

Growing in Grace
What Good is God?, Part VI
 Matthew: 23:1-12
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When you think of South Africa, what names come up for you?

Nelson Mandela writes in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*:

From an early age, I spent most of my free time in the veld playing and fighting with the other boys of the village. A boy who remained at home tied to his mother's apron strings was regarded as a sissy. At night, I shared my food and blanket with these same boys. I was no more than five when I became a herd-boy, looking after sheep and calves in the fields. I discovered the almost mystical attachment that the Xhosa have for cattle, not only as a source of food and wealth, but as a blessing from God and a source of happiness....From these days I date my love of the veld, of open spaces, the simple beauties of nature, the clean line of the horizon. ...I recall one story my mother told us about a traveler who was approached by an old woman with terrible cataracts on her eyes. The woman asked the traveler for help, and the man averted his eyes. Then another man came along and was approached by the old woman. She asked him to clean her eyes, and even though he found the task unpleasant, he did as she asked. Then, miraculously, the scales fell from the old woman's eyes and she became young and beautiful. The man married her and became wealthy and prosperous. It is a simple tale, but its message is an enduring one: virtue and generosity will be rewarded in ways that one cannot know (9-11).

Nelson Mandela served time in prison for twenty-seven years, without a view of his beloved veld (open grassland), without his family, without the freedom to help his people get out from under apartheid rule in South Africa.

Mandela's mother became a Christian, and her son was baptized in the Methodist Church. Through the church, Nelson was sent to school at the age of seven, the first in his family ever to go to school. There he received a British education. British ideas, culture, and institutions were assumed to be superior. As far as the school was concerned, "there was no such thing as African culture" (14). A teacher, who said he had to have a British name, gave him the name, Nelson. To this day, he has no idea why his name is Nelson.

In South Africa, even in the church, a terrible sin evolved and became the norm. It was the sin of disregarding human beings and treating them as if they did not exist. Racism and the apartheid system kept races apart and denied human rights to Black Africans. It was as if they didn't matter, truly as if they weren't human.

Thank God, we have seen a transformation in South Africa. Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990 and elected President of the country in 1994. Bishop Desmond Tutu, of the Anglican Church, tells about that Election Day:

Elections are usually just secular political events in most parts of the world. Our election turned out to be a spiritual, even a religious, experience. We won't so quickly forget the images of those long queues snaking their way slowly into the polling booths. Someone would say, "I waited for two hours before I could vote!" And someone else would say, "Oh, that's nothing—I waited four hours!" ...After Bishop Tutu cast his vote, having waited all of sixty-two years to do so for the first time, he toured some of the voting stations. The people had come in droves and they looked so utterly vulnerable. It would have taken just two or three people with AK-47s to sow the most awful mayhem, he said. [But] it did not happen. What took place can only be described as a miracle. People stood in those long lines, people of all races in South Africa that had known separation and apartheid for so long—black and white, colored and Indian, farmer, laborer, educated, unschooled, poor, rich—they stood in those lines and the scales fell from their eyes. South Africans made an earth-shattering discovery—'Hey, we are all fellow South Africans,' Tutu said....People shared newspapers, picnic lunches, stories—and they discovered that they were human together" (*God Has a Dream*, 6).

Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu, these are the heroes of South Africa of my lifetime. And together they launched a program, since apartheid, called *Ubuntu*, which simply means "humanity." The Xhosa people have a proverb: *Ubuntu ungamnutu ngabanye abantu*. Roughly translated, it means: "A person depends on other people to be a person." People with *ubuntu* are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring, and compassionate. They share what they have. It's not like the European thinking of the Enlightenment: "I think therefore I am." No, not at all. It's more like, "I am human because I belong." In Christian terms, we would say, I am human because I belong to God's human family (Daye, *Political Forgiveness: Lessons from South Africa*, 161).

After the fall of apartheid, President Mandela asked Bishop Tutu to chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and negotiate restorative, communal justice. Bishop Tutu allowed people to tell their stories of injustice, and called on the oppressors to confront the pain and sin they had caused. The goal was forgiveness, not revenge; forgiveness for the sake of *ubuntu*, forgiveness for the sake of "humanity" (Paul, *The Ubuntu God*, 114).

The author we've been following, Philip Yancey, traveled more than once to South Africa. He noticed the changes, from apartheid to a newfound freedom. He saw grace growing between the races in the form of forgiveness, but also he saw the enormous threat of the HIV-AIDS crisis. Midst all the problems of poverty and disease, he has watched churches become more involved in social change, as the country grows in grace.

Nelson Mandela and Bishop Tutu are certainly people of grace. And through their leadership, the country has grown in grace. The church, on the other hand, has not always been very grace-filled.

The Dutch colonized South Africa very early—in the late 1600s. Their church was the Calvinist Reformed Church. These white (mainly) Dutch settlers became known as the Afrikaners. They believed they had a divine right to the land in South Africa. They were the

elect, chosen by God. They took the biblical story of the Exodus out of Egypt from the Hebrew Bible and used it to justify their own Great Trek from Cape Colony to the interior republics where they settled, and fought the Boer Wars against the British in the 1800s. It was to a large extent the Dutch Reformed Church, and its traditions, that fought against the British effort to abolish slavery in South Africa. And it was to some extent the church that resisted the end of apartheid. In the history of South Africa, the church, and the society that embraced it, was actually an impediment to grace.

The church was an obstacle to grace in another way in South Africa, and throughout the continent of Africa. Besides colonialism, the missionary movement that brought Africa Christianity was also an obstacle to grace. Along with Christianity, came Western culture. Today critics of the missionary movement say that the big mistake that the missionaries made was that they brought the people of Africa to the institution of the Western church, instead of bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to the people of Africa. An American Catholic missionary priest, Father Vincent Donovan, lived for 17 years in Tanzania with the Masai people. He came to feel that the people did not need the Western "church," but they *did* need the universal gospel of hope. He advocated for church without buildings, for priests to be ordained among village leaders, even though they were married, and for the traditions of the Masai culture to be integrated into the practice of Christianity. His ideas were not all embraced by Rome, as you can imagine. (Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*).

Jesus said, "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Mt. 23:11-12). We can only grow in grace when we humble ourselves. We see this humility of Jesus, who became a servant and washed his disciples' feet.

Where was humility in the colonization of Africa, taking land and forcing European values on tribal peoples? (Where was humility in the colonization of *America*, taking land and forcing European values on tribal peoples?) Where was humility in the missionary movement that taught the Africans the ways of the Western church, generally without regard for local cultural ways?

Now we live in a postcolonial time. Countries have become independent of Europe. South Africa has experienced its "miracle," and lives no longer under the oppression of apartheid. And yet the message of humility, the message of *Ubuntu*, is still not the theme song. It's certainly not the theme song of this capitalist world we live in.

Today in the 21st century there is a land rush on Africa. Richer countries are leasing acreage and growing crops on the fertile land of the African continent; then they are importing the food to their wealthier countries where there is not enough open land to grow "needed" crops. Millions of acres of land in Sudan, Mozambique, Liberia, Ethiopia, and Nigeria are feeding people in China, Indonesia, Argentina, Brazil, Russia, and the United States. Small subsistence farmers' lives in Africa are being threatened. We may soon have the situation that Africa becomes the "breadbasket" of the wealthy world, while Africa is

left hungry ("Who Will Control the World's Next Breadbasket?" *Christian Science Monitor*, 2/7/11).
Where is the humility in this scenario?

We need another miracle. We need a Year of Jubilee. The writers of the Old Testament talked about proclaiming a holy year when all the inequalities of wealth and status and land ownership would be readjusted. Once in every fifty years, land that had been sold away was to be returned to its original owners. The Jubilee Year was a year of universal pardon, in which slaves and prisoners would be freed, debts would be forgiven, and the mercies of God would be particularly manifest. The Israelites were to blow the trumpets throughout the land! "The Year of Jubilee has come!"

Jubilee is the message of pardon and grace, a fresh beginning. We know that there will not be a true fresh beginning for South Africa or any country of the world. Our history makes us who we are. But in God's time, there is always hope for a new beginning in grace. Perhaps today as United Methodists we will work to bring about a more just sharing of the world's resources through our World Service giving, a more humble appreciation of human diversity on this planet, and a more gracious acceptance of the humanity of each child of God.

I'd like to close by sharing An African Creed, written from the viewpoint of Christians of the Masai tribe, and translated into English:

We believe in the one High God, who out of love created the beautiful world and everything good in it. He created man and wanted man to be happy in the world. God loves the world and every nation and tribe on the earth. We have known this High God in the darkness, and now we know him in the light. God promised in the book of his word, the bible, that he would save the world and all the nations and tribes.

We believe that God made good his promise by sending his son, Jesus Christ, as man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He lay buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, he rose from the grave. He ascended to the skies. He is the Lord.

We believe that all our sins are forgiven through him. All who have faith in him must be sorry for their sins, be baptized in the Holy Spirit of God, live the rules of love and share the bread together in love, to announce the good news to others until Jesus comes again. We are waiting for him. He is alive. This we believe. Amen (148).