

Oppression and the Realm of God
1 Maccabees 1:54-59
Matthew 24:15-28
Luke 17:22-37

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Today we begin a seven-week sermon series based on the sculptures you see displayed around the chancel. These are by Charles McCollough, who served on the national staff of the UCC and was also artist in residence at five seminaries. I encourage you to come up for a closer look at all of them before and after worship. Please don't touch them, but do note the humor, the expressiveness, and the detail of the images. There are booklets available that give insights into each sculpture. Especially for those of you who have mobility challenges, I suggest you have the booklet in hand so you can see the sculpture image that is the focus of the sermons in this series.

Our first sculpture to focus on is called "Corpse-Eagles," and in case you can't see it clearly, here's the gist of what it contains: Along the bottom in the foreground there is a body, naked, face in the ground, feet splayed, hands tied behind its back. From the bald head I would guess this is the body of a man. In the background, smirking, jeering, are three Roman soldiers in full armor. Each of them bears a staff with an image of an eagle, which represents the Roman Empire. Their shields also bear eagles. The staff in the center bears the letters "SPQR," which stand for *Senatus Populusque Romanus*, or "The Senate and People of Rome."

In McCollough's book *The Non-Violent Radical: Seeing and Living the Wisdom of Jesus*, he notes that the scripture related to this sculpture is just one sentence, appearing in nearly identical form in both Matthew and Luke: "Wherever the corpse is, the vultures [eagles] will gather." And the first thing he says is, "This wisdom saying is full of ambiguity."

The more I delved into the texts surrounding this scripture, the more I thought, “Yeah, no kidding.”

“Wherever the corpse is, the vultures [eagles] will gather.” Our Bibles translate the Greek word as “vultures,” but it can also mean “eagles.” McCollough writes,

My view is that “eagle” is a better translation. Though vultures do indeed naturally gather around corpses as scavenger birds, Jesus and the gospel writers were not naturalists and were not primarily concerned to make everyday observations about birds. Rather, Jesus in this saying is opposing the violence of Rome by calling attention to that violence.

“Eagles” it is. “Wherever the corpse is, the eagles will gather.” But still, what does that even mean?

Based on the scripture passages we heard a few moments ago, as well as the parallel passage in Luke 17, our theme is oppression, including the systemic killing of the oppressed, an example of which we see in this sculpture.

There are plenty of example of oppression over time:

Of Jews throughout the centuries:

In Egypt under Pharaoh

Jews several centuries before Jesus being oppressed by

Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the Maccabean Revolt

Casting Jews out of Spain in 1400s or forcing them to convert

Jews in WWII being subject to genocide

Christians in early centuries were oppressed, and in some parts of the world that is still true today.

Christians have also been oppressors. The Church in the Crusades wiped out “infidels,” including Jews and Muslims.

Ethnic cleansing in Bosnian War, in Rwanda in 1990s.

Today: Aleppo, Yemen, South Sudan, Israel/Palestine. There are 60-65 million refugees in the world today, many fleeing oppression.

U.S. history is full of oppression:

Native Americans and Manifest Destiny

Spanish missionaries in American Southwest

Kidnaping of Africans to become slaves on U.S. plantations

Today: people of color, Muslims, immigrants, women, LGBT community, Chicago with a murder rate in 2016 of over 700 people.

So our country can play the role of oppressor as well. And of course the national bird is not the turkey, as Benjamin Franklin proposed, but the eagle. Just like the Romans. When we think of the Romans having an Empire, we might do well to remember that we are one of the largest producers of arms on the planet and furnish arms to conflicts all over the world. That we have military bases everywhere—Europe, Asia, the Middle East—and soldiers stationed in all of these places. That we went to war in Vietnam and more recently in Iraq in response to trumped up incidents or accusations. The U.S. is not innocent of oppression.

The thing about Jesus' stories and sayings is that you can often enter them from different places. Maybe, given our national history, we identify with the oppressors. Ugh—uncomfortable. Jesus tells plenty of stories about the oppressed, and perhaps we ourselves have experienced oppression of some sort. So maybe we relate to the corpse. Both are possibilities.

Let's stay with the oppressed point of view for a moment. The passage today from 1 Maccabees talks about the desecrating sacrilege on the temple altar: symbols of a Greek god in the Temple, sacrifices to that other god in the holiest of Jewish sites. In this passage we hear of the oppression of the Jewish people in ways that may remind us of Nazi

Germany: burning of holy books, genocide of all discovered to be Jewish, nonstop violence against a specific group of people.

The reading from Matthew may likewise remind us of oppressed people in war settings: two people working side by side, a bomb goes off; one is killed, the other flees for the hills just to survive. Don't even stop to grab your coat—just go as quickly as possible. Or perhaps we think of Syrian immigrants, leaving everything behind and piling into flimsy boats to flee north to Europe. And then pray for the best.

And the questions we hear coming out of the texts in Matthew and Luke are, “Where is God in this? Where is the Son of Man? Where is the realm of God?” Jesus cautions against anyone who offers an easy answer or a quick fix: “Look, over here,” or “Hey, over there.” “Follow me and I'll give you all the answers, give you security, give you power, give you riches.” False prophets, false gods, every one.

Jesus says, “For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” I suggest one way to understand this sentence is that Jesus is wherever we are willing to do the work of justice. There are no guarantees of security, success, or material wealth. In the Luke version of this passage, the gospel writer says, “Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.” (Luke 17:33) I think we're being cautioned not to wander off in search of certainty and security. These are not the realm of God.

Jesus gives us great images and invites us to find ourselves in them. Here we have a corpse and eagles of the Roman Empire gathered around it. I don't particularly want to be either one. I do not choose to be either victim or oppressor.

And maybe that's the point. Maybe that's a possible reading of this difficult text. There will always be those willing to oppress, usually to gain power, wealth, security, certainty. There will be those who become

the oppressed, the powerless, the victims, the corpses. And there are those who will seek a third way.

We are entering a new era with a new political administration. Our country has elected to the highest office a person who has assaulted women and bragged about it, who has stated that he could fire a gun in midtown Manhattan and still be elected president, who has encouraged restriction of a free press, who has suggested banning Muslims from entry to this country, who has proposed we build a wall along the Mexico border. These are not words of justice; rather, they encourage supremacy of one group and oppression of many others. And he is nominating a cabinet full of people who think similarly.

We have choices to make. Will we become oppressors, going along with those who would get rid of millions of undocumented immigrants or target Muslims or rape women, and on and on? Will we let our investigative journalists be hounded out of their field so that we no longer hear news based on facts? Will we let our public lands be thrown open to deregulated fossil fuel extraction on a scale we have never yet witnessed? Will we lie down like corpses, silent and still, refusing to say a word of protest in defense of the people and the planet? Silence is complicity.

Or will we refuse to be both oppressor and oppressed, finding ways to claim our rights, to stand with and protect those who are threatened with oppression, to insist on free and loving spirits even in shackled times? Will we dare to love across boundaries, bringing water to those in the desert even when that becomes illegal, feeding the hungry without asking for proof of citizenship, caring for endangered lands and species? Will we find a third way that is neither oppressor nor oppressed?

The Chinese have a saying: “May you live in interesting times.” It is supposed to be a curse. The coming four years could be very interesting indeed. How we choose to live into these interesting times is up to us.

Will we become oppressors? Oppressed? Or will we choose a third way, a way that involves working for the realm of God?

Of course, when we talk about empire and corpses, we remember that Jesus himself took the role of corpse. And that his story did not end there. They could kill his body. But that's all they could do. And his body had a surprising trick of not staying put. We hear again the words in Luke: "Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it." Jesus lost his life—and gained it. Not by lying down and letting empire roll over him, but by preaching the realm of God: love of God instead of other false idols, love of every person, love of the planet and all of creation, sharing, justice, compassion, peace.

Since the election, people in this congregation and others I know have felt called to spring into action in new ways to work for justice. Let's feed that energy.

We choose where we live. May we choose to live in the realm of God, come what may. Amen.