

The Heart of the Matter

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Sunday, January 3, 2021

Texts: Exodus 5: 1-2; Exodus 7:8-23

In human history, there are many people who have been the epitome of evil. Among those is the Pharaoh of the Exodus story, you know, the “one who didn’t know Joseph”. He’s the one who made people “work so hard they could not stand.” He held many slaves and when Moses worked for their liberation, Pharaoh made their work harder and cared little about the people. Slavery is always wrong, there can be no doubt about it. Pharaoh’s heart was hardened many times in this story, sometimes (the story tells us) by God’s action, and sometimes by his own.

The heart. I’m not talking about the organ that pumps blood through your body. No, I’m talking about the heart that is the seat of your compassion and mine, our emotional and spiritual center, perhaps. There are many heart conditions that have relationship to, but are not the same as, physical heart conditions: a bleeding heart, a hardened heart, a soft or tender heart, a cold heart, a heart that skips a beat, a heart of rock and roll, a broken heart, a healed

heart. In short, Pharaoh had a heart condition of a different kind than the one you go to the doctor about. It's so easy to point fingers at Pharaoh, call him evil, say he was "hard hearted" and completely ignore the fact that we can get hard hearted as well. Argue all day if you want to about who is the most evil in human history, but I think it clear that anyone can have a heart condition of small or great magnitude. Even you...and yes, even me.

But we're Christians! You'll know we are Christians by our love! We care about other people! We are caring and compassionate and friendly and loving. We who follow Jesus all around the world...we are people of the love movement. Surely, we never would do things as terrible as Pharaoh! Did you catch the last sentence of today's scripture, "Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not even take this to heart." The entire Nile River (and every other place that water existed) turned to a smelly pool and river of blood and Pharaoh didn't even take it to heart! How cruel. How awful. How wrong. Surely, we can never be THAT bad!

And perhaps it's true that we couldn't be THAT bad...at least not individually anyway.

What could cause such a heart condition in Pharaoh? Are people just born bad? Was his heart in need of repair as he exited the womb? Was he always this hard-hearted? What about others who have a hard heart? Were they always this way? What causes a hard heart anyway?

Well, I don't know what caused Pharaoh to have a hard heart. The scripture tells us that God did it some, and that he hardened his own heart. I really struggle mightily with the idea that God creates someone's hard heart. This makes no sense to me. I think it more likely that no one knew what made Pharaoh so mean, so they credited/blamed God (depending on how you look at it). This was, after all, the ancient near east. They didn't do a lot of study of psychology of any kind, especially child psychology. They didn't know how to measure ACES (Adverse Childhood Experience Scores), and they didn't have psychological treatment or medications or anything really to help someone who might have a hard heart.

But we do.

I submit to you that no one is born with a hard heart. Neither Pharaoh, nor you, nor I, nor anyone in all of creation was ever born with a hard heart. We are made in the divine image and we are good. Babies, by their very nature, are

anything but hard hearted. You can't be hard hearted and be completely and totally dependent on someone else for your every need. Think about it. Do you know a hard-hearted person who will accept anything from anybody? Not in my experience. They tend to be loners, against the world (so it seems) and see themselves and completely self-reliant. I don't need anybody kind of people.

Where does this come from?

Well, I'm no psychologist, so I'm sure I'll miss a few causes, but one I know for sure is finding out at a young age that you cannot rely on other people. Many hard-hearted folks have been mistreated in a variety of ways, been the victims of abuse or neglect, been promised many things that never came to pass. As children, they may have been ignored or spent much of their time the victim of someone else's verbal assault. Sadly, this is often generations in the making, so even the adult who perpetrated the acts against a child was often a victim themselves.

I think another way it happens is when people are given everything without any boundaries or expectations. This is more likely the cause for Pharaoh in my mind. He was thought to be a god, with unlimited power, money, influence, prestige and again, power. The proverbial saying 'power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely' conveys the opinion

that, as a person's power increases, their moral sense diminishes.

"Absolute power corrupts absolutely" is the best-known quotation of the 19th century British politician Lord Acton. Pharaoh and other hard-hearted folks seem to make this statement a reality. From our story and other historical data, this particular Pharaoh was not just mean to the Israelites.

I guess that lets us off the hook, then. If we had a good childhood and we never held absolute power, then we can't be hard-hearted. Right?

I guess that is a question for you to answer on your own, and for me to answer on my own. While we may not be always or continually hard-hearted, do we have times in our lives where we are hard-hearted? I don't mean setting boundaries or saying "no" to something. That is not the definition of hard-heartedness. No, I mean watching so much hurt in the world and in our community and not even caring. I'm not saying we have the power to solve all the world's problems, but I think many in our culture have become numb to what is happening in this world. From homelessness to food insecurity, abuse and family violence, addiction to gun violence, we just have gotten numb. We see ourselves powerless, so we do nothing. I know we are not Pharaoh, but if we get to the heart of the matter, our hearts can be hard as well. Maybe not always, but from time to time.

We cannot solve all the worlds problems, I know. And it hurts to have our hearts broken all the time with so much wrong in the world. We do need to protect ourselves somewhat, but if we over protect our hearts to avoid them being broken, sooner or later they become hardened. In our “heart of hearts” -- if you will – we hate that there is so much wrong in our world, but we often believe we cannot do anything about it. A few weeks ago, I read a piece written by Rev. Cameron Trimble from Center for Progressive Renewal. It was a piece about a sparrow that was laying on it’s back with its feet up in the air. I believe it was a horse that came by and asked the sparrow, “what are you doing?” The sparrow replied, “I heard the sky is falling and I’m doing my part to keep it up.” The horse simply laughed at him and thought it was ridiculous that the sparrow, so tiny, thought he could keep the sky from falling. “You’re too small to help,” said the horse. “But I’m doing what I can” replied the sparrow. The horse was a bit hard-hearted; wouldn’t you say? Maybe the sparrow was on a fool’s errand? But what if we all did our part? What if all of us became soft-hearted about something and did something to help?

The other old, beloved story I know is one you’ve probably heard. It is the story of the person on a beach covered with starfish that had washed up. The person was throwing starfish back into the ocean. Clearly, the

person couldn't save them all. When asked why they did it, when it wouldn't make a difference, the person, throwing another starfish into the ocean said, "It made a difference to that one!"

Throwing our hands up and saying we can't do anything about anything is a little like Pharaoh turning around, going into his house and not even taking the tragedy around him to heart. While it's true that we cannot, on our own, solve all the world's problems, we have the power and the privilege to help another. Maybe only one. Maybe only a few. Okay. But the excuse that we're too small to make a difference anywhere belies our faith. Remember when they only had five loaves and two fish? Yes, Jesus stood among them as they fed 5000. Do we not believe that Jesus will stand beside us as we do what seems impossible? What difference can a small, committed group of people make in this world? What difference does it make that you and I are here at this point in history?

Many have said that God didn't put us here by accident. Moses was completely unqualified to do what God called him to do...IN VIRTUALLY EVERY WAY! And yet, by saying yes to God's calling, Moses led the people to freedom. He didn't do it alone. He couldn't do it alone. He needed many around him, like Aaron, Miriam and others. Of course, he needed God. But God doesn't work alone, and neither did anyone in our

Bible, Jesus included. It's true, many hands make light work. It takes all of us, doing what we can, when we can, with open hearts and open minds. It means taking the risk that our work will either be un-noticed or perhaps criticized. We're in good company. Jesus died, in part, for his role in caring for those who were the victims of hard-heartedness. In his name, can we do any less?

It is the heart of the matter for Christian people.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.