

Ubuntu: I Am Because We Are

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of being able to attend my godson's graduation ceremony at Earlham College. As a part of the baccalaureate service, the wonderful professor, Dr. Womai Song, provided a fantastic address, called "Ubuntu Rising: Moving Forward in the World in Solidarity and in Solitude." I was so moved by his words, and they seemed so connected to today's scripture, that many of the ideas in this sermon come from his speech.

Dr. Song explained that *ubuntu* is a common concept in almost all African Bantu languages. It almost always denotes community and connection, and the idea that a person is a person through other persons. Found in many other African communities and cultures, the sense of this word is "I am only because we are."

I am, only because we are. This is such an important concept to live by. It's an aspect of today's scripture from Galatians and the commonly used scriptures from Romans and 1 Corinthians, all of which stress the interconnectedness of all peoples. The passages from Romans and 1 Corinthians discuss the role of the body of Christ, telling us that we are all parts of one body—all integral parts of that one body, working together to make that community function well.

Ubuntu: I Am Because We Are

Our reading from Galatians today reminds us of that same concept. Paul tells us, “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” One of the main messages Jesus brought to us is that we are all connected—one body, with Christ at our head, serving the will of God. So, instead of seeing ourselves a part of little separate groups that stand against one another, that are enemies or rivals, we are to understand that we are all one people.

When we read this passage, it behooves us to think for a moment about how we do separate ourselves now, to name those separations so that we can work to overcome them. I would imagine that we would come up with obvious divisions: Republican and Democrat, pro-vaccine and anti-vaccine, pro-choice and anti-abortion, Russian and Americans or Europeans. But I wonder, given a moment, if we can think about how else we separate ourselves?

I grew up in a college town where we separated the townies from the college students. Thinking that our slightly larger small town was much better than the smaller small towns around us, we separated our region into our town vs the neighboring towns. In my high school, we seemed to separate ourselves into the kids of college professors and staff vs the kids of factory workers and farmers, the neuro-typical vs neuro-atypical, black vs white, gay vs straight. I

Ubuntu: I Am Because We Are

think that, if we look, it doesn't take long at all to find the ways that we divide and subdivide ourselves into little groups, usually suggesting that the group we are a part of is better than the other groups.

But not only does our scripture encourage us NOT to do this—not to see one group as better than the other—but it seems to suggest this concept of Ubuntu that Dr. Song discusses. It's not just that we need to stop breaking ourselves into categories and groups. It's not just that we need to see the value of each part of the body of Christ. It's that we need to really see and understand that I, as an individual, am because we, as an entire world community, are. I exist and thrive because I am part of this larger whole.

On a small scale, it's probably easy to see this and to think of examples of this interdependence. We all live through rough times, just as our psalm for today makes clear. But because we are interconnected through the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, we get through those times. I invite you to take a moment and really think about how you got to where you are now. Who helped you get there? Who is your community? And who are you now because of who they were and how they supported you?

Since it's Father's Day, I'll focus on a few examples from my life of male and father-like figures. I think of my grandfather, who financially supported my cash-poor parents, as they started out in

Ubuntu: I Am Because We Are

life, putting the down payment on their first car and then doing the same for me and John when we got married. I think of the middle school English teacher who saw academic gifts in me, especially in writing, when I had no self-esteem and no sense that I could be academically talented. I think of the church choir director who allowed me, a shy but devoted singer to join the adult choir when I was in 9th grade, thus providing me with much needed adult mentors and friends. I think of the graduate advisor who went out of his way to find me teaching assistantships in my first years of graduate school and who then provided help and support when John and I had our first children while still graduate students. All of these people stepped into my life at critical times, providing guidance, encouragement, financial and moral support precisely when I needed them, to help me become who I am now. I am who I am because of who they were and because of how they showed up in my life.

Another way to think about this idea is to say, without others, I would not be. Dr. Song chose this concept for a graduation address because he wanted students to think deeply, clearly, and often about the ways that even the smallest actions of the seemingly most insignificant person could affect each of them. We would not be if it were not for all of the people who grow, package and transport our food. We would not be if it were not for all of the people involved in cleaning and transporting water to our homes.

Ubuntu: I Am Because We Are

We would not be if it were not for those who gather building material, refine it, and turn it into homes. Many of us would not be if it were not for all of the people working in service industries, in medical fields, in janitorial, sanitation, and other cleaning professions. We are constantly surrounded by those who take care of us and provide for us. Being mindful of this helps us to think of the needs of these folks when we vote, when we think about legislation, and when we think about how we spend our money.

But the concept of Ubuntu goes even deeper, or perhaps, more widely than this. It seems to refer to the world as a whole, and to the idea that we individuals are who we are because of who the world is. Right now, it's easy to see interconnectedness through negative effects. Russia has attacked the Ukraine, so world energy and food prices are spiking. The world is facing a global pandemic, so we have strange supply chain problems that have had enormously negative effects. Wars, tyrannical and unjust rulers, as well as natural disasters have caused influxes of refugees all over the world. We are all affected by what affects the rest of the world, and we have an effect on them.

But Dr. Song is quick to point out that Ubuntu, like our Christian teachings, is grounded in an ethic of benevolence, goodness, and kindness. I am because we are means that my choices and my behaviors affect everyone in the rest of the world, and they—everyone in the rest of the world, their experiences, their

Ubuntu: I Am Because We Are

choices, their lives--affect me. Therefore, we are called upon to do good to and for each and every person in the world community.

Today, we celebrate Juneteenth—the day that the last slaves in Texas learned about the Emancipation Proclamation, two years after it had been issued. I think of the people who brought them the news, knowing that some slaves were still not free, not resting until they had been brought the news. And I wonder, what good is still waiting out there for us to do--good that still needs to be spread to the widest corners of the earth or to the smallest counties in our own country?

Ubuntu, says Dr. Song, calls on us to ask ourselves each day what we've done in service of each other. So this week, at the end of each day, I invite you to ask yourselves that question: What have you done today in service of our local and our world community? And if the answer is, I'm not sure or nothing, what commitment can you make for the next day? For since we are neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female, but one people all united under Christ, we none of us can be our whole, true best selves unless others are also able to be their whole, true best selves. I am *only* because we all are. Amen.