

Witnessing to Healing as Liberation

This morning I am drawn to the moments before the story in this passage. We find the disciples having a dinner (the passage only mentions the leftover food). They are mourning the death of their friend and leader, wondering about what it means for their movement. It is in this context that Jesus shows up and declares liberation.

Last week, April 4, I found myself in a similar place. I was in Atlanta for the commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. In the evening, after all the official celebrations, I attended a dinner with local activists and community organizers. We were to partake in the dinner he never ate. It was a beautiful event. A local chef made the food, with greens grown from community gardens. The room had people of all different races all of whom were active in their various communities, who were working hard for social justice, and a better world. As we dug into the amazing food, the MC of the event invited everyone around the table to answer a question. "What was a moment when you witnessed liberation?" It's incredible that I'm here this morning asked to witness to liberation, and with a scripture (that I didn't pick) offering the exact same contextual set up.

That night I told a story of a village in the South Hebron Hills. I only had about a minute to share. Today I have a bit more time, so if you'll indulge me I'll give you a little more background on the village of At-Tuwani.

At-Tuwani is one of the bigger cities in the South Hebron Hills, but that's not saying much. There are about Seventeen small Palestinian villages with a combined population of approximately 1,100. So, At-Tuwani is the biggest with like 250 people. But it has the school building, the mosque, and the store.

Because the South Hebron Hills region is one of the most remote and sparsely populated areas of Palestine. It is primed for Israeli take over. Today the area is completely in Area C, under full Israeli military and civil control. This means that the Israeli military makes up all the rules for the Palestinians living there. They do not have the Palestinian's best interest in mind, quite the contrary the Israeli military implements policies specifically designed to push Palestinians in the South Hebron Hills off their land. This includes arbitrarily closing off roads, destroying roads, or not allowing roads to be built. This cuts off the folks living in the South Hebron Hills from much needed resources.

Speaking of resources. The Israeli military has shut off the water in the village. It does not allow the people in At-Tuwani, or throughout the South Hebron Hills to be on the water grid. The military has also torn down electrical towers, put demolition orders on solar panels and wind turbines, not allowed a 3g network to be created in the area, and generally tried to make it impossible for Palestinians to have what they need to survive.

But that's just the "tip of the spear" (to use the military term) of the occupation.

In the 1980s Israeli extremist started moving into the area. They came in with guns and set up outposts of campers on hilltops. Though they are illegal by both international law, and by

Israel's own laws, the Israeli military was sent to aid these Israelis in their illegal activities. And, of course they need to take up more land for the military installations. They need places to park their Humvees and tanks, to build barracks, and sniper towers, and of course more land for a "secure perimeter."

There are now more than a dozen of these outposts there, some of them have developed into small villages of their own, with permanent structures. All of these outposts and settlements, which are off limits to Palestinians, are not only given Military security, but are hooked up to the water system, have their own 4g network. Basically, these illegal Israeli outposts are given the things that legal Palestinian villages are being denied.

At-Tuwani finds itself in a particularly precarious position because it is in a valley. The hilltop to one side of it is an established settlement. The hilltop on the other side of it is a newer outpost, and the goal of the settlement and the outpost are to take over all the land in the middle and merge. That land makes up the village of at-Tuwani, and the surrounding fields where shepherds graze their flocks.

I referred to these settlers as extremists, because of their beliefs --- that they are destined to take over, cleanse the land of all non-Jews, and rule over the land as God ordained lords. And their actions --- They intimidate and attack attack Palestinians, especially shepherds who are often alone in fields near the settlement, and school children who have to pass the settlements en route to school. They have also been known to throw animal carcasses in Palestinian wells, their only water source. They do all of this under the watchful eye of Israeli soldiers, who are not allowed to stop them, and sometimes assist.

In short, the Israeli machine made up of soldiers and settlers has put the Palestinians of At-Tuwani into a living hell. But the people of At-Tuwani did not despair.

At-Tuwani really started cultivating their nonviolent strategy in 2003. I did not work with them until 2013, a decade later. By that time, they had created a whole ecosystem of resistance. It is one of the most beautiful and inspirational stories of a people liberating themselves that I have ever witnessed.

I describe it as an echo system, (in part because it's earth day and I'm thinking in those terms) because they didn't just have a nonviolent campaign, or a single strategy of nonviolence, but the village, as a whole chose nonviolence as a way of life. Everyone had a role to play. And I mean everyone.

One thing the village leaders did was to start the South Hebron Hills Popular Resistance Committee. This was a group that would organize and strategize. They would connect with other coordinating committees throughout Palestine, strategize together, learn about shared campaigns, and ask for help from other activists. Over the decade they helped other villages establish Popular Committees as well.

They also invited Israeli and international organizations to help them. An Israeli organization called Ta'ayush, an Italian organization called Operation Dove, and Christian Peacemaker

Teams (CPT) answered the call. They were especially helpful in helping children get to and from school.

In 2004 Operation Dove and CPT started accompanying children every day to and from school and lived in a small house in town. The settlers didn't change their actions much, but at least tended to aim their violence at the internationals rather than the Palestinian children. The organizations were able to document the attacks. Ta'ayush used their contacts with Israeli journalists to make the issue front page news, and eventually the Israeli government took notice. They demanded that the Israeli military show up every day to walk the kids to school. This is a totally unprecedented occurrence, and a huge win for the At-Tuwani campaign. Though there are still many problems with having a foreign hostile military walking your kids to school (the soldiers are often late, they often don't get along well with the children, or do not live up to their obligations) it showed that this small village could leverage power and advocate for change.

Unlike many nonviolent struggles, it's not just the men who are leading the charge. A few years before I got there, the Israeli military invaded the village to destroy the pylons that held the power lines up. They were going to leave the village with no electricity.

The people in At-Tuwani realized, that with armed guards surrounding the equipment, the men would be arrested or killed if they even approached. The women did not hesitate to step up. I remember one woman telling me the story. She stood in front of a bulldozer that was there to tear down the pylon. It was driven by a young female Israeli soldier. The woman from At-Tuwani stared straight into the young soldier's eyes, and she could see her break out of her soldiers training and become a young woman again. She dropped her head, turned the bulldozer around, and they stopped their destruction.

Ever since then the women of At-Tuwani have not only participated in the nonviolent demonstrations, but are in all the planning meetings, and often lead them.

Artists, musicians, and actors have a role to play in the ecology of nonviolence that has been cultivated in At-Tuwani. I never went to a demonstration in At-Tuwani that didn't also include a celebration, and I never went to a celebration that didn't also include a demonstration.

Their love of the arts attracted the Jineen freedom theater. They did a "Freedom Bus" tour through the West Bank. They stopped in major cities like Nabuls, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Ramallah, and tiny little At-Tuwani. The idea was that the troupe would do play back theater, as a way of story-telling and healing. In the evening the village gathered. They told stories, and the actors would play them out. I heard stories of children being taken and jailed, stories of being beaten by settlers. The troupe would act them out with care and beauty. Often finding ways to add in some humor, and everyone could laugh together. At the end of the evening the organizers of the event reminded everyone to come back tomorrow, when they'd break ground on a new building, despite the authorities threatening to not allow them. Celebration tied to demonstration.

Even children had their place in all of this. I was invited to a demonstration to build the kids a shelter that they could wait inside, if soldiers were late to walk them home from school (as they often are). The strategy was that internationals were invited to come and be observers. The men of the village would work on putting the shelter together, quietly behind the demonstration. Women led the chants and choreograph the event. What amazed me was the kids. They were part of the demonstration too. They gave interviews to the journalists, talking about their first-hand experiences. And they had this way of playfully challenging the soldiers. They were waving Palestinian flags, and they'd hang them up on fence posts. The soldiers would angrily tear them down and throw them on the ground... so the kids would pick them up and hang them up again. They knew what they could get away with, without getting into too much trouble, and they knew not to get into fights with the soldiers. While the soldiers were occupied minding the children the shelter was constructed. I found out later that all the kids are trained in nonviolence.

The organizers in At-Tuwani know that they need to teach their kids these ways as well. So they put on a peace camp, not only for their own kids, but also for the kids of their Israeli friends.

CPT was invited to the graduation for the peace camp. It was incredible! Just walking under the huge tent, filled with parents, friends of the village, international human rights NGOs. It was great seeing all the different groups together.

Two women MCed the event, while the men of the village served coffee to the crowd. The main event were the kids.

First a group of boys came up and danced debkha. A Palestinian dance that tells a story of resistance through movement. It was so refreshing to see the young boys so enthusiastically express themselves through dance.

Then two girls came up and gave speeches to the crowd about what they had learned. They sounded like practiced orators, and I loved seeing girls, in that culture being invited to express their voice.

After all the kids, Palestinian and Israeli, were honored for completing the camp, we got up to get food and share a meal together. As we were walking I saw the soldiers on the next hillside. Those soldiers that had been so menacing, who constantly watched and threatened the village. Who represented a powerful state trying to crush these people's spirits. And those soldiers on the far off hill looked so small, and lonely compared to the great celebration we were having. I felt pity on them as we sat down, because I realized that as long as they had that uniform on they couldn't experience what I was experiencing.

I sat down, and beside me was a Palestinian Muslim activist from a nearby village, sitting across from a Jewish Israeli. One a farmer who will probably never leave that region, the other a well-educated well-traveled journalist. They sat across from each other, old friends, reminiscing about the different demonstrations they'd been a part of, asking about each other's families, laughing and eating off the same plate.

I looked around and couldn't help but think, this must be what heaven is like. When I hear about God's upside-down kingdom, the image of those two eating together that day is what comes to mind. Despite the hell around them they created heaven.

So, I end my sermon where we started. With folks eating a meal together, morning and celebrating, and glimpsing liberation. The disciples, the folks in Atlanta, and At-Tuwani. And I celebrate that we'll soon be moving into our own meal together. May it be a time to morn, to celebrate, and to practice liberation.