

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

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Beyond Numbness to Compassion

As Jesus came near and saw the city [of Jerusalem], he wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. – Luke 19:41-48

In Luke’s account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, he is coming down the Mount of Olives just east of Jerusalem. A few years ago, Therese and I were visiting

Jerusalem, and on a Sunday morning, we walked down what might have been the same road. (slide) There are olive trees there, some of which may have been saplings in Jesus’ day, because olive trees can live a very, very long time. It was the one place in Israel where I felt a spiritual connection to Jesus. There is a place where you stop,



because the view takes your breath away. (slide) The Old City of Jerusalem is spread out before you, across the Kidron Valley, filled with graveyards. The



golden Dome of the Rock dates to about 690 C.E. but the Temple Mount on which it stands was built in the time of King Herod, when Jesus was a youngster, and the city walls it overlooks date back long before Jesus’ time. When Jesus walked down this hill, the brand-new temple of Herod would have been just as prominent and just as dramatic, made of

gleaming white marble. Perhaps many of the pilgrims who came down the Mount of Olives on that first Palm Sunday were as amazed by the beauty of the place as we were, but apparently Jesus’ reaction was quite different. The place from which I took these pictures is called Dominus Flavit, which in Latin, means “The Lord Wept.” This is where, tradition says, the view made Jesus so sad that it reduced him to tears. (slide)

Back then, the temple that stood on this site was the focus of the economic, religious, and political power that controlled the Jewish nation. The temple was to ancient Israel, what the White House, the Capital Building, the Supreme Court, the

Pentagon, Wall Street and the National Cathedral, collectively are to modern Americans. The chief priests were also the political leaders of the country, and the wealthiest landowners, and they used both religious and political power to enforce a situation that kept the majority of the people, mostly peasants, desperately poor so that a small elite could be fabulously rich. When Jesus looks over this scene, he sees with peasant eyes, and his peasant eyes fill with tears because he knows that this temple is the reason why so many babies die before their first birthday, so many women starve in order to ensure their children have enough to eat, so many men are reduced to begging or banditry, and so many families end up in slavery because they cannot pay their debts. And so, when Jesus enters the temple, Luke says that the first thing he does is to drive out those who were selling things in the temple, saying “My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers.” Sometimes, people read this story and think that Jesus is just talking about the vendors, but the story says that it was the religious and political leaders – the chief priests, scribes and the leaders of the people – who were most threatened by his action and who looked for a way to eliminate this Galilean prophet who was causing such a stir.

Today, the site of the old Jewish temple is the home of a Muslim shrine, and over the past century bloody conflicts have raged between Jews and Palestinians over control of this site, and indeed, the whole land of Isarel/Palestine. Between 1948 and 2011 there have been over a 1500 Israelis and over eight thousand Palestinians killed in violent clashes between the warring factions, including 142 Israeli children and more than 1600 Palestinian children.¹

Knowing that sad reality should have made me weep as I came down the mountain, but it didn't. My heart was numb that day, and I find myself wondering why it was numb. Perhaps it is because numbness is a psychic defense against depression. If I wept over every atrocity and tragedy, I would always be weeping because there is so much tragedy in the world. Numbness is the way I get through a day without being overwhelmed. Numbness may not be such a bad thing then. Perhaps I build a wall of numbness around my heart so that when I do open it, there is still something there to open. My fear of having my heart broken keeps my heart numb.

¹ Statistics from “Israeli–Palestinian conflict,” . Downloaded April 10, 2019 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israeli%E2%80%93Palestinian_conflict#Fatalities_1948%E2%80%932011

But, as Parker Palmer points out, our hearts can be broken in a couple of different ways. One is to have our hearts shattered, broken into shards so painful that we withdraw and become more numb to other's pain. But the other is for our hearts to be broken open, like the Grinch's heart that grew two sizes when it was broken by the singing of the Whos in Whoville. When our hearts break open, rather than break apart, we become less numb, we have greater capacity for empathy, for joy, for hope, for compassion and community.²

While a numbed heart keeps us from really feeling compassion, it is also true that systems of injustice and violence depend on our numbness to exist. If we were to really open our hearts, how could the terrible gap between rich and poor, for example, not move us to tears and to action? How could the sight of even one homeless person on the streets of Red Deer not move us to tears and action, never mind the 149 homeless identified in the latest Point in Time count?³ The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes that

Empires live by numbness. Empires, in their militarism, expect numbness about the human cost of war. Corporate economies expect blindness to the cost in terms of poverty and exploitation. Governments and societies of domination go to great lengths to keep the numbness intact.⁴

Sometimes, we are kept numb by the myth that suffering is natural and normal, that the poor and oppressed deserve what they get because they are lazy or corrupt. Sometimes we are kept numb by distractions, by entertainments. Sometimes we are kept numb through the delusion that a handout or a child sponsorship or an act of charity is an adequate response to a situation. Sometimes we are kept numb through a sense of powerlessness, that there is nothing we can do that will make a darn bit of difference.

² Parker J. Palmer. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*,

³ <http://www.reddeer.ca/media/reddeerca/about-red-deer/social-well-being-and-community-initiatives/housing-and-homelessness/Point-in-Time-PIT-Count-Final-Report.pdf>

⁴ *The Prophetic Imagination*, pp. 86-7.

What is remarkable about Jesus is that he did not allow himself to become numb. Over and over again, the gospels speak of his compassion: he had compassion on the crowds because they had nothing to eat (Mark 8:2), because they were sick (Matthew 14:14) and because they were like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34). He had compassion on a woman whose son had died (Luke 7:12-13). His best known parables are about a Samaritan who had compassion on the victim of a mugging, and a father who had compassion for an alienated son, and his most vociferous condemnations are for those whose rationalizations keep them smug and numb to the suffering of others (Luke 6:24-26). And when Jesus sums up the heart of his ethics in a few words, he says, “Be compassionate as God is compassionate” (Luke 6:36).

The word *compassion* means “to feel with” another person, to allow one’s psychic defences down so that we are moved by the suffering or struggle of another. The Greek word usually translated as compassion means to let one’s womb or guts embrace the feeling or situation of another. It is to move past the rationalizations and defences that allow us to pass by suffering on the other side. It is to move into community with the suffering and to work in partnership to find ways to change the situation that creates suffering.

Compassion, then, is not only an individual private response. Just as Jesus’ compassion for Jerusalem led him to the prophetic act of chasing the vendors out of the temple, so our compassion needs to lead us to resistance against the powers and systems that seek to keep us numb, and to acts of solidarity with those who suffer.

This coming week, we remember the series of events that led to Jesus’ death. I want to encourage you take some time this week to remember the story of Jesus’ last days. I think that story can help us break through the numbness that insulates us against suffering. I always find it sad that so many show up on Easter Sunday without having come out for Maundy Thursday or Good Friday. Perhaps some people have good reasons for that, as they suffer from depression and anxiety, and find that service unbearably sad. But I suspect that most people skip Good Friday, because it is easier to stay numb than to really open our hearts to the story of a man suffering on a cross. So if you can come to one of the services, then do that. But if you

can't, watch one of the many good films or TV shows dramatizing the life of Jesus, or read the account in one of the gospels. Do something, and whatever you do, open your heart to it.

The really important question is not whether we show up for Holy Week services, however. The really important question is whether we show up for life, whether we show up for our neighbours who are in need, whether we enter into community with those who are poor and oppressed, or whether we hide out in the numbness of our hearts. Because the Christian faith asserts something quite daring, that joy and life and freedom will not come to the numbed heart, and only by staring suffering and death in the face can we overcome our numbness and really experience abundant life.

There is a story from the Jewish Hasidic tradition about this: A pupil has been studying the verse that says to write the words of Torah on our hearts. He is puzzled, so he goes to his rebbe and asks, "Why does Torah tell us to place these words *upon* your hearts'? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words *in* our hearts?" The rebbe answers, "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks, and the words fall in."⁵ Perhaps, the story suggests, numbed hearts keep us from encountering both God and one another. It is only through broken hearts that we can be open to the fullness of life.

Let's sing together a hymn that asks God to open our hearts and to help us to love as God loves.

⁵ Parker J. Palmer. A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life (Kindle Locations 1849-1851). Kindle Edition.