

Sermon: No Hands But Ours

Scripture: Luke 4:14-21; "God Has a Dream" by Tutu

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Over the course of Christian history the saints are those people who have embodied through their lives the Spirit of Christ, the love and truth of Jesus, in ways that help the rest of us see it better, believe it better, live it ourselves better. If there's one common characteristic of the huge cloud of witnesses that are the saints across human history and what distinguishes them from superstars and heroes, the famous and the powerful it's that their lives do not point to themselves, but to Christ. The saints wherever they are, whenever they live, and however they conduct their lives, embody the words of the Apostle Paul – "it is not I who live but Christ who lives in me". They say not "make something great of me, worthy to be admired, liked and followed" but they say "make of me an instrument of Yours..." They are instruments of God in a world that at times plays a very different tune than God intended, so more often than not are battered and bruised and suffer to produce the music that God plays through their lives. Jesus, abandoned, betrayed, executed, being the model instrument himself. It is in weakness not in strength that Jesus and the saints reveal God's truth and love to the world, in their own weakness and in the way they direct their lives not towards the strong and powerful, the mighty and popular, but towards the weak and powerless, the dismissed and disfavored.

It's right there at the beginning, when Jesus first steps onto the stage of his public ministry, in the Gospel of Luke, after his birth, dedication in the temple, baptism, temptations in the wilderness and then he stands up in his local church,

his synagogue, and pulls out the Isaiah passage that Maggie just read for us to describe what he is going to be about and, since we know the end of the story, we know this is what is going to get him killed: “I have come to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

This, from Jesus’ own mouth is his purpose and plan and point. You’d think with how some people interpret the Christian message that he had said “I have come to save souls from eternal damnation if they accept me as their Lord and savior,” but that’s not there at all in Jesus’ own account of his purpose. He is very much focused on transforming the hellish natures of this world into the heaven that God intended this world to be. And since this is what Jesus was about, this is what the saints are about as well. All the household names – Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the far many more who maybe didn’t make quite as global an impact but lived similarly to transform hellish social situations here into more just and compassionate scenarios.

The day after Christmas, December 26th of this year, one of those more globally recognized saints in our midst died – Desmond Tutu – the Anglican cleric who used his pulpit, his incredible oratory skills, his joyful spirit and his commitment to God’s grace and forgiveness to help bring down Apartheid in South Africa and pave the way for a peaceful democratic transfer of power as well as a national process for healing through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. What an incredible human being he was – not flawless or sinless, for that doesn’t make a saint, but rather he allowed himself to be an instrument

of God's love and grace in this violent and troubled world, a revelation through his life of what Jesus intended and intends for this world.

So this morning I'd just like to lift up and share with you 5 ways that Desmond Tutu's life, teaching, and actions bore the marks of Jesus and enfleshed God's intentions for this world. His teachings are summarized in a beautiful little book that I recommend to you called God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time. It's really quite remarkable to read it in this moment that we find ourselves in in this country and will go a long way towards reminding you of God's presence in even the most conflicted and trying of times. Of course there are many more than 5 principles in the book but for this morning I'm highlighting 5 for you: it's a moral universe, no one is irredeemable, God has no hands but ours, God cares about the underdogs, and there is no situation that can't be transformed by God.

So first of all, Desmond Tutu proclaims that God who is the Creator of this world who creates order out of chaos from day one and on-going has created the universe to have a moral order and this is the foundation of our hope in the future. This enabled Bishop Tutu to say to the president of South Africa PW Botha during some of the darkest days of apartheid, that he and other white South Africans should join those trying to dismantle apartheid because they had already won. Despite the objective facts and the horrible circumstances they were at the time still facing, Tutu maintained the deep confidence that God's universe was a moral one and that as a result there was no way injustice, oppression and lies would have the last word. "Of course there were times when you had to whistle in the dark to keep up your morale," Tutu wrote, "and you wanted to whisper in God's ear: 'God we know You are in charge, but can't you make it a little more obvious?'" (p.2) The world has a moral order that will ultimately prevail, all chaos

and struggle and doubt aside, we must lend our weight to the moral side of the given situation.

Secondly, Tutu proclaimed and insisted, despite the horrors of white brutality against blacks in South Africa to keep them oppressed and in their place, that no one is beyond God's grace, that we ALL have great propensity for evil and we all have great capacity for good. No one, he claimed, inspired as he was by Christ's spirit, is irredeemable. "Not one of us can say with certainty," Tutu wrote "that we would not become perpetrators if we were subject to the same conditioning as those in South Africa, Rwanda, Germany, or anywhere that hatred perverts the human spirit. This is not for one minute to excuse what was done or those who did it. It is, however, to be filled more and more with the compassion of God, looking on weeping that his beloved children [are consumed by fear and hate].... Desmond Tutu forever held out, despite all the hate he got and all the suffering he witnessed, that the only way forward was together and that the oppression of the blacks ultimately oppressed white people as well and that love and forgiveness was how they too would be freed from oppression.

Thirdly, in God's Dream for this world, God wants human partners and needs our hands to do God's work. He refers to a statue in France where the outstretched hands of Jesus were lopped off by vandals and the keepers of that cathedral where the statue stood decided not to restore it saying that it stood as a reminder that God has no hands but ours. Or as the Northern African saint Augustine put it: "God without us will not, as we without God cannot." "When a person is naked," Tutu writes, "God wants to perform the miracle of clothing that person but it won't be with a Carducci suit or Calvin Klein outfit floating from

heaven, it will be because you and I, all of us, have agreed to be God's fellow workers, providing God with the raw material for performing miracles." (p.60)

Fourth, our scriptures make it clear that we worship a God who is the God of underdogs, a God whose concern is for the poor, the oppressed, those on the margins not the center of society. Those at the center already have their reward. God's eyes and ears are trained for the cry of the oppressed, whether that's the Hebrews in Egypt, the blacks in south Africa, the slaves in our own country, the Jews in Nazi Germany, the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, and any number of others. And if we are to follow our Jesus then we must hear the cry of those suffering as well. To remain silent is to take the side of the oppressor. "We must be," Tutu says, "where Jesus would be, the one who was vilified for being the friend of sinners."

And finally, though there are certainly other beautiful principles that Tutu proclaims as a follower of Christ, I'll end with this one – No situation is intractable but God can always transfigure our circumstances. And as followers of Jesus, as believers in the sovereignty of God in this world, we must believe things can change and that we can be a part of that change. Tutu writes:

God certainly does have a sense of humor. Who in their right mind could ever have imagined South Africa to be an example of anything but the most ghastly awfulness, of how NOT to govern a nation? We were a hopeless case if there ever was one. We succeeded not because we were smart. Patently not so. Not because we were particularly virtuous. We succeeded because God wanted us to succeed. It is because we were so improbable that God chose South Africa and will point to us and say... to people throughout the world "see, they had a nightmare and it has ended. Your nightmare will end too." That is the principle of transfiguration at work and so no situation is utterly hopeless, utterly transfigurable. We must have the calm assurance and patience that faith can give us but we must also not be patient with

oppression, with hunger, and with violence. We must work to bring the time when history is ready for all people to be free, to be fed, to live in peace because as God's partners, we help determine the timeframe in which God's plan unfolds and God's dream is realized!

Those are a just a few of the principles that this saint, Desmond Tutu, can remind us of and inspire in our own lives though he has now died. And so in the face of racism in this country, in the face of climate change and it's threat to the most vulnerable people and creatures around this globe, in the face of deeply divided politics of insurrections and a deep seething anger in our country, let us train our eyes on Jesus and study the examples of the saints not far removed from us and be guided by love, be grounded in hope, and see ourselves and our lives, as Desmond Tutu named it, as oasis of love and peace, for God has no hands but ours in this world, amen....