



## **Sermons from Northwood United Church**

**“UBUNTU: Reflections on a trip to South Africa”**

**1John 4:7-21, Romans 8:14-17**

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The prayer I have just spoken is based on Psalm 19: vs 14. Two weeks ago when I attended Northwood, I had a chance to speak very briefly with Will about my adventures in South Africa.

I told him the story of my meeting someone for lunch at the invitation of my sister - someone my sister had known from the days when she lived in Zambia for 14 years during the apartheid days. I was struck with admiration towards this good humoured, sparkling-eyed, deeply committed Christian who sat across from me at the lunch table laughing out loud at a story and carving his meat holding his knife and fork with the metal claws that have replaced his hands. You see there were those in South Africa during apartheid who did not take kindly toward opponents of apartheid. One of them sent a parcel bomb to Michael – and when he opened it, both hands were destroyed. As I spoke, Will's eyes lit up, “I know that man, - Michael Lapsley,” he said. “Louise, do you remember the prayer I say every Sunday before I preach. It is based on a passage in Psalm 19 - “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Strength and our Redeemer. Because of Michael I have added another phrase as he has done– which is in keeping with the spirit of the New Testament.” Will says: “May the words of my mouth , and the meditations of our hearts and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.” I want to talk about some of the actions I saw in South Africa.

Let's go back in history a bit.

Long before European settlement spread into the area around the southern tip of Africa, a nation of black Africans called the Xhosa lived there.

The settlers who arrived from Europe for the most part considered them to be savages even though they had a highly developed social structure based on traditions, values which had evolved over thousands of years. It was - and is – called UBUNTU!

It's time for a definition! Ubuntu is a South African philosophy or belief that holds as its central tenet that a person is a person through other persons, that we are meant to live in caring community, that my wellbeing is tied to your wellbeing, that both individuals and whole communities thrive best when we care for each other – or as John says it “we must love one another.” Ubuntu, a traditional way of being with others has been practiced by many African Communities to promote respect for humanity, dignity of others, collective solidarity, commitment to integrity, social justice, equality and the sanctity of each human being. I can be fully happy when you are fully happy. I can be fully a person when you are fully a person.

It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and is inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. You are human because you

belong. It speaks about wholeness, it speaks about compassion. A person with “Ubuntu” is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole. They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they are. The quality of Ubuntu gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them. It has to do with what it means to be truly human, to know that you are bound up with others in the bundle of life.

Two of the best models of this way of living are Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu. The miracle is that they were able to maintain this way of being even through the apartheid years and to inspire and provide models for the people of South Africa. Gandhi would be another example. He was once asked what he thought of Western civilization. His reply? “ I think it would be a good idea!”

Another example are the Gogos of South Africa, that is the grandmothers who have stepped up to care for their grandchildren as well as the grandchildren from other families whose lives have been affected by the scourge of AIDS. In this they are supported by grandmothers in other countries - like Canada – who raise money to support the Gogos of Africa and who wage an education campaign to persuade the Canadian Government to allow the necessary drugs to fight HIV Aids to enter Africa as generic drugs at a much lower cost.

The opposite of caring for the wider community was demonstrated by the powerful white Afrikaner government who chose to control the black Africans in South Africa by passing a set of very restrictive laws. Black South Africans were restricted in their movement, in the jobs available to them, in the education available, in the language of instruction, in the requirement that they must always carry a pass with them and produce it to authorities on demand, in limitations as to whom they could marry, or even date, and in where they could live.

To our shame when white government officials were developing this program of apartness or apartheid, they looked to Canada to examine what we were doing with our native people with particular regard for the Indian Reservations and Residential Schools.

The roots of apartheid or separateness went back to the mid 1600's when Jan Van Riebeck planted a bitter almond hedge around his settlement in a half moon shape punctuated by watch towers. Van Riebeck declared that anyone who broke so much as a twig of his hedge would be sentenced to 3 years imprisonment in chains. Part of the hedge still stands today in Kirstenbosch Gardens, a twisted impenetrable entanglement of branches. Even though it no longer physically remains, the symbolism remains in the hearts and minds of many white South Africans – the desire to keep white South Africa separate.

During the apartheid years tests were applied to determine your category. For example the pencil test in which a government official would stick a pencil into your hair – if you could shake it out, your pass was stamped WHITE and you became one of the privileged! At the apartheid museum we were shocked when we looked at our tickets. My ticket said, “Whites only!” My sister's said “Blacks only”! And then we noticed there were two doors one for blacks and one for whites! We realized that this was deliberately designed as a jolting reminder of the way things were for so many years.

Fast forward to the present day. I want to tell you briefly of some of the places where we saw UBUNTU at work.

The Desmond Tutu HIV Foundation Youth Center. We arrived just at 2 pm and were swarmed by a group of laughing, jumping, energetic young teens who spent their after school time learning to use computers, playing soccer, doing their homework, getting counseling , watching TV and getting health education and testing and care. UBUNTU!

We visited a recreational center in the Cape Flat Townships: Guguletu, Langa, Nyanga and Crossroads. The leader, straight faced, asked us as we climbed out of our two vans, “What's your game?” I was a little taken aback because it sounded as if we were being asked, “Why are you here!?!” We weren't quite sure how to answer that, then he grinned and said, “What's your game – soccer or basketball?” Most of us were fifty plus, but someone said “Soccer” ! And the game was on between these mature somewhat sedentary seniors and a horde of young teens! As soon as we lost that game, the call went up for basketball and we were hooked for that too. I believe we won - or were allowed to win!- on a shootout! UBUNTU!

One another day we visited the Solm-Delta Wine Estate where the two white owners had made a decision to invite in a third partner – the workers. One of those black workers gave us an informative and proud description of the history of the winery. UBUNTU!

We visited the Regina Mundi (Queen of the World) Roman Catholic Church in Soweto on a Thursday - on a day were twenty or more infants and young children had been brought for baptism. As the baptismal rite continued we were quietly lead to the altar. The altar cloth was lifted to show how it had been broken in an attack by the military police during the apartheid years – a punishment to the congregation and clergy for harbouring fugitives from one of the most repressive systems this world has seen. Our guide then pointed up to the high ceiling pockmarked with bullet damage because this church had tried to be a place of refuge during apartheid. UBUNTU!

We climbed up a high wooden platform to see Khayelista, a township of shanties with a population of 1.2 million stretching as far as we could see in all directions. Many of these people had been living closer to Johannesburg but their homes had been destroyed and they had been ordered to move here. We met some of the both white and black leaders who had taken up the challenge to work with them. UBUNTU!

The Diakonia Council of Churches operates many charities including working with women who have been raped, supporting people who have been charged with offences – whether justified or not. We visited some of the programs supported by the Stephen Lewis Foundation – such as a pre-employment center for older teens called “fit for life, fit for work”. And church sponsored maternity hospitals for mothers and infants infected with HIV-AIDS and a Hospice for those dying with Aids. UBUNTU!

And we saw some remnants of the worst of the apartheid period: caspirs(heavy vehicles similar to earthmoving equipment in an open pit mine but reconfigured to hold 60-60 armed military personnel and used now to terrorize the black Africans and to clear an area, prison cells, pictures of 13 year old Hector Peterson whose photographic image of his death by gunfire

during an uprising to protest the introduction of Afrikaans as the language of all instruction galvanized a nation.

And we visited the new Constitution Court in a building constructed with prison bricks which once hid the world from the abuses of human rights “building our future with the bricks that once imprisoned us” UBUNTU!

We visited Nelson Mandela's modest four room home, just across the street from Desmond Tutu's home.

We were welcomed into South African homestays with hosts who were willing to answer even our most intrusive questions. And attended church services where two or three were gathered and where over a thousand gathered.

One last story

On our last Sunday we attended a traditional 2 1/2 hour African service at the Central Methodist Mission in Johannesburg. We saw groups of women in special uniforms such as black skirt, red jacket and white bonnet and collar or black skirt, white jacket, and bonnet with red scarf and the men dressed in suits with shoes buffed to a mirror finish. And the singing – oh my- the singing!

At one point one of the ministers invited those who wished to pray to come forward. About 200 did. As they gathered they began to pray each in their own language (there are many official languages) began by whispering – louder, louder, louder – like the roar of a mighty wind – We were reminded of the story of the coming of the Spirit to a ragtag group of Jesus’ followers huddled in an upper room distraught at the loss of their leader. The disciples regained their courage and were inspired to go out and make a difference.

Is there hope in South Africa – we saw many signs of the Spirit of God at work. And the trip will continue to be a challenging, powerful inspiration to all of us who experienced a trip of a lifetime! And may God bless us with enough foolishness in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done. Amen