

# *Healing the Haunted*

Acts 8:26-40

When a couple of the Baltimore Orioles home games were postponed this past week due to the street protests in and around Camden Yards, a lot of fans, particularly from the suburbs, were upset. Baltimore sports-radio broadcaster, Brett Hollander, even took to Twitter to complain that the public demonstrations over Freddie Grey's death were counter-productive in terms of garnering widespread support from local residents and sports fans.

This was not surprising; in fact, it is the sort of reaction that's expected from those not directly involved, but somehow inconvenienced. What was surprising to me was the thoughtful response from the chief executive of the Orioles, John Angelos (son of the owner), who lost out on the ticket and concession sales. Instead of being indignant and reiterating the complaints of many or even litigating for their losses, he took the side of the protesters. Here is what he said:

Brett, speaking only for myself, I agree with your point that the principle of peaceful, non-violent protest and the observance of the rule of law is of utmost importance in any society. MLK, Gandhi, Mandela and all great opposition leaders throughout history have always preached this precept. Further, it is critical that in any democracy, investigation must be completed and due process must be honored before any government or police members are judged responsible.

That said, my greater source of personal concern, outrage and sympathy beyond this particular case is focused neither upon one night's property damage nor upon the acts, but is focused rather upon the past four-decade period during which an American political elite have shipped middle class and working class jobs away from Baltimore and cities and towns around the U.S. to third-world dictatorships like China and others, plunged tens of millions of good, hard-working Americans into economic devastation, and then followed that action around the nation by diminishing every American's civil rights protections in order to control an unfairly impoverished population living under an ever-declining standard

of living and suffering at the butt end of an ever-more militarized and aggressive surveillance state.

The innocent working families of all backgrounds whose lives and dreams have been cut short by excessive violence, surveillance, and other abuses of the Bill of Rights by government pay the true price, and ultimate price, and one that far exceeds the importance of any kids' game played tonight, or ever, at Camden Yards. We need to keep in mind people are suffering and dying around the U.S., and while we are thankful no one was injured at Camden Yards, there is a far bigger picture for poor Americans in Baltimore and everywhere who don't have jobs and are losing economic civil and legal rights, and this makes inconvenience at a ballgame irrelevant in light of the needless suffering government is inflicting upon ordinary Americans. <sup>1</sup>

Now you might not agree with everything Angelos' said, but what I found remarkable was his perceptive candor and willingness to look beyond the immediate protests and publicly empathize with the demonstrators, when few in the media have done so and when he had every reason to express anger and characterize the protestors as a bunch of "thugs," as some politicians and prominent people have done in currying favor with voters.

What made an even greater impression on me was that this was said in the context of the terrible humanitarian crisis following the earthquake in Nepal, which has received a far more charitable response from Americans and from around the world. Certainly, many people are good-hearted and motivated to step up and provide generous assistance to those who are suffering half way around the world; but in some ways, it's ironic and revealing that the empathy among many seems to be far less for those who are suffering in poverty within our own country—those closer to us. What Angelos' comment did was to bring a surprising and empathic focus to a similar population that is chronically suffering from conditions not

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *USAToday*, April 27, 2015.

entirely of their own making—something that many Americans are often reluctant to recognize, let alone address.

Perhaps more than anything, empathy is called for in times like these. When it is easy to rush to judgment and harshly criticize the actions of a violent few, we miss the underlying concern for millions of others, particularly when it comes to police-community relations, let alone the depth of poverty and despair that exists in so many of our cities and around the country. Without an appreciation for the fear that many urban, black citizens have of the police in general because of racial profiling and aggressive treatment, we have no well-informed idea what those marching in the streets are rising up about. Few of us place ourselves among those whose living conditions are appalling and so we may never realize just how bad things are for so many households. The unemployed and the working poor are struggling in ways that never get reflected in the stock market or corporate ledgers. On the streets of the many Baltimores in this country, life is not improving; in truth, it's getting worse. As much as the American people consider themselves conscientious and caring, libertarian callousness throughout this country is also evident in the manner in which so many are reluctant to feel responsible to and for the poor in our midst.

When I speak of empathy, it's not limited to the poor. Empathy is needed to cross many thresholds that exist for the average person—racially, socially, politically, religiously, those who have been traumatized in some way, perhaps wounded in war, those who are homeless, those with chronic physical or mental illness, etc. It's easy to isolate ourselves, individually and collectively, and consider life

good, while missing how miserable it is for countless others. Many times they become “the other”—those who are defined by their conditions and of little concern to us. These are natural (and often perceived) boundaries which produce social distance that divides up society and prevents us from truly understanding and appreciating one another. Without appreciation, of course, there is little empathy; without empathy, it’s hard to care. Much like Dostoyevsky put it in *The Brothers Karamazov*, hell is the suffering that comes when we are unable to love another. To love begins with the willingness to empathize with someone else’s pain.

There are no easy solutions, of course—there never are. Fear plays a large role in whether or not we will engage those we don’t know or trust. No one is completely innocent or without fault; we can always find reasons to justify mistrust; wisdom, not naiveté, is clearly called for. Still, there must be a commitment to overcome the distances through intentional efforts to cross the great divide that exists. “To each his own” isn’t good enough when human suffering is real and all-too-present in our midst.

Perhaps because of all the news of the week, when I read through the text from Acts for this morning, I found myself not reading it in my normal way, attempting to understand how it would be heard 2000 years ago. Instead, I found myself listening to its words for what it means to us now—even pondering the references to places that now suffer greatly—Jerusalem and Gaza to begin with—and contemplating what salvation means to those in hopeless situations of chronic suffering—the type that the rest of us, relatively unaffected, grow accustomed to seeing in others and simply accept.

To get a sense of what I'm saying, beyond Jerusalem and Gaza, there is also a reference in this story to the Ethiopian eunuch which, when parsed out to what that meant in first century Palestine, referred to one who came, not from the nation we know today, but from the region now within the borders of Sudan (a place that has come to our attention because its population has suffered greatly in recent years due drought, famine, and civil war). The eunuch himself represents sexual minorities, both in the ancient world as well as the modern—those who have often been marginalized and still are the targets of scorn. It's striking to me that all these references speak of those who have suffered greatly—who are haunted by past losses and present grievances that severely scar their souls.

All of this matters to us, even on a local level. Over the past several weeks, Connecticut College, for example, has been in turmoil over the fallout from Facebook comments posted last year by a Jewish professor demeaning the Palestinians of Gaza. This precipitated a reaction that went far beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It brought up a number of other impressions and stories where various students felt marginalized or unwelcome, misunderstood or undervalued because of their race, ethnicity, social class, and other distinctions, reflective in many ways of the stresses within larger society. There have been confrontations and protests on campus, as well as various efforts to reconcile relationships through programmatic and individual overtures—all in an attempt to increase the level of empathy within the college community, particularly for minorities. Here this is among an enlightened, educated population—how much more this occurs when people live in an environment with

explicit racism and bigotry! It has challenged Conn College on many different levels, though it has also taught a valuable lesson about the importance of being open and empathetic toward others—embracing, not fearing, individual differences among people or presuming everyone’s story and life experiences are much the same. Hopefully, awareness and actions will follow that will change the environment permanently for the better.

All of this erupted over the hostility between Jews and Palestinians—perhaps one of the most haunting tragedies of human suffering. That’s where this story takes us on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, as it were. As much as the dominant voices and powers in the Middle East demonize and perpetuate the hostility between Israelis and Palestinians, as much as American media gives us primarily one side of this story (i.e., Israeli), there are efforts on all sides—Jews, Muslims, Arabs, Palestinians, Christians, Druse—to foster understanding and empathy by telling everyone’s story of suffering.

Last week, my former professor, Yehezkel Landau of Hartford Seminary, wrote a piece for the Huffington Post titled, “Jerusalem, Our Healing Mother City,” where he commented on the shared suffering that all parties have experienced—the Holocaust for Jews and the Nakba for Palestinians—suffering that has justified the anger and perpetual warfare between the two. He wrote this at the time of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian genocide at the hands of the Turks. He made this stirring observation:

Within the walls of Jerusalem’s Old City, Armenians, Jews and Palestinians live in adjacent quarters. On the level of the physical body, all three peoples have endured massacres in the last century—two on a

genocidal scale. So all are survivor communities, suffering-servant peoples experiencing death and resurrection, and acting as witnesses to the triumph of the spirit over horrific suffering. On the spiritual and emotional levels, all three peoples have experienced exile from their homelands, being refugees or “strangers in strange lands.” Can there be some transcendent lesson in this interface of sorrows and of aspirations for homecoming and healing? <sup>2</sup>

Immediately, I thought of Phillip going to explain to the Ethiopian eunuch the meaning of a passage that perplexed him:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
And like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
So he does not open his mouth.  
In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth.

What Phillip was asked to do was to explain the Suffering Servant passage from Isaiah—a passage in which Christians try to make sense of Jesus’ death on the cross, and which Jews read as solace for their own suffering throughout the centuries.

I thought to myself, what a profound passage to unite all people in their mutual sorrow, marginalization, or pain! Finding solace for one’s own suffering in this text is certainly important and relevant, but to read the suffering of a stranger *or of your enemy* through these words is utterly transforming!

In human suffering we recognize how hard things are and how they much lead to substantive change for everyone’s benefit. In human suffering we begin to find healing through the love and care of empathetic hearts. Recognizing and honoring the suffering of another brings greater hope for reconciliation when one’s enemy discovers empathy offered and received.

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<sup>2</sup> Yehezkel Landau, “Jerusalem, Our Healing Mother City,” Huffington Post, April 21, 2015.

For me, that is the fruit of the Gospel—not to claim victory over or dominate others (and then conforming them to our image and standards!), but to share in someone else’s suffering—to empathetically enter into their darkness that you may share it and together find the light which brings hope. Love is what heals the haunted; love is what we desperately need to share. Love, as Dostoyevsky reminds us, is what keeps us from hell.

In times like these, that’s something to be reminded of as we translate this into our context; that is what might heal our land—when we collectively understand and share the suffering of those who are oppressed and downtrodden by the circumstances of their lives and the conditions in which they live, who feel left out, who are overlooked, neglected, mistreated, abused, forgotten—whatever marginalizes them as a human being. As we try to understand, empathize, and share in other people’s suffering instead of rushing to preconceived judgment, then we will express meaningful love—the kind of merciful love worthy of Christ’s blessing—the kind of love that heals the heart and soul.

Through the eyes of love and empathy, we realize all these protests aren’t a threat to the established order, as much as they are signs of someone’s pain—that there is a terrible injustice to be addressed—that’s someone’s place in the world is not right. In a country that was founded in revolt, in a land shaped by Christian sensibilities and in the spirit of redemption, the Baltimores of our nation deserve something better than the suffering they have experienced. May we listen to their voices, sense their pain, recoil at the injustice, and somehow find a way to baptize them in the waters

of hope and healing that they may find salvation as it is truly meant to be.

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