

Fifth Sunday of Lent

St. Thomas Aquinas once said that two obstacles hinder justice, “deference to power and deference to the mob.” Deference to power can delude us to believe that true justice comes only from the use of judicial authority or lethal force. While justice often requires such usage, a total dependence on such power reduces justice to the adage “might makes right.”

Our war on terrorism, now in its second decade, certainly has utilized the massive power of our military forces. But this war or any war also requires the work of diplomats, missionaries, human rights activists, humanitarian relief organizations, cultural exchange programs, dialogue among religious communities, and all efforts to build trust among human communities. Conflicts settled only with force contain seeds of humiliation and vengeance erupting again into armed violence at a later time.

Deference to the mob results in rash judgments, rush to judgments, and a hysteria that blinds rational judgment. The mob sees only “them and us,” refuses to acknowledge nuance or complexity. A mob mentality, fueled by fear, quickly deteriorates into a collective violence. Apart from the mob, many individuals participating in such horrific violence could never have imagined their involvement in such behavior.

Many of the genocides of the last century began with state operated media broadcasting fear filled lies about certain groups and justifying state and mob violence to assure security and safety. Such was the case in Nazi Germany, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Rwanda. Neighbors previously living peacefully turned on each other with hostility. Soon entire cities and regions erupted with hate and violence directed at those enemies targeted by state propaganda.

In the Gospel, Jesus faces a cruel death perpetrated by both deference to power and deference to the mob. The Roman authorities retain power with a punishing and merciless justice. The religious authorities retain control by inciting mobs demanding blood. Facing his inevitable destiny, Jesus proclaims defiant refusal of any pursuit of justice under such terms. “Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit...(and)... When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.”

The grain of wheat must fall before it can rise, and it must die before it can give life. The grain of wheat must absorb from without to give all that is within. The grain must break open without breaking apart. The grain of wheat experiences powerlessness and loss of control in falling to the earth. Its purpose is to be covered by soil and break open with the gift of life from within. The wheat harvest emerging from within bears no resemblance to the seed that contained it.

The grain of wheat is symbolic of the human heart. The whole purpose of the human heart is to break. A heart is “*not truly human*” until it has been broken. The heart is “*not meant to be broken apart*”, but rather to “*be broken open.*” Only a heart “*broken open*” is truly human.

A heart unbroken resembles the seed not fallen, and not buried in death. Ironically, seeds not immersed in the soil remain dormant. They might refuse to fall and be buried from apathy or fear. They might refuse to let go of bitterness, resentments, or vengeance. Whatever the reason, any opportunity to nourish others from their own pain and suffering remains trapped inside. It has been said that one of the greatest sins in our world today is to walk through daily suffering with dry eyes.

Those with hearts broken apart are those crushed by structures of sin, oppression and exploitation. Those with hearts broken apart have often had trust betrayed or are burdened from lies of racism, hatred, and discrimination. Their personal worth is measured in cheap labor, customers for illegal drugs, sexual gratification, or taking on the blame for all our problems.

Those with hearts broken open refuse to remain victims and choose to be people of transformation. Those with hearts broken open focus sight on the poor, abandoned, and hated; then choose to stand up on their behalf. They are moved to actions of justice either from their own experiences of injustice or from witnessing the lives of others so affected.

The writer of **Hebrews** reminds us that Jesus “learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” For the sacred writer, Jesus’ sufferings came from the pain of a heart breaking open. Like a mother’s pains giving birth, a police officer’s wounds protecting the innocent, or a parent’s sleepless night with a sick child, we learn our capacity to care and be compassionate from our ability to let our hearts be broken open, no matter the suffering endured.

While death for humanity terminated possibilities for life and love, Jesus’ death opened the limitless possibilities for choosing love and a compassion that does justice. To be one with Jesus’ death is to be one with those possibilities and embrace those possibilities within our reach.

The lives of the saints are particularly instructive in this. In the month of March, the life of St. Patrick stands out. As a young boy in Great Britain, Patrick was kidnapped by Celtic pirates and sold into slavery in Ireland. He escaped back home in his later teen years.

Once returning home, he had a dream of God speaking through the Irish people calling him back to Ireland as a missionary. After ordination to the priesthood, Patrick returned to Ireland, evangelized through many years of difficult and dangerous conditions and established the church throughout the land.

Calling on the Irish people to keep the crucified and Risen Lord before them, they were drawn from becoming a mob to becoming a community, a church, the Body of Christ. Through St. Patrick, the Lord drew the Irish people to himself. Through the church he established, God shaped and formed a faithful people for centuries upon centuries. Because of his past as a slave and his great efforts of evangelization, Ireland was the first nation in world history to outlaw slavery. St. Patrick’s heart, a grain of wheat, as the Lord’s own heart, broke open for an abundant harvest.

When the Lord draws us to himself, we become not a mob but community. Those with hearts unbroken can experience compassion and thirst for justice. Those with hearts broken apart can find healing, forgiveness, mercy and become those with hearts broken open.

The true community of the church encounters the crucified and Risen Lord especially at every celebration of the Eucharist. There, the Lord Jesus draws us into the power of his death, of his heart broken open. At the Eucharist, we find the strength to allow our own hearts to break open. There, the Lord directs us back to our daily lives as a harvest of love and compassion that does justice.

“I will place my law within them,” writes the prophet Jeremiah, “and write it upon their hearts. I will be their God and they shall be my people.” When the crucified and Risen Lord is obscured from our sight, we rebel at the thought of a broken heart and retreat into victimization or react with vengeance. When we keep the crucified and Risen Lord before us, we resist justice deferring to power or the mob; and a broken heart becomes a heart broken open.

For the section on **Hebrews**, please refer to **Hebrews: A Commentary**, by Luke Timothy Johnson, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2006. Especially “Excursus 3: Suffering and the Obedience of Faith”, pg.149-152.