

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, April 19, 2020

“The Spiritual Weakness of Ramses II’s Cognitive Dissonance”

First of six in a sermon series entitled “Kings of the Bible”
Second Sunday of Easter

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Christian Scripture: Exodus 15:1-18

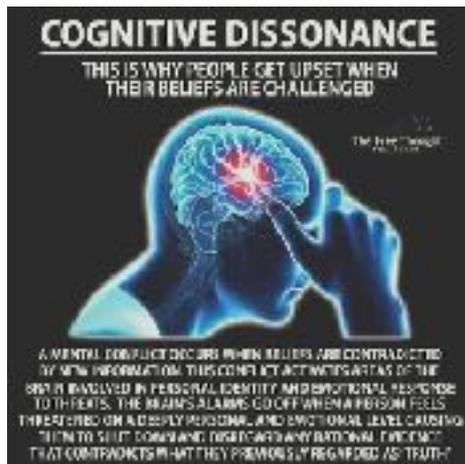


Good morning! Welcome to the first of six sermons that focus on the historical biographies of biblical ‘kings’. In this series, we will move from one end of the Bible to the other mining spiritual lessons learned from scriptural rulers. My aim is to apply these lessons to our own lives and to those who we chose to be our leaders. This week, we begin with Ramses II and the dynamic of ‘cognitive dissonance’.

Have you ever heard of the term ‘sour grapes’? It comes from a story told in Aesop’s Fables. The story is about a fox, driven by hunger. The fox tried to reach some grapes hanging high on the vine but was unable to, although he leaped with all his strength. As he went away,

the fox remarked 'Oh, you aren't even ripe yet! I don't want any “sour grapes”’.

The story of the fox is one about that which psychologists identify today as ‘cognitive dissonance’. What is cognitive dissonance?



In the field of psychology, cognitive dissonance occurs when a person holds contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values, or participates in an action that goes against one of them, and therefore experiences psychological stress.¹ The fox desired the grapes. The fox could not obtain the grapes. That contradiction caused anxiety. To relieve the anxiety, the fox explained away the contradiction and falsely rationalized that he did not want the grapes because they were sour.

Another example of cognitive dissonance that is perhaps closer to home is when a person knows (cognition) that starting to smoke (a behavior) cigarettes leads to addiction and causes cancer and he or she

¹ Adapted from, *Wikipedia*, “Cognitive Dissonance”, found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance, accessed April 20, 2020.

smokes the cigarette anyway. He or she is in a state of cognitive dissonance. In other words, there are two values present: one, ‘cigarettes will make me feel good or look cool’ and, two, ‘cigarettes can kill me’. The behavior of smoking the cigarette affirms the first value ‘cigarettes are good’ and violates the second value ‘cigarettes kill me’. The person knows that they are choosing one of the two contradictory values and that person’s dissonance is the angst. The apostle Paul spoke of exactly the same things when he lamented: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do [...]. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep-on doing (Romans 7:15-20). This is cognitive dissonance explained in the Christian scriptures.

Hear this: We *all* practice cognitive dissonance.

What is an example of cognitive dissonance in the Hebrew scriptures? A perfect example comes from the pharaoh, Ramses II. Ramses II was most likely the successor to King Seti I, the ruler of Egypt, who concerned that the Hebrews (the descendants of Joseph) were too numerous, ordered every newborn male infant to be drowned



in the river.² The mother of

phic, 2019, pp. 18-21.

the infant Moses placed him in a basket and floated him down river to escape. The daughter of the King Seti found Moses and adopted him. As a young man, Moses fled Egypt because he killed an overseer in the act of beating a Hebrew slave. In exile, Moses understood God to have instructed him to free the Hebrew slaves.

Moses then opposed King Seti's son, Ramses II, likely his brother-agemate in an epic confrontation of quite literal, biblical proportions.

You may remember, Moses and Ramses II repeat an argument and observe the consequences. Moses pleaded with Ramses, "Let My People Go". Ramses said, "No." A plague then struck the land. Ramses then relented. Then Ramses changed his mind only to oppress the Hebrews again. The two repeated the cycle ten times with ten plagues: "Let My People Go"; "No"; Plague; "O.K. I tap-out"; "No, I change my mind. Back to start".

I pray you all are familiar with the Exodus story. Before the Passover, when all of the first born males of Egypt were killed in the

last plague, there is a curious phrase about which since childhood I always wondered. “Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh, but the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let the Israelites go out of his country” (Exodus 11:10). What does it mean that ‘the Lord *hardened*’ Ramses’ heart? As I taught in the last sermon series, we will often run aground if we interpret the Bible literally. Did Ramses suffer from hypertrophic cardiomyopathy? No! Did God *cause* Ramses to be such an ass-hat? No! That God ‘hardened’ Ramses’ heart was just a two-thousand-year old Ancient Near East synonym for ‘cognitive dissonance’. It was a way of explaining, with an exasperated tone, how unfathomable it is when someone so irrationally behaves against one’s own interest.

One of my favorite people in Brattleboro is Dr. Meg Mott, a political science professor with a speciality in constitutional debate. In so many lectures, Mott identifies cognitive dissonance to explain why people take the contradictory stances they do in issues of ethics, politics, and faith. Have we not seen cognitive dissonance this very week in regard to the issues of states’ rights? Some argue states have the right. Some argue that the federal government has the right. And some, incredibly, argue both, contradicting themselves, thus demonstrating cognitive dissonance and thus explaining, in part, irrational behaviors and decisions.

As I said earlier, we all practice cognitive dissonance. What is key is not necessarily that we do, but that we be able to identify when we do and then to avoid doing it. In other words, to be self-aware, and self-correcting, is the key! Ramses was not self-aware. He could not correct his own behavior. He was incapable of self-regulation.



The dénouement of Ramses' story is narrated beautifully by the tragic song we read in Exodus 15. Did God cause Ramses II and “the flower of his officers” to die? No, God does not wish the death of any of his children. That which caused the death of so many thousands was arrogance, cognitive dissonance, and the tools to exercise power unwisely at the expense of many. May this not be your fate or mine. Let us be aware of the spiritual folly of cognitive dissonance and instead exercise the grace of God.

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.