

Tear Down Those Walls!

By Pastor Steve Ramer

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I love Old Testament stories. There is a sense of the absurd in them that causes me to think, "This story could never have happened." And at the same time they have a life to them that allows me to live them over and over and make them a part of my story – you know, the little person conquering the giant, the weak having power over the strong, the victim overcoming the conqueror. They may not have happened, they may be absurd, but there is a transcendent truth to them that appeals to me more than the facts.

The fall of Jericho is one of my favorites. So let's go back and look at it more clearly. The Children of Israel had just crossed over the Jordan River into the Promised Land for the very first time. They had been on the verge of entering once before, and Joshua had been there the first time. This first time things didn't go so well. Twelve spies, including Joshua and Caleb, had been sent across the Jordan to see what was there. They scouted out the place for forty days, and came back to tell the people something like this: "This land is beautiful. It flows with milk and honey. It has everything in it we could ever want. We would never go hungry there. But we shouldn't try to enter this land. The people in there are huge and strong. They have well-trained armies and fortified cities, and there's no way our little group of wandering people can stand our ground against them. It's impossible."

And the people said, "Oh, if only Moses hadn't led us out of Egypt and caused us to wander in the wilderness for so long, only to find out that the land God promised is inhabited

by giants. Fighting them is impossible! We don't have the numbers, the weapons or the physical size. Let's go back to Egypt, or if we can't do that, we'll just make our homes on this side of the Jordan."

Joshua and Caleb tried to reason with them, telling them that their God would help them to overcome the obstacles, but the people of Israel were ready to stone them. They would not listen. God was angry that these people hadn't learned by now that they could trust Him to help them through anything. So he commanded that they spend forty more years in the wilderness, that everyone who had made the journey out of Egypt and had come to the Jordan would die (including Moses and Aaron, who had cowered before the people). They would only see the promise from afar. Only Joshua and Caleb had been faithful and would lead their descendants back to enter the Promised Land.

Forty years later, the people were ready, and crossed over the Jordan with resolve. Apparently the "giants" had already heard about the people of Israel, who had fought battles and overpowered mighty kings, and their hearts were "already melting." So the people of Jericho had gone into their fortified town and sealed the doors shut, with nobody going in or out of the city. The Israelites were ready to conquer all of the people in the land. But God had a different plan. Through a messenger, he told Joshua the children of Israel, all of them (except for the guards), should put down their weapons. All they had to do, God said, was to walk around the city once a day for six days. They were to be silent as they walked, except for some priests blowing ram horns. Then on the seventh day, they were to walk around the city walls silently seven times. When Joshua blew the trumpet, then they were to give a great shout and Jericho would be theirs.

Joshua passed this on to the priests, and then to the people. They must have thought he was crazy – just walk around the city thirteen times, then shout, and the city will become ours – no armor, no weapons, no noise. But at that point they would do anything Joshua said. They were sick of wandering in the wilderness and wanted stability in their lives. So the chief priests picked up the Ark of the Covenant and carried it around the city, with all the people following. And on the seventh day after the seventh time around the city, the people gave a great *shout!* And the walls fell, giving the people entrance into the Promised Land.

So, what are we to think of the story? Some may say, “Yes, it was a nonviolent beginning, but look what afterward. It was the nonviolent beginning to many very violent acts.” Others may be distracted by God’s taking sides. After all, the Jerichoans were already frightened of the Israelites. The leaders could have come together and made a peace treaty. The Israelites could have lived peacefully with all the giants in the country, because their sheer numbers would keep the peace, right? Instead they went into Jericho and slaughtered all the men, women, and children in the city, except for Rahab and her family, who had helped the spies escape the Jericho soldiers. But God’s messenger had assured Joshua that he was on nobody’s side. What, then, are we to make of this short, one-time event in the life of a wandering group of people?

I think all of these are reflections from the surface of the story. What if we look at the deeper meaning of the story, of battle as metaphor for the many battles, personal and societal, that we face in our lives, walls as the walls domination culture puts up to keep out the poor, the enemy, and the fighter against injustice? What if the walls of Jericho were the walls that we so often bang our head against? Or the walls we put up to protect ourselves from our own fears

and pains? What if wilderness was how we feel when we can only wish to go home, when we have banged our head so many times that we can't stand the idea of facing another "giant"? Perhaps the wilderness is what we must walk through if we can't face those big battles. Maybe we can't find a way to knock down the walls, and we know that we may not see the promised end to the battle in our lifetime and must live with the hope that the next generation will find a way to knock down those walls. What if putting down our weapons and armor is what we must do in preparation for the real battle – the one against the violence used most often to resolve the biggest difficulties our world faces, or the violence we use against our spiritual nature when we forget to love ourselves or love others? What if the walk around the wall, following the Ark of the Covenant in silence is a metaphor for the silent walk with God, or the relationship with the sacred that we must have to prepare us for the shout? What if the shout represents the power that we must summon from within to break down those walls, to free ourselves from fear and shame, to break into a new day when we can live God's dream of compassionate community, where we can drink the living water and live out the "kingdom of God" on earth? What if the Promised Land was the hope we have, that someday we will find that land flowing with milk and honey, where we will never need to thirst and hunger for justice, freedom from struggle, a relationship with the sacred within ourselves and in the world around us, and a place and time when there is no little person or big person but all are equal? What if it was the hope we have that someday there will be no homelessness or mental illness or racism or classism or ageism or anything else that separates the haves from the have-nots?

As I have thought about all of these metaphors, the one that has struck me most this week has been the SHOUT. God cannot knock down our walls for us, and we cannot sit around

and wait for the walls to fall. Our participation is required, when we are tired of the wilderness and everything in us says enough is enough, and out comes a big shout that shatters the walls.

John Philip Newell, in his book *Echo of the Soul: the Sacredness of the Human Body*, says that Celtic Spirituality sees the body as a vessel which reflects the image of the God within us. In talking about the strength of God, he offers up the image of the left hand of power and the right hand of love. I would like to read an excerpt from the chapter called, *The Strength of the Self*.

Jesus speaks of faith restoring us to the power that God has placed within us. ‘If you have faith the size of a mustard seed,’ says Jesus, ‘you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move.’ The mountain as well as the mustard seed is a metaphor, of course, but Jesus is pointing to the way in which faith releases in our being strengths that might have seemed entirely foreign to us, strengths for healing and justice, energies for liberation and love. Where do we find the power to shift the apparently immovable powers of wrong and apathy in our world? Where do we find the strength to let go to love again after we have been betrayed or hurt? ‘The kingdom of God is within you,’ says Jesus. This is not to say that the power that can be released in our lives through faith is *our* power. It is to say, however, that only *we* can release it in ourselves. As Jesus says repeatedly in the Gospel stories of healing and liberation, ‘your faith has made you well’, ‘your faith has saved you.’ It is faith that releases the power that God has placed deep within the mystery of our beings, a power that is close to us but from which we have become distant.

A true strength of power does not stand alone. It is wedded to the strength of love, which is also waiting to be rediscovered in our depths. The Jewish mystics like to speak of power and love being yoked together like oxen ploughing the land. Only when our strength of power is yoked with our strength of love with the fields of our lives truly be cultivated.

Even when the power of God’s anger at wrong is heard in the Scriptures, stronger still are the words of love, ‘I have loved you with an everlasting love,’ and ‘you will not be forgotten by me.’ Greater than the relentless denouncing of sin in the Bible is the assurance that God ‘does not deal with us according to our sins.’ Love’s strength

is a boundless flow of mercy. Return therefore to God, says Isaiah, ‘for he will abundantly pardon.’

Deep in our souls are the promptings of love’s strength. When we use the power of force creatively or defensively in our lives and world we are being called at the same time to release from our depths the even greater strength of love. In opposing injustice with all our might we are being call from the very centre of our beings to do so with love. Otherwise, even the goodness of our attempts to fight injustice and inhumanity in the world will become infected by perversions of power.

We have that power and that love within us. The two combined is a force to be reckoned with, so strong it can produce a shout that can be heard around the world. So strong it can shatter our concepts right and wrong, of us and them, of freedom and captivity, of the power of nations and the voices of individuals, of military might and nonviolent action. We have the ability to SHOUT! So, Mennonites, all children of the Living God, and all who are outside the sealed walls of separation and injustice, SHOUT! All those who long to break down the walls of fear and shame that surround their hearts and to love others freely and live with authenticity and integrity, SHOUT! All those who are sick and tired of walking in the wilderness, SHOUT! Let us listen in silence and walk in holiness, let us wait until the timing is right, and when we have done it all and our time has come let us surround those walls and let out a great SHOUT! Our voices will be heard in the land! And those walls will come tumblin’ down.