

Liberation for the Oppressed

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Pullman, WA

May 30, 2021

Ancient Witness: Matthew 18:10-14

One of the great themes of the Bible that is often overlooked in Christianity, especially White Christianity, is *liberation*. In fact, the Bible as a whole can be seen as a story of liberation: Liberation for the Jewish people under the yoke of oppression in Egypt. Liberation for the Jewish people being held in captivity in Babylon. Liberation for those suffering under occupation of the Roman Empire.

And Jesus, himself, was seen as the Messiah, a national liberator, who, like Moses and David, had come to deliver his people from bondage. Jesus, who will defeat the Beast, the Earthly powers of domination that seek to subjugate people of the world. Jesus continues this theme of liberation.

And in our faith tradition then, we worship a God who liberates and who cares for the *oppressed*. If you read the Bible, it becomes undeniably clear that this God cares deeply for the poor, homeless, exiled, enslaved, imprisoned, those living under occupation, abused, exploited, vulnerable, the widows, the orphans, the refugees, immigrants, the sick, starving, the underside, the untouchables, lowest rung in society, the weakest, powerless, the dregs and nobodies of this world. The God of ancient Israel, the God of Jesus, cared particularly for the oppressed people.

The Psalms say, “The Lord vindicates and brings justice for all who are oppressed (103:3), and “The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed” (9:9). This is, in James Cone’s words, “the God of the oppressed.”

In his inaugural sermon, Jesus quoted the prophet, Isaiah, saying: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me and has anointed me to bring good news.” The Greek word here is *euangelion*, which is also translated as gospel. Good news. For who? And here is where it gets good. Good news for **the poor**. Good news for those in **captivity**. Good news for those who are **blind and incapacitated**. Good news for the **oppressed**. Good news for those **suffocated by debt**. This is the gospel of Jesus.

But wait. Does this sound fair? What about all the other people? Come on, Jesus, don’t all lives matter? No wonder the crowd wanted to throw him off a cliff. Then Jesus told them all a parable. It was the parable of the one lost sheep.

If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gotten lost, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is the will of your Father in heaven that not one of these little ones should be lost.

So the other 99 said to Jesus, what about us? Don’t we matter? Don’t all lives matter? Of course! But those 99 aren’t the ones in danger. They aren’t the ones lost in the wilderness where there are predators and all kinds of threats. The one is.

The gospel, the good news, is for the oppressed. Jesus and the prophets remind the world that poor lives matter; oppressed lives matter; transgender lives matter; undocumented lives matter; Black lives matter; Palestinian lives matter. Jesus and the prophets say this to the world, not because the other lives don't matter, but because the world has forgotten, because they have acted like those precious lives don't matter, and they need to be reminded, as we all need to be reminded.

Now, one of the most oppressed groups today are the people of Palestine. For the past few weeks, we have witnessed the horrific, indiscriminate bombing of civilians in Gaza by Israel, using American-made bombs dropped by American-made fighter jets. At last count, over 200 Palestinian people have been killed, including 64 children. I have heard accounts of families sleeping together in one room of their home so that if they are bombed, they will live together or they will die together. This cannot be justified and must stop!

This violence and utter brutality against Gaza is nothing new. In 2008, Israeli military in Operation Cast Lead killed over 1,300 Palestinians, including 300 children. In 2014, the Israeli military killed over 2,000 Palestinians, including 495 children. In 2018, the world watched as Israeli military killed 214 Palestinians, including 46 children, mostly by sniper fire during unarmed protests.

Today, in Gaza we see overwhelming military power against 2 million people, whom they've blockaded in a tiny strip of land and who literally have nowhere to run. For the 13 years of this blockade, Gaza has resembled the world's largest open air prison where the population is confined and denied freedom of movement. The suffering is unimaginable. Unemployment is over 45%. 98% of the groundwater is undrinkable. Many children suffer from malnutrition from food scarcity. There is often only 2 to 4 hours of electricity a day. Medical care is insufficient. Even for specialized medical treatment many are denied to leave. Much of the farmland and coastline within Gaza itself is blocked off due to Israeli security zones.

Created in 1949, this 140 square mile piece of land had less than 80,000 residents. It was seized by Israel military with the other occupied territories in 1967. Refugees from cities and villages who were expelled from their homes by Zionist militias flooded into Gaza and it is now one of the most densely populated areas in the world. In the other occupied territories such as East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Negev, Palestinians are denied many rights of citizenship; they are subjected to unfair military courts; their freedom of movement is restricted; and their homes and land are routinely seized and taken away from them for Israeli settlement.

Human Rights Watch and other organizations, and many individuals such as former President Carter and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, have characterized Israel now as an Apartheid regime. And let us not mince words, Israel has become an Apartheid regime. This is a government, like the former government of South Africa, marked by systematic oppression and inhumane acts with the intent to maintain domination over another racial group within its borders.

Of course, we condemn the violence of both sides, but we also need to acknowledge that this is an asymmetrical relationship. Israel has overwhelming superiority in military force, while the Palestinian people's weapons are ineffective, and they are virtually defenseless. Palestinian legal scholar, Noura Erakat says that Israel's oft-cited claim of "self-defense" does not apply against an occupied population. "You cannot dominate another people and then use the claim of self-defense in order to protect that domination." That's like someone who kidnaps someone and puts them in their basement. If the captive fights to get away, it is not the kidnappers right of self-defense to kill the victim.

The Israeli government claims that the oppression of Palestinians is necessary for Jewish people to be safe. We know this is a lie, and that true safety can be found only through solidarity. Instead of false security for some, gained through violence, we envision a just world where all people are safe. The only way for a lasting peace is to end the brutality, the bombing and the terror. The siege in Gaza must end. The Palestinians must have a voice in how they are governed, and they must be given a modicum of human dignity. And our government, that gives Israel \$3.8 billion a year to Israel in military aid must condition that aid and demand that Israel respect the basic human rights of all within its borders, including our dear Palestinian brothers and sisters. The blood of Palestinian children is on our hands.

Now we must challenge anti-semitism wherever and whenever we see it. But we must be clear: demanding that the government of Israel act justly is not antisemitic. In fact, there are many Jews both in our country and in Israel, who, themselves, want to see greater justice and hold the Israeli government accountable. Many have signed the following pledge:

As Jewish people from all backgrounds and walks of life, we wholeheartedly endorse the Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions... The call urges us to apply the same nonviolent pressure used to end South African Apartheid to Israel, until the Israeli government complies with international law by meeting three demands:

- 1. Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands occupied in June 1967, and dismantling the Wall;*
- 2. recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and*
- 3. respecting, protecting, and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.*

This call for basic rights and freedom is in line with the highest ethical teachings in our texts and traditions. By signing this pledge, we are calling on everything within Jewish tradition that values life, all life, above all else.

And so we worship a God who calls out and issues a warning to the oppressors, the rich, the politically powerful, the colonizers, the occupiers, the hoarders, those who exploit the poor, who don't treat workers fairly, those who benefit from a system that is unfair and unequal, those who are silent to the injustice and who stand idly by, those who turn their heads at the suffering of others. In the book of Malachi, God says, "I will bear witness *against those who oppress* the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the immigrant." God wants to liberate the oppressors, too, but liberate them (and liberate us) from thinking that justifies the status quo. God wants from them (and us) *metanoia*, to turn around and change our direction, to be set free from the ideology based in self-interest, greed and fear.

This, my friends, is the good news, the gospel.

I will end my sermon this morning with another poem by my friend, Rabbi Brant Rosen. Brant was the rabbi at a large, liberal congregation in Evanston, Illinois when I was there. In 2008 he started speaking out for justice for the Palestinian people, and that was too much even for that congregation. So he was forced to leave. He took a position with the American Friends Service Committee and started a new congregation in Chicago, called *Tzedek*, which means "Justice" in Hebrew. This poem, written three years ago, is called "psalm 140: deliver me," and it is written out of his own Jewish perspective.

*oh lord deliver me from my people
who wield their weapons with impunity
whose armies rain bombs on the imprisoned
whose apologists equate oppressor and oppressed
who punish resistance without mercy.*

*keep me from those who speak so easily of two sides
of dual narratives of complexities and coexistence
those who call submission peace and lawless laws justice
who never tire of intoning never again
even as they commit crimes again and again
who have forsaken every lesson they've learned
from their own history and their
own sacred heritage.*

*like jacob i have dreamed fearful dreams
i have struggled in the night
i have limped pitifully across the river
and now like jacob in my last dying breath
i have nothing left but to curse my own
whose tools are tools of lawlessness
who maim refugees who dare dream of return
and send bombs upon the desperate
for the crime of fighting back.*

*so send me away from this people
this tortured fallen assembly
keep me far from their council
count me not among their ranks
i can abide them no longer.*