

Message: Healed and Restored**I have a word for you to learn today: ubuntu**

Some of you may know it. Repeat it after me. Our Bible passage today is about ubuntu. As part of Readiness 360 Plus, we’re studying Cultural Openness; that’s about ubuntu. There are many examples of the South African concept of ubuntu. It’s an Nguni Bantu term that is difficult to translate into English. Very simply, ubuntu is the essence of being human. In sharp contrast to this is the situation of the lepers in our Scripture reading from Luke 17:11-19.

The lepers were dealing with the stark reality of being isolated and ostracized from home, family and community. People with leprosy weren’t allowed to enter a village. On top of that, they had to shout “leper!” whenever they saw people approaching. They couldn’t attend synagogue. They couldn’t live at home, as anything they touched would be declared unclean. They begged for food unless family provided for them. Lepers were kept at a distance by racial and religious barriers.

Ubuntu calls for racial harmony. That’s what it means to be human and humane. A person who is ubuntu is someone who is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, with a servant spirit that affirms others and says, “I am because you are; you are because I am.”¹ A person who is ubuntu recognizes we’re all brothers and sisters created by God to “*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself*” (Luke 10:27).

Today, there are people who are isolated and kept at a distance in the same way lepers were in Jesus’ day. The lepers of today are the homeless, addicts, the mentally ill, those who are of a different sexual orientation, those struggling with dementia, Alzheimer’s or other maladies of old age, and those who have different skin color, native language or dress. Even those with different political views or social status are isolated. Cliques exist in our community, social organizations schools and churches. Racial, economic, political, gender and sexual orientation, and religious barriers exist today. The battle for the hearts

¹Adeyemo, Tokunboh. *Africa Bible Commentary*. WordAlive Publishers, Nairobi, Kenya, 2006, p. 1251

and minds of people being played out in our culture is a battle that wants to polarize us, separating and dividing our homes, schools, churches, communities and nations. We’re becoming more isolated and alone, at a distance from healthy, spiritual relationships.

That was particularly true for the Samaritan leper. There was great hostility between Jews and Samaritans. A popular Jewish proverb stated that “a piece of bread given by a Samaritan is more unclean than swine’s flesh.”² Samaritans were a racially mixed people. The Jews in the northern part of Israel had intermarried with the locals. Adding fuel to the fire, the Samaritans often embraced paganism – worship of other gods. Those who didn’t had developed their own version of Hebrew Scripture and even built their own temple. Relations between the Jews and Samaritans had always been difficult, but they seem to have deteriorated even more in Jesus’ time. One reason is because the Samaritans had defiled the temple court during one Passover by throwing human bones into it. They defiled the sanctuary, making it impossible to celebrate the feast that year.³ These are the kinds of offenses people remember, and often don’t forgive, even decades later.

We live with the same kinds of offenses today. There are things that happened decades, hundreds of years ago, that cannot be forgotten. Enslaving people in Africa was a terrible tragedy and injustice. We cannot forget it and we should not. Kidnapping young girls and boys and trafficking them to the United States happens. Riverside County has the highest incidence of human trafficking in the nation. We cannot, and should not, be complacent and overlook it “because that’s the way it is.” If we do, we’re part of the system of injustice.

We can do better. We’re blessed with great abundance. We have time, money, property, facilities and a community of faith who are dedicated. What we need is the will and commitment to reach out to others who are hurting and to offer a place where healing and restoration can occur. What we need is faith and ubuntu.

We don’t need to wait for more faith or powerful faith. What God needs is a faith that is simple and pure. God needs faith with integrity

² <http://www.stephanielandsem.com/2013/05/jews-vs-samaritans-insult-and-injury/>

³ *Ibid*

(Luke 17:6-10). That’s the faith of the Samaritan leper. That’s the faith of the Roman centurion. We aren’t powers and authorities by faith, God is. Our faith makes us into humble servants of God. We are the “*little ones*” God gives the power to, so we can say to a tree, “*be uprooted and planted in the sea*” and it will obey (17:2,6). We can do much more than we realize if we live with honest, simple faith.

Ubuntu reflects Jesus’ mercy and compassion for others. Bishop Desmond Tutu described ubuntu in this way: “a person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.”⁴

Jesus heard the cry of the lepers, “*Lord, have mercy on us*” (v13). He heard. He saw. He had compassion. The lepers were united by a common condition, their need. Regardless of their differences, they needed help. They asked and Jesus responded in a way they couldn’t imagine. He healed them. Jesus didn’t see people of different races and religious backgrounds. He saw children made in the image of God who were in need, united by a common tragedy. Jesus didn’t stand back and give them a lecture on how they should be living and what they should be doing. He acted. Jesus didn’t go to the lepers, touch and heal them. He sent them to a priest. On the way, they were healed.

The priest was the one who had declared them unclean, unfit for their community. His declaration had cast them out of their homes, separating them from their loved ones and ability to worship God. The priest couldn’t heal the lepers, only Jesus had the power to do so. But the priest could restore them to the community. Once he saw they were no longer afflicted by the disease, the priest would declare them to be clean. They would be able to return home, to work, to attend synagogue and to once again be part of the community.

⁴ <http://askubuntu.com/questions/424/what-does-ubuntu-mean>

Bishop Tutu said, “Ubuntu focuses on the fact that you can’t exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality - ubuntu - you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas we are connected and what we do affects the whole world. When we do well, it spreads out; it’s for the whole of humanity.”⁵

We’re called to heal in Jesus’ name. There are people crying out all the time for help, care and compassion. We live in communities divided by ethnicity, money, age and sexual orientation. We watch the news and see terrible acts of crime and violence that dehumanize the victims, perpetrators and watchers. We live in a culture where insecurity and selfishness rule, rather than assurance and love for our neighbors. We have the means. All we lack is the faith and assurance to act.

Nelson Mandela shows us a different aspect of ubuntu with this illustration: “a traveler through a country would stop at a village and he didn't have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food and entertain him. That is one aspect of ubuntu but it will have various aspects. Ubuntu does not mean that people should not enrich themselves. The question is: are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve?”⁶

Mandela asked about the purpose of our enrichment. Do we seek wealth, power and fame for our own ends or do we give glory to God by putting our wealth, power and fame, in fact, all we have, to work making our community better? As Jesus’ disciples, we’re called to invest all we have – heart, soul, strength and mind, in loving our neighbor. And our neighbor is everyone around us, but particularly those who are suffering, alone and in need. The first place to start is in our own neighborhood. Reach out to someone you don’t know who is different in some way. Spend time getting to know them in a significant way. Build a real relationship. Share the challenges and needs of life. Care for one another; follow up with phone calls and cards. That’s true and meaningful faith in a simple, direct way, the way of love and grace.

⁵ <http://askubuntu.com/questions/424/what-does-ubuntu-mean>

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The issue of diversity is present over and over again in the ministry of Jesus. He was willing to be associated with tax collectors, those who sold out to the Roman authorities and made themselves wealthy at the expense of others (Matthew 11:19). Jesus sent his disciples to the lost sheep (Matthew 10:6). He healed the daughter of a Syrophenian woman (Mark 7:24-30). Jesus healed the servant of a Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5-13). He even told the chief priests and elders of the people that “*tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you*” (Matthew 21:31).

Why? Faith has nothing to do with skin color, economic status, age, gender, sexual orientation, language or politics. People of faith welcome brothers and sisters from diverse backgrounds as well as those who are outcast, depressed, oppressed and sinners. Jesus’ good news is more than intellectual elitism or ethnic chauvinism. Jesus’ love is freely available to everyone, all the time, everywhere.

The hallmark of Christianity, and particularly of the United Methodist Church, is to be open to diversity and to promote a culture of human dignity and social justice. Through this kind of openness we encounter the living Christ in others. It requires us to live with a new lifestyle with new eyes and ears. It calls us to remember the words of John 3:17, “*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*”

Let’s consider the final exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan. Realizing he was healed, the Samaritan came to Jesus and, finally, “*threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him*” (v16). The distance was gone. I’m not talking about physical separation, but the social, racial and religious separation and every kind of alienation between the person and Jesus, and between the person and God, was gone.

All were removed by the gift of grace. The Samaritan’s grateful recognition of God’s power brought him back to Jesus. Jesus is the expression of God’s power to humanity. Jesus didn’t just grant physical healing, which the other nine received. Jesus extended a hand of friendship, forgiveness, reconciliation and salvation. Jesus removed all alienation and distance between the one suffering and God.

That’s what we’re called to imitate as disciples of Christ. When we go out from this place today, we’ll meet others. We may not know much about them. That’s because we all stay safely within our cocoons. Today, I invite you to break out of that cocoon, to spread your wings and fly. Reach out and touch someone in a real, meaningful way. And, as you do, give thanks to God.

The best thanks we can give to God, as his little ones of faith, is to show our gratitude. The words of Psalm 103:1-5 say it well,

“O my soul, bless GOD.

From head to toe, I’ll bless his holy name!

O my soul, bless GOD,

don’t forget a single blessing!

He forgives your sins - every one.

He heals your diseases - every one.

He redeems you from hell - saves your life!

He crowns you with love and mercy - a paradise crown.

He wraps you in goodness - beauty eternal.

He renews your youth - you’re always young in his presence”

(The Message).

Ubuntu, my friends, ubuntu. Amen.

Psalm 66:1-12 (NRSV)

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;

 sing the glory of his name;

 give to him glorious praise.

Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds!

 Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you.

All the earth worships you;

 they sing praises to you,

 sing praises to your name.” *Selah*

Come and see what God has done:

 he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.

He turned the sea into dry land;

 they passed through the river on foot.

There we rejoiced in him,

 who rules by his might forever,

whose eyes keep watch on the nations -

 let the rebellious not exalt themselves. *Selah*

Bless our God, O peoples,

 let the sound of his praise be heard,

who has kept us among the living,

 and has not let our feet slip.

For you, O God, have tested us;

 you have tried us as silver is tried.

You brought us into the net;

 you laid burdens on our backs;

you let people ride over our heads;

 we went through fire and through water;

yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.

Luke 17:11-19 (NRSV)

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”