

The Missing Hands of Hope

Luke 3:1-14

One of the more profound symbols I've ever come across sits in my office on the shelf. It's a small plaster figurine of Christ which was given to me back in May 1989 by an Estonian Christian friend, Urmas Lepp—a human rights activist and musician, whom I met in Tallinn when I first traveled there a few years earlier. Urmas discovered it in a house that was being razed—hidden inside a wall. He presumed it was stashed there by an unknown Estonian Christian sometime after 1939, when the country began its half century occupation by foreign powers, principally the former Soviet Union, which notoriously repressed most religious expression.

When Urmas handed the figurine to me, he showed me that both hands were missing, apparently broken off at some point while being stored inside the wall. In his view, this handless Christ symbolized the plight of Estonians—having the religious faith and desire to defy Moscow, but lacking the hands or means to do so. It was, for him, a symbol of desperate hope that bordered on despair—impotent religious belief in a world of oppression—a vision of a better world, but lacking the means to get there. His hope in Christ was genuine, but, all too often, Russia seemed more powerful than God.

I remember being somewhat surprised by his sober outlook, given the positive developments since we initially met a few years earlier—five years in which so many changes were unfolding under the weakening Soviet rule. Estonian nationalism was reemerging in the “Singing Revolution,” as it would come to be called—Urmas amidst the heart of it, joining many of his fellow Estonians in those

increasingly hopeful times. Within a couple of years, Estonia would even declare its independence and a whole new world would open up for them. Soviet rule and oppression would come to an end.

Yet, as I would eventually learn, Urmas didn't live to experience Estonian independence, as he died under "mysterious circumstances" within the year (believed to be at the hands of the old regime). So I've held onto this handless figure of Christ as a memorial to Urmas, as well as a testimony to the plight of many people of faith who suffer under oppression, holding onto a desperate hope that God somehow would answer their prayers for deliverance.

The missing hands of this Christ figure represent so many truths I see from day to day, from place to place, from year to year. The presence of Christ embodies hope; but without hands, the healing touch is lacking and the miracles just don't occur. Every action seems impossible toward making things better, because the principalities and powers of this world loom larger and sever the possibilities right from the source. In so many instances and settings, religious belief is virtually impotent to change things for the better and, at times, appears more like an opiate to quiet restless discontent or a sanctuary from the world to share our sorrows. The *missing* hands of hope are more apparent at times than the divine promise of deliverance.

I should say, I've often associated Urmas with John the Baptizer. Urmas was hoping for (and proclaiming the need for) a monumental change to his Baltic country, but did not live long enough to see it realized, not unlike John's story in the Gospels. More significantly, Urmas seemed to understand the cost of discipleship in embracing higher values which he associated with his faith and the

advent of a regime change—where the end of Soviet rule would bring about human dignity and justice, mercy and freedom from oppression, and a change of heart in a new relationship with God and humanity. In short, a fresh start in the way the Estonian world was ordered and in the nature of each one’s character and spirit. It wasn’t enough to try to merely fix what was already broken, as the old guard cautioned them to do; it required a new vision and paradigm for organizing society—a new way of being and relating—of building community in a world seemingly gone mad, whether in first century Judea or 20th century Estonia—a hope for deliverance from the oppressive powers of the time.

John the Baptizer’s story, of course, isn’t usually presented in this way. John is portrayed more as a mythical religious character who forecasts the future, than a revolutionary waging a call for regime change. But, in effect, regime change was what John was campaigning for. Yet, it wasn’t merely directed at the Roman or Herodian rulers, he was calling for everyone to change their ways—“to repent,” as the text tells us—from the greatest to the least in society. Repentance means, literally, “to turn around” from the trend you’ve set and the direction you are heading. Repentance is as much a collective action as it is a personal, individual one with a similar intent: to stop what is happening and to turn things around for the better.

John’s baptism was representative of divine amnesty for everyone as a basis to start over—to rid their world of all that corrupted it—a renunciation of oppression, brutality, abuse, greed, deceit, malice, fear, and all the myriad ills of human civilization,

particularly when it seems at its worst. Since every injustice couldn't be accounted for, nor every grievance settled, nor every problem solved, instead of wringing his hands in frustration and despair, John took to the wilderness and announced a ceasefire for all the partisan infighting throughout Judea and a time of reckoning for everyone to let go of the past and start over.

Again, we don't normally get this sense of John's call to repentance. Christian tradition, for the most part, has blunted the force of his proclamation by taking John out of his context and presenting him in the Christmas story as Jesus' version of Ed McMahon (or Jimmy Fallon's, Steve Higgins)—someone to warm up the audience before the star of the show arrived on the scene at Christmas. And the concept of repentance, as well, has been limited to the personal, where John is akin to an old-time revivalist preacher, conducting altar calls and baptizing guilt-laden sinners, preparing them for their Lord and Savior. So when faith is only personal and privatized, no regime change is required. The world can remain as it is, worthy to be rejected, judged, and eternally condemned to hell.

Yet, if that's all the message was, John could have remained in Jerusalem, preaching in the courtyard of the temple. Every good Jew already knew about atoning for one's personal sins and living a good and righteous life. John wouldn't need to reinvent that. Instead, though, we find John baptizing out in the wilderness in a context intentionally symbolic (and ironic) because that's where Israel first started with Moses.

In other words, what John was calling for was a do-over—interrupt the present and return, in effect, back to the beginning! So

baptism was reminiscent of the journey through the Red Sea, which was the dramatic moment when the Israelites realized they were actually and finally being delivered from Egypt. Coming through the waters of Jordan was like acquiring a second chance to prepare for the Promised Land in order to finally do it right and live into the covenant and paradigm of God's realm. John was symbolizing the Exodus story in his wilderness ministry. Rather than repeat the past with its military conquests and political corruption, John's Advent call was about changing the manner in which their entire world operates: the way governments are set up, the way societies are organized, the way people treat each other, the way certain ones bilk the system to their advantage, the ways that powerful interests control society, to the benefit of some and the disadvantage of most. In the imagery of Isaiah, everything would begin again on level ground—the valleys would be lifted up and the mountains would be made low. It would become a level playing field.

That is the powerful promise of Advent—that the world can turn around for the better. It inspired hope for those who were tired of the way things were and responded to John's call and to Jesus, as well as to those throughout history who took to the streets and campaigned for a new world order of freedom, like Urmas, who yearned for such freedom from oppression. Granted, you and I may not readily identify with those who feel oppressed—those who yearn for a new reality in their world, but then again, given what we face right now in this country, we are not oblivious to the need for significant change, either.

After the horrible events of this past week, many of us are feeling overwhelmed by the terrible scourge of endless gun violence and can't tolerate another massacre with nothing being done about it. Paralyzed, as we are, by political partisanship and profound differences over what guns represent in this country (security or harm), with fear clouding our vision for what should be done, our world is as broken and hopeless as it was for John and for Urmas. That's what oppression feels like, when we can't muster any realistic hope for meaningful change!

Or perhaps, we sense oppression in other ways. We might struggle with financial burdens, student loans, or credit cards that enslave us to long-term debt and an inability to get solvent. We'll never get out from under it. This is what oppression feels like—a heavy burden that will not go away!

Or maybe we feel overwhelmed and oppressed by the toxic amount of pornography and sex trafficking that permeates our society and, on a daily basis, devalues men and women, even young boys and girls, to being little more than sexualized objects for gratuitous pleasure. It's so ubiquitous, we fear the permanent loss of innocence and decency, even among children. That's a form of oppression!

Or we can feel oppressed if we are never free of the consequences of poor decisions, terrible mistakes, or regrettable actions in our past and are constantly haunted, if not condemned, by it. The sense of judgment looms over us endlessly. That's oppressive!

Or maybe our hearts pound with compassion and empathy for those who are suffering terrible injustices in society or with paralyzing problems in their families or households and we carry

their burdens everyday as their friend and ally. Though we may not experience firsthand the impact, the stigma, the deep-rooted prejudice or disadvantages that we know exist, we empathize with them and yearn for mercy and for laws and cultural perceptions to change, so they can find the freedom they deserve and long for. That's understanding and appreciating oppression.

Whenever we experience or recognize oppression in any form, we face a choice: we can wring our hands over it in frustration and despair, without lifting a finger to do anything about it. Or, like John, Urmas, and so many others, we can make it our moral duty and purpose to stand up and work toward a societal change by making a positive difference.

Yes, we can use our hands to simply point fingers at who's to blame; we may even raise a fist in defiance over terrible injustices. However, it isn't enough to target causes. Like John, we need to help people find a way out—a baptism of repentance that offers hope and a way to turn things around. It's not enough to simply offer prayers, either, for religion without appropriate action is like Christ without hands. It's like what Augustine said: Without God, we can't; without us, God won't. We can be the merciful hands of Christ if we put our own flesh on the broken arms of Christ, or we will end up being the missing hands of hope if we won't. The choice is ours to make, individually and collectively!

In such a time as this, with collective vision, commitment, and support, we can join our hands together to counter the forces and beliefs that rob people of hope and to resist those who use their power to oppress and harm the welfare of far too many lives. Above all, we

can remember our call as followers of Christ: to proclaim and demonstrate hope for a better world, with a vision and example of just living, of kind and compassionate care, of inclusive community, of welcoming life's refugees, of selfless generosity, of redemptive mercy with new beginnings, and of peaceable, respectful relations between people from all walks of life. That's a regime change!

That is the Christ-inspired vision for a new world that lifts hopeless hearts, and we are the hands that can make it real.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
6 December 2015