart.” We have walked alongside Jewish refugees in Babylon, the apostle Paul, the gathered church on Pentecost, the suffering and faithful Job, the Samaritan woman at the well, and many others. We began this series partway through the shelter in place order, not knowing if or when we would be back in the sanctuary together again. Now, we are in the first half of July, and our plans continue to unravel. We care for the sick and the injured, work virtually from our homes, attempt to make ends meet, wear our masks, and worry about our family and friends. Most, if not all, of our summer plans have changed, and we do not know what the fall holds yet for students or working adults.

We are still unraveling at the end of this sermon series, and I had hoped to tie it all up neatly with a bow for you this morning. Give you a nice recap of where we have been, the lessons we learned along the way, the silver linings of the difficult texts we wrestled with over the last few months. When Andrew and I chose the order of these texts, we wanted to end on the story of Moses because his journey does not end with the ten plagues. His life begins with unraveled plans as his family cannot raise him due because the Pharaoh is killing boys his age. His life begins with carefully executed plans when the daughter of Pharaoh adopts him and raises him as her son due to the cunning decision of his mother to place him in a basket in the Nile River near the princess. And the life of Moses continues to unravel during the mission that God sent him to accomplish, bringing him out of a self-imposed exile in another land--the mission to free the enslaved Jewish people. Earlier in his life, Moses had murdered one of the Egyptian slave drivers because he was beating an enslaved Jewish man. Moses fled Egypt and became a shepherd. God calls him out of the wilderness and safety in order to free the Hebrew people from slavery. He eventually leads them from slavery to the wilderness as they search for their ancestral lands, but not this morning. Not for many mornings.

So on one of those mornings of unraveling and transitions, God wants to bring us some challenge and some hope in this text from Exodus.¹ This

¹ The job of the newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” -paraphrase of Mr. Dooley, *Observations by Mr. Dooley*, by Finley Peter Dunne (1902). Article by David

morning, we are in the middle of the tension with Pharaoh. In Egyptian culture, Pharaoh was considered a god. For Moses and Aaron to go to him to ask God to let the Jewish people go was incomprehensible. It would be like asking God to stop the rain. But this is exactly what Moses and Aaron do. They go ask the deity-like Pharaoh to free the Jewish people.

Here is one of the challenges in this text - most of us are not Moses or Aaron in this story, although we would like to picture ourselves as the protagonists rather than the antagonists. Most of us in this congregation are not part of a community experiencing oppression or systemic injustice on a regular basis. We are pretty comfortable. Sure, life has been more challenging lately, but most of us have the financial resources and the emotional support we need to get by in the current circumstances of the pandemic. We might relate to Pharaoh a little more, afraid of losing what control we already have. We might not want to admit that we find his misunderstandings about power to be deeply woven into ours, too.

Erna Kim Hackett, a social justice advocate and preacher, says that the white Christians believe in Disney Princess theology. She argues, “White Christianity suffers from a bad case of Disney Princess theology. As each individual reads Scripture, they see themselves as the princess in every story. They are Esther, never Xerxes or Haman. They are Peter, but never Judas. They are the woman anointing Jesus, never the Pharisees. They are the Jews escaping slavery, never Egypt. For the [white] citizens of the most powerful country in the world, who enslaved both Native and Black people, to see itself as Israel and not Egypt when it is studying Scripture, is a perfect example of Disney princess theology. And it means that as people in power, they have no lens for locating themselves rightly in Scripture or society- and it has made them blind and utterly ill equipped to engage issues of power and injustice. It is some very weak Bible work.”²

Shedden, “Today in Media History: Mr. Dooley: ‘The job of the newspaper is to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted,’ ” October 7, 2014. Accessed July 9, 2020. <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2014/today-in-media-history-mr-dooley-the-job-of-the-newspaper-is-to-comfort-the-afflicted-and-afflict-the-comfortable/>

² Erna Kim Hackett, “Why I Stopped Talking about Racial Reconciliation and Started Talking about White Supremacy,” August 23, 2017. Accessed July 9, 2020. <http://feistythoughts.com/2017/08/23/why-i-stopped-talking-about-racial-reconciliation-and-started-talking-about-white-supremacy/>

Pharaoh thinks that power is a limited commodity, something that he will lose if he lets the people of Israel go. What Pharaoh doesn't understand is that everyone is born with the same amount of power. One of the greatest tricks of public leadership is leading people to believe that they don't have any power at all. That the people at the top, the ones who built and maintain the system of structural wealth, are the ones who have it all. But God knows something that Pharaoh does not--there is enough power for everyone. Pharaoh has power, and so do the Jewish people.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg says this of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart: "When we make the choice to turn away from suffering, when we engage in the action of walking away from others' pain, we impact our inner life — our own heart is hardened, we become estranged from the divine and from our own holiest self. True, it's scary to look that pain in the eyes, and then to grapple with the feelings of responsibility it might engender in us. But there's a cost to that turning away."³

What does it cost us to turn away from the pain of others? What does it cost us to turn away from the feelings of responsibility to our fellow human beings that their pain brings up in us? Rabbi Ruttenberg argues that turning away from the pain of others cuts us off from ourselves. We become disconnected from God and from, as she says, "our holiest self." We see this take place in the exchange between Pharaoh, Moses, and Aaron. Moses and Aaron turned towards the pain of their community, rather than away. And this brought them closer to one another and to God. It also brought them closer to risk, suffering, and uncertainty. But that is right where God wanted them to be. This is something that Pharaoh does not understand. He is under the illusion of his magicians as well as his own making.

He is under the illusion of power being the avoidance of pain--believing that the only power that matters is his, and not anyone else's power. The truth that Pharaoh does not understand is that one person having power does not cancel the other person's power out, and vice versa. Power is not something we can own or control. Power is the ability to act, and power comes from within. But Pharaoh has a limited imagination. He thinks that the person who makes the rules has the power. He thinks that he has all the power because . The text tells us that his heart stiffened, or became hard. Moses went to him, like God

³ Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, "Who Really Hardened Pharaoh's Heart?" Accessed July 9, 2020. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/who-really-hardened-pharaohs-heart/>

told him to do, and asked Pharaoh to release the enslaved Jews. Time and again, throughout chapters 6-9, Pharaoh tells him no. He will not let the people go. Pharaoh tells Moses that he will not open up his hands. Instead, he clenches them tighter and tighter.

Pharaoh is not the only one grasping to hold on to power, refusing to receive this invitation from God through Moses and Aaron. Each of us, in our own way, has something we are gripping tightly to control. And whatever that is, God is asking you to open up your hands. Control is an illusion, God says to Pharaoh. He does not own people. People belong to God, to themselves.

*[There is enough power for everyone. There is enough power for everyone. There is enough power for everyone. If we open up our hands. If we open up our hands. If we open up our hands.]*⁴

Moses and Aaron do not give up--they keep on asking Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go. They continue to persist, going over 10 times to speak with Pharaoh after each of the plagues. They believe that God has given them a task to fulfill. They believe in their inherent power. They believe that they must not rest until the people of Israel are free from slavery. No matter how many times we feel like giving up and writing someone off, God compels us to show up. God compels us to complete the vision God gives to us, no matter how long it may take or how many sacrifices we must make.

And God does not give up on Pharaoh--he has ten opportunities to soften his heart and unclench his fists. Each time Moses and Aaron visit him, God gives Pharaoh the opportunity to change his mind and open his heart. And like Pharaoh, God does not give up on us. No matter how many times we shut God out and turn down God's invitations to choose life and freedom, God shows back up with welcoming arms. God has shown up here for us, with us, this morning. We have the power to turn towards the pain of others. We have the power to turn towards the pain within ourselves. God is waiting there for us, the midst of the pain and suffering of others. Will we embrace that power?

[There is enough power for everyone. There is enough power for everyone. There is enough power for everyone. If we open up our hands. If we open up our hands. If we open up our hands.]

⁴ Lyrics edited to "There Is Enough Bread for Everyone," Rev. Emily M. D. Scott.