

In the sci-fi film *The Matrix* there is a scene when Neo opens his eyes for the first time in the “real world.” He has just been brought aboard the ship the Nebuchadnezzar and experienced the trauma of being “unplugged.” His body and mind have just been freed from a computer-generated dream world. A world built to keep human beings under control so that their bodies can be used as an energy source for an empire of machines. Disoriented and confused, Neo asks, “Why do my eyes hurt?” Morpheus replies, “You’ve never used them before.”

It is when Jeremiah sees his cousin Hanamel with his own eyes, perhaps as if for the first time, that Jeremiah knows “this was the word of the LORD.” When Hanamel visits Jeremiah in prison the situation is immediate and desperate. Jerusalem is a city under siege, and Judah is a conquered nation on the verge of total annihilation. Hanamel appeals to Torah saying, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.”¹ Hanamel invokes a law of Jubilee, saying, “Cousin, you are my next of kin. You are my emergency contact person. Buy my field, because I am about to lose it. Buy my field so that we can maintain our family’s claim to this land in Anathoth. Redeem this land, and in doing so, redeem me.”

Hanamel, like Judah itself, is on the verge of a great loss. We don’t know why Hanamel is in such dire straits. We don’t know why he is about to lose a field in his ancestral land. In the midst of a war, there could be any number of reasons for Hanamel’s situation. But what we do know is that this land is important enough to Hanamel that he willing risk seeking out a political prisoner in a city under siege to redeem it. This field, this claim to ancestral land, is important enough to Hanamel to risk redemption.

About a month ago I saw a field. For the first time I saw the Potter’s Field on Hart Island. Just north of the Bronx, the Potter’s Field in New York City, just like the one in the gospel of Matthew, is a place to bury “foreigners.” In a similar social strata to the “foreigners” of ancient Israelite society, the people buried in this potter’s field are on the edges. They are cast

¹ Jeremiah 32:8, NRSV

out both in life and in death. The homeless, the undocumented, stillborn infants, the unidentified, and people whose families can't afford funerals are buried there. I went to Hart's Island for a memorial service led by Picture the Homeless, a grassroots organization founded and led by homeless people here in New York City. Our purpose was to bear witness to the dead. Today's "foreigners," like those in Matthew's day, that are buried in mass graves.

Stinging with tears, as if using them for the very first time, I too saw with wide open eyes that day. In seeing that field I realized, that because of the commitments that I have made to the struggle to end poverty, because of my work with the Poverty Initiative, I too am in relationship with people who are buried on Hart's Island. I am connected with people like the founder of Picture the Homeless, Lewis Haggins, who was buried there. I can no longer look away from this reality, the reality that my cousins, my brothers and sisters in struggle, are buried in places like Hart's Island. This field, this claim to an ancestral land of struggle is crying out for redemption.

Like Hanamel's relationship to his cousin Jeremiah, bound up in a field, are our relationships important enough to risk redemption? Are we too willing to see those relationships that define us and our struggles for what they truly are? Are we too willing to be "unplugged" from the computer-generated dream world of our individuals selves? It is my hope that we, like Hanamel and Jeremiah, are willing to see the interdependence in our relationships, relationships that define and make possible our very existence as human beings. It is my hope that in a willingness to see our relationships, familial and societal, that we too can risk redemption.