

Parallel Paths: Loving Your Enemy
Matthew 5:21-25

I spent my last three weeks in Africa. A little bit of time in Zambia, a tiny bit in Zimbabwe; mostly in South Africa. I loved Africa, and I am eager to go back again—next time, I hope, to Sierra Leone and Liberia. But just like Bodie Knepp said to us last month about his trip earlier this summer, my time in South Africa was transformative.

For those of you who have not been there--and for those of you who know it far better than I--Africa is an amazing place, wide open, full of big sky, extravagant sunrises and sunsets, wild landscape. Wild animals! It is beautiful, full of charisma. Ernest Hemingway is said to have written, "I never knew of a morning in Africa when I woke up and I was not happy." A little romantic, probably, but I think it is possible.

South Africa has a fascinating history. It was settled by Europeans, valuable because all east/west trade had to go around its southernmost tip, the Cape of Good Hope, until the Suez Canal was built. First the Dutch, and then the British, settled in South Africa's resource-rich land. They claimed it as a place for white Europeans. But to do that, they had to move aside in some way the native Africans who had been there for a long time.

When gold was discovered there in the 1860's, the Dutch brought in first white mineworkers, and then slaves imported from India. Finally it was too labor-intensive even for those groups to be enough, so the Europeans employed the African natives. But how would these very different groups of people live together?

Apartheid was their solution. *Apartheid* is, literally the Dutch Afrikaans word for "apart-hood" (as opposed to "neighborhood"). It was simply assumed that people of different races would want to live separately, with as little contact between them as possible. It was always present, but in 1948, Apartheid was named and declared the policy of the South African government. Hundreds of laws were passed to enforce separation of the races. Group areas, or *bantustans*, were established—literally, the drawing of geographic shapes to keep black and white people separate. It was a strict social structure in three categories—white Europeans, black Africans, and in between those two, a class of "colored"—which meant Indians or other people of mixed race—although I'm not sure how much mixing happened--racial inter-marriage was also illegal.

There were *pass laws*, which required every person to carry a passbook identifying their race, so that if they were caught out of their designated area, they were detained and jailed. Because they were seen as having value only as they were needed, it was illegal for black Africans to be unemployed. If they did not have a job, they could be shipped out of the city and back to the tribal areas their families had come from. Men who worked in the mines were separated from their families and forced to live in barracks. Police raided homes in black townships regularly and carted off to jail anyone whose passbook did not have the proper signatures or who could not establish their employment. It was a miserable, dangerous, precarious existence for black people in South Africa—who comprised 90% of the population.

By the 1960's, a resistance movement had taken shape. This was the movement that Nelson Mandela joined, first as a youth. Mandela was subject to the pass laws just like everyone else; he was jailed several times for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He could not vote or hold office, but his vision and his life's work was a South Africa in which people of all races would be treated equally. For a long time he advocated non-violence, but years of inaction and non-responsiveness by the government convinced him that militance was required. And so, finally, he trained for and led a program of sabotage against the government, as a way of deepening resistance to the status quo. He was arrested again and again; finally charged, tried and convicted of treason. In 1964, he was sentenced to life in prison.

With a handful of other leaders from the movement, Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island, which is off the coast of Cape Town—sort of like Alcatraz is to San Francisco. There were no white prisoners sent to the island: only black and colored people. The guards enforced a caste system even there, to foment mistrust and conflict among the prisoners. Different food—the coloreds got bread, the blacks didn't. Different clothes—coloreds wore long pants, blacks wore short, even in long, cold winters. The conditions were miserable; physical punishment and solitary confinement were frequent. There was hard labor; Mandela and his comrades did back-breaking work in the island's rock quarry, every day.

But they made a significant mistake at that prison: they kept all the political prisoners together. And so Mandela and the others found ways to talk, and to plan, and to keep their hope alive. Mandela resisted in small and subtle ways. He refused to submit to the most demeaning forms of mistreatment. He wrote the first half of an autobiography; other people smuggled out the pages he had written. He exercised. He found ingenious ways to get and to read newspapers. And he never gave up hope that he would be released.

Mandela was imprisoned for twenty-seven years. While he was locked away, the resistance movement continued outside. Police turned their guns on peaceful demonstrators. In 1975, thousands of schoolchildren marched in protest of the requirement that all schools be conducted in the Afrikaans language—which only white people spoke. Police fired on the children, killing and injuring many. A young resistance leader named Stephen Biko was mysteriously killed in police custody. And the rest of the world began to notice and to pay attention to what was happening in South Africa. There were boycotts and sanctions, first by the United Nations and later by other countries as well, including the United States. Pressure on the government built; South Africa was largely isolated from the rest of the world.

From prison, Mandela sensed that a moment for change had arrived. He sent a letter to South Africa's Prime Minister, F.W. de Klerk, suggesting they meet and discuss compromise. De Klerk was both a worthy opponent and a courageous ally. And on February 11, 1990, no doubt for his own political reasons, de Klerk released Mandela from prison—very publicly. Black South Africans were overjoyed. But if you watch the video of de Klerk's speech to Parliament, announcing this pardon, none of the members of Parliament is smiling. They knew everything was about to change.

Negotiations toward a new South Africa included every political party and every racial group in the country. In 1993 they signed a new Constitution. Listen, in this preamble, for the mutual respect it contains:

We, the people of South Africa,

Recognise the injustices of our past;

Honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land;

Respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and

Believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.

South Africa's Constitution is one of the most progressive in the world. It prohibits discrimination on any basis, including race, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability and religion. It guarantees the right to education and health care. Every racial and ethnic group is declared equal. And I heard people there say proudly that their flag has six colors, more than any other country in the world. It is a combination of the British and Dutch flags—red, white and blue—and the African tribal flags—green, yellow, black.

The peaceful transition to a new republic, with one group ceding power to a certain defeat by popular vote, was almost unheard of in history. In 1993, Mandela and de Klerk were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, together.

Mandela ran for President in the first election in which all people were permitted to vote. He promised that he would serve no more than one term. He made forgiveness the hallmark of his presidency, and of the new South African Republic. He set the tone in very strategic and visible ways—with a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, by inviting his Robben Island prison guards to be honored guests at his inauguration. He unified the country by publicly supporting the white cricket team in its international competition. (You may remember this scene from the movie *Invictus*.) He insisted that South Africa would be a nation not just for the black Africans whose party won the election, but for all people, of every race and color. He worked to fill himself and his country with love and respect for everyone. He *showed* people that freedom and joy lie in forgiveness, not prejudice.

Bill Clinton once said to Mandela, “Tell me the truth: when you were walking down the road [from prison] that last time, didn't you hate them?” Mandela answered, “I did. I am old enough to tell the truth...I felt hatred and fear but I said to myself, if you hate them when you get in that car you will still be their prisoner. I wanted to be free and so I let it go.”

I heard echoes of this attitude in many people I talked with in South Africa. Former prisoners now lead tours of the prison on Robben Island. A man named Kenny proudly showed me Soweto, the township outside of Johannesburg where he was forced to live for the first twenty years of his life, where he was jailed before he was 11. Another man named Africa Mundi showed me where he lives, in the shabbiest homes I have ever seen, still hopeful. All of them

said in some way, they are working out their own forgiveness, knowing that hatred and desire for revenge have the power to imprison you.

Mandela did not succeed in everything he hoped to do in South Africa. Changing the law and changing a country are two different things. In many ways, the country is a mess. Many black South Africans live in townships, in conditions as poor as they are anywhere. South Africa has the greatest disparity between rich and poor of any country in the world. After Apartheid ended, whites largely abandoned the cities; big cities are just now becoming vibrant again. Unemployment is high. The current government is a mess; everyone knows it is corrupt and incompetent. The country is dangerous; almost everyone lives behind locked gates.

But Mandela is universally loved and respected—even after his death, he is still inspiring a vision of equality and dignity and hope for the country. His image is everywhere; his words are on billboards and the sides of buildings. When he died, a soccer stadium that held 40,000 people was not large enough to contain those who came to mourn. And his memory inspires the kind of hope you hear in these voices as they sing *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*, an African anthem of hope and blessing. If you know this hymn, you are welcome to stand and sing along.

[Video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5h01eu7XxNg>]

You must forgive, Jesus said in the passage from Matthew we read this morning, to be free to worship God.

You must forgive, Mandela said, to be free to live.

May it be so for us.

Pastoral Prayer

O God of miracles and multiplications,
We are grateful that you measure us not by our fears or failures or frailties, however large they are;
But by our hope and faith and love, however small they seem to us.

Now we pray that by your grace, we—our boldness and our gifts—will become miracles of leaven in the lump of this world. That the mustard seeds of our faith will become the trees under which others can find shade.

Multiply our courage so that we may be a source of life and healing for those we hold in our hearts...
a source of justice and peace for those we carry on our consciences...

Multiply our faith in you so that all our struggles, all our joys, even all our tensions with one another,
will be steps taken toward what it means to be human,
to be sisters and brothers, and to be yours.