

8.31.25 Sermon Transcript – Archbishop Desmond Tutu

The Apostle Paul tells us in the passage we heard this morning: “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away, See, everything has become new. We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.” When Paul wrote these words, he was writing to a church in Corinth that was filled with division, that was fractured by conflict, temptation, and he dares to proclaim to them that reconciliation is, in fact, possible. Not only is it possible, but this is what God desires for them. This is God's mission for them: to be reconciled to God and to be reconciled to one another. The Church is entrusted with this mission. And so today we hear these words alongside the life of Archbishop Desmond Tutu as we wrap up our series on Holy Disruptors, as we've been looking for the past couple of months at Christians who have gone before us, who have taught us what it is to live and act in times of great difficulty.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu spent his life proclaiming reconciliation in the midst of one of the most brutal systems of oppression that the modern world has known, which was the system of apartheid. And this is important: Tutu didn't just proclaim reconciliation with gritted teeth, but he did so with great joy, with laughter, with dancing and singing. He reminded the world that to follow Christ is not only to resist injustice, but also to do so with a heart that refuses to let hatred, or fear ,or despair have the final word.

The context in which Desmond Tutu lived in apartheid South Africa, was not just a world of social prejudice, but it was a full-scale system of governance and law in South Africa that lasted for nearly 50 years, from 1948 to 1994. The very word apartheid means “apartness,” keeping separate. It means division. It was designed to segregate people by race, and it enshrined white supremacy into every corner of life in South Africa. It affected land and housing, where black South Africans were pushed into “homelands” or “townships,” which were often far from economic centers and they were forbidden from living in white-designated areas. It affected identity and movement as people were traveling around. Passbooks, which were ID documents, were required in order to move or work in white areas, and failure to carry your passbook could mean arrest. It made its way into education and work. The Bantu education system deliberately underfunded schools for black children and trained them only for menial labor, while higher paying jobs were reserved for white folks. And of course, the apartheid system played out brutally and violently in the lives of many South Africans with police brutality, mass arrests, and killings. These were all common things against those who protested this system. Leaders like Steve Biko were murdered in custody. In other words, the whole system of apartheid was one of division that denied everything that Paul proclaimed: that in Christ every thing is a new creation where human worth is no longer defined from a human point of view. Apartheid defined people by human categories. Skin color, ethnicity, class.

This is the context into which Desmond Tutu was born. (Actually, he was born before apartheid became the official governance and law of South Africa, because he was born all the way back in 1931.) But he trained first as a teacher and he turned to the priesthood when the government imposed racist controls on education. He was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1960, which was

the same year that the Sharpeville massacre took place, where police killed 69 unarmed protesters. And so, Desmond Tutu rose to prominence not as a political figure in office, but as one who used his voice to proclaim the message of reconciliation – and he used the church's visibility to speak when others were silenced.

He preached that apartheid was not simply a political issue, but that it was, in fact, a heresy – that it was sin against God who created all people in God's image. He had this prophetic voice and he openly criticized the government and this system at a time when doing so risked imprisonment or even assassination. He described apartheid as evil, and unchristian, or even anti-Christian. He drew parallels between what was happening in South Africa and what had happened not that long before in Nazi Germany.

He was an advocate. He took action. He called for nonviolent resistance, but he also did things like supporting economic sanctions against South Africa because he realized that there needed to be global involvement in order to end this system of oppression. He said, “Those who invest in apartheid have chosen to be on the side of oppression.” He also regularly preached at the funerals of activists slain by the police, often calming violent crowds when he was there with words and with prayer. And once when a funeral threatened to turn into a riot, Desmond Tutu grabbed the microphone and he led the people in singing and in dancing as an act of resistance, which quelled the potential threat of violence.

So back now to our text. Today, Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.” That was a scandalous claim in the church in Corinth, but it was also scandalous in apartheid South Africa. Apartheid declared some human beings as more valuable than others. But Desmond Tutu insisted, “God's dream is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness.” Even while police raided homes, while black South Africans were forced into those homelands or townships, and while activists were beaten or killed, Desmond Tutu stood in pulpits and sometimes also on picket lines to declare, There is a new creation! The old order cannot stand. The God of Exodus, the God of resurrection, has already overturned it.” So we need to embody that new creation.

That's what he calls the church to. Paul says, “We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.” An ambassador is someone who does not speak for themselves. They speak for the one whom they serve. Archbishop Desmond Tutu saw himself as an ambassador of reconciliation, of this message of reconciliation that God has entrusted to us. Here, he takes an idea that's a little bit of copying off of Bonhoeffer. The idea not of cheap reconciliation, not reconciliation that ignores injustice, but reconciliation that is rooted deeply in truth and in repentance. That's why, after apartheid fell, Desmond Tutu chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa, where victims of violence were able to tell their stories, where perpetrators could confess their crimes. And it was messy. It was painful. It was not perfect either. But it was rooted in this gospel conviction that reconciliation is not avoidance. It's not creating false peace or unity. It's not denial. Instead, it is truth telling with the hope of healing.

And through all of that, he insisted on joy. He would laugh. He would dance in the aisles. He once said, "I don't trust a theology that doesn't laugh." Why? Because joy is not frivolous. It is, in fact, defiance. Joy is, in fact, resistance. Joy says, you might strip us of our land and of our dignity and of our rights, but you cannot strip the image of God or the laughter of God's children.

So how do we find joy when faced with evil? Paul says "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." In other words, the cross tells us that suffering and death are not the final word, but resurrection is. I like to think of the resurrection as the cosmic joke that Christ plays on evil, on sin, and on death. Desmond Tutu lived resurrection, joy. He once stood before a gathering of police and soldiers who had surrounded a church. And I told you this story, I think a few months ago in worship. But the police and soldiers had surrounded the church, and they were there, ready to intimidate worshippers. And Desmond Tutu pointed his finger at them and said, "You are powerful, very powerful, but you are not gods. And I serve a God who cannot be mocked. So since you have already lost, I invite you to come and join the winning side!" And then he started dancing down the aisle, and he invited others to start dancing down the aisle with him. I mean, can you imagine? This is what joy as resistance looks like: not denial of suffering, but a bold declaration that the forces of death will not have the final word.

Back in 2007, (which I can't believe is almost two decades ago at this point,) I was doing a summer field education placement, which, when you're in seminary, that means you're an intern in a church for the summer. And I was up at Christ Church in Alexandria, Virginia, and they were a pretty, big, wealthy Episcopal church, and they had a program where they had clergy residents who came in. It was funded by the Lilly Endowment, I think. And prior to my time there, Desmond Tutu's daughter was one of the clergy residents, and so he formed a relationship with Christ Church. And one day I went into work and I had no idea, but Desmond Tutu was there, so I got to meet him briefly. And I was indeed just very taken by how joyful and jolly he was. He's probably the smiliest person I've ever met. And you could see the joy in his eyes. He was somebody who embodied joy even after everything that he himself had experienced in his struggle against apartheid.

So what can we learn from him today, here and now? Desmond Tutu called apartheid not just an unjust system, but he called it heresy. It was a theological framework that denied the image of God in black South Africans. And so we too have to recognize not just the injustice, but the heresy that still exists in our society today that claims that white supremacy is somehow the truth. He says, this is idolatry. It is heresy. And so, like Tutu, we need to have the courage to call it what it is.

Two, he teaches us that true reconciliation requires truth-telling. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission insisted that healing could not come without confession of harm and acknowledgement of suffering. He reminds us that we too have to confront our own long history of enslavement, of Jim Crow, of lynchings, of mass incarceration, of voter suppression. We cannot rush to unity without telling the truth, without paving a way forward for both those who have been hurt and those who have done the hurting to acknowledge, to recognize, and to move forward. As the church, we are called to be communities that create space where those who have been

harmed by racism, by other forms of oppression and marginalization can share their stories and can be heard.

Third, he teaches us joy as resistance. Joy disrupts. Joy ultimately reminds us that our hope is found in Christ, and Christ is the resurrected one, the one who can make all things new. Tutu's laughter and dancing were ways of proclaiming that oppression would not define God's people. We too are called to embody joy and hospitality and celebration. I mean, there are many days where I do not feel like singing or dancing, and instead I just feel more like Eeyore, just glum and down and tired. But Desmond Tutu teaches us that joy is what the church needs to embrace because a joyful church undermines the anxious and angry vision of the powers around us.

He also teaches us that we are ambassadors for Christ, not for anyone or anything else. Tutu refused to be a chaplain to the state, to the status quo. He insisted that the church has to be the conscience of the nation, much like we heard from Martin Luther King Jr. A couple weeks ago. Sometimes that means speaking the truth that is unpopular, refusing political co-option and standing with the marginalized, even when it costs us.

He also teaches us about forgiveness and that forgiveness does not mean the same thing as forgetting. Tutu said over and over again, "Without forgiveness, there is no future." But he never confused forgiveness with erasure, of sweeping things under the rug, of pretending like they never happened. Truth comes first, and then comes the possibility of reconciliation. And so we are called as the church to preach forgiveness, but not in such a way that denies the wounds of racism or other harm that has been perpetuated, especially in the name of the church. Real reconciliation requires repentance, and repair, and transformation.

And finally, he teaches us to choose hope over despair, much like he teaches us of joy. Under apartheid, despair seemed logical. It was terrible. It was a mess. It felt like it would never be different. But Desmond Tutu declared, "Goodness is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness, and life is stronger than death." We, as the church in these days, are called to practice a stubborn hope, a hope that recognizes that the way things are right now is not how things will be forever. It's not naive optimism, saying, "Oh, everything's gonna be okay. It's all gonna work out, out in the end." But rather, it's a stubbornness and a persistent hope to refuse to concede the last word to death. When we know that the resurrection is the ultimate reality, Paul tells us in his writing, today, "We entreat you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

Archbishop Desmond Tutu embodied this call. He resisted apartheid with the fierce truth, but also with irrepressible joy, a joy that could not be squashed. He showed the world that reconciliation is not some kind of abstract or dry doctrine, but it's a lived reality, and he invited the world into God's dream, a dream where laughter breaks the power of fear, where enemies in fact become siblings, and where the joy of resurrection gives us courage to resist despair. And so my prayer is today that we may be ambassadors of Christ, that we may resist the powers of death, that we may tell the truth with courage. And in all of that, may we never forget to laugh, and to dance, and to sing and to live as witnesses here and now to the joy of God's new creation. Amen.