

August 18, 2024

Pr. Steve

Texts: 2 Chronicles 20: 5 -12; Psalm 133; 2 Corinthians 12: 8 - 9; John 3: 5 - 8

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good to be back. I remember most of you.

Several decades ago, a student from South Africa was studying at one of the prestigious universities in Great Britain. One of the professors had no respect for Black people coming out of Africa. *What do they know? Inferior. Backwards. How can they measure up to any of the rest of us?*

After several weeks of this abuse, the student finally confronted the professor one day and said, *'You really think you're something? Tell me which continent is the most rich in all the resources that the world has ever seen. Which has minerals? Which has culture? Which is the place where human beings are destined to come from? You pride yourself on all the gold and silver in your palaces and churches, and it's all stolen wealth. Every ounce of it pillaged, plundered. And sacrificing the lives of human beings—slavery for centuries. You know nothing about being a human being, and it's time you start learning because you've built your entire culture on the backs of us.'*

The people of Venda and Lwamondo Parish begin by saying to all of us today, *'Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for the gratitude that you show for us, for the recognition and respect for our dignity which you have shown as Peace Lutheran Church for 30 years. Thank you for bearing with us those hidden scars, the hidden wounds, traumatized by decades of abuse. Your recognizing us as human beings is God's gift to us. Thank you. Thank you.'* To be seen, to be heard, to be recognized is the most essential, basic experience for human beings. When we aren't seen, we're dead, aren't we?

Two things are essential for Partnership: one is solidarity. It's much more than empathy. It's much more than just getting projects done together. Solidarity is the willingness to commit to the well-being of others—no matter what. Are we in it for the long haul—the well-being of others?

And the second thing is a willingness to cross over—not just cross over the Atlantic—a willingness to go beyond what we know: our own culture, our own assumptions, a willingness to recognize the dignity, the possibilities of being human in different ways than ourselves. It can be stressful work. It is not easy. But are we willing to cross over? It's pretty rare. It's pretty rare.

Today, I want to share a little bit of context and background for how we got here—because there's a new Partnership Committee in Lwamondo Parish. Lwamondo Parish is made up of about 11 Congregations now and two Preaching Stations. And the new Committee—they were all in *'creche'* as they say—they were in preschool when our Partnership began with them three decades ago.

So here's just brief context—what we are involved with and who we're involved with. Really important, there was a fellow named Vorster who was a Boer, an Afrikaner. Back in 1933, he went to study in Germany and Fascism was on the rise, and he said, '*Ah, there's the ticket. I'll take that home*', and he did. And they strategically organized for the next 12 years, until in 1948 they passed the 'Pass Laws' in South Africa, which said '*Black people are not human. They have no human rights, no voting rights, and they must carry a pass with them*'. And if they [black South Africans] don't, they can be arbitrarily arrested for any reason or cause. You don't even need justification. And that's when Apartheid began in its severity. It is against this that Nelson Mandela, a brilliant lawyer protested, and eventually, in 1962, went to prison for 27 years. (Think of a 27-year period in your life, please. 27 years.)

Another stellar figure about whom we seem to know very little in this country, the person named Steven Biko, B I K O. He founded the Black Consciousness movement, and he was a bit like Martin Luther and Martin Luther King. (You see, the Reformation from 500 years ago was not just about religious issues—it permeated the culture. People found a new sense of dignity.) And even 500 years later, one of the benefits of that was democracy—(which is up for debate these days, right)? Maybe it's not that important that it's coming out of Reformation.

Second thing, Martin Luther King only had the courage and the moral stature to endure endless imprisonments. This is what Biko himself experienced—and finally was murdered himself, in prison, brutally. And of course, it was said in public, '*He died by suicide*.' This happened to thousands of people, thousands.

Tshenu and Steven Biko became friends when Tshenu Farisani was in Seminary in the early 70s—fast friends. And Tshenu took what was Black Consciousness and brought it into theological study and understanding—nurturing a church, in time, which was not only spiritually grounded, theologically astute, economically, politically, educationally aware and working with folks. One of the first [Partnership] Projects we ever did years ago was we sent books to help create a library in Venda, because they didn't have one. All the dimensions of life were being permeated by hope and grace once again.

I first met Tshenu in 1986, Thanksgiving Eve, where he spoke in San Francisco, and he said, '*If I'm ever arrested again, I won't come out alive*.' Three weeks later he was arrested. There was an outpouring of support from people around the world, and Amnesty International, and church circles.

That arrest occurred at their home in Buester. 57 police and security vehicles surrounded their home. There were 70-80 soldiers in the bushes, rifles, automatic weapons, going after a Pastor's family. They [Tshenu and Mudzunga] knew this kind of thing was coming, so they had prepared. They secured their bedroom with special security, and, they had a second phone line installed. So when the first one was cut, Tshenu and Mudzunga crawled underneath their bed to hide out. As he said, '*In those days, we were designed to bit more economically*.' That's where they spent the night, calling Bishop Tutu, German bishops, Amnesty International, and others. (All of these phone numbers they had memorized, because it was too dangerous to have phone numbers listed anywhere.) At 2:00 in the morning, when Security couldn't get in without total demise of the building, they demanded

Tshenu who was the Dean (like a bishop in the church) come out. And Tshenu said, *'It is 2:00 in the morning. God has ordained two periods of the day—one for sleeping; one for activity. And now I will sleep.'*

At 6:00 in the morning, he dressed in his clergy garb with a large pectoral cross, he and Mudzunga came to the door and said, *'You are free to take us.'* Tshenu's mother, a peasant woman, threw herself in front of the police vehicle, blocking it, and saying, *'Take me instead. I know what you'll do to my son.'* And they threw her aside. Tshenu wept.

They put him in the car. First question they asked, *'Did you speak to the United States Senate about ending Apartheid?'* And he said, *'I most certainly did. And we received 75 votes to overturn banking on Apartheid in America'. ???*

President Ronald Reagan didn't know what to do with that. Tshenu went on a tour throughout Europe, parts of Asia, Australia saying, *'Your big brother in America has said they're going to end banking on Apartheid. You should join in too.'*

So they drove him to the Torture Station, where he'd been before, and there his previous torturers were sitting there around the table to greet him. They started asking questions. He said, *'I will answer none of them because you are not here to listen to me. I know that. Why don't you begin to do what you do best?'*

Meanwhile, an outpouring from countries and Amnesty and churches around the world was flooding the offices there in Venda demanding Tshenu's release. Through some miraculous circumstances, he finally was released. *He was too public.*

You should know that Mudzunga was also equal in stature to Tshenu. She would go into the prisons and smuggle his letters out. She was communicating with Amnesty International in coded language. She was taking care of the families who had detainees—people who were tortured, and disappeared. And the church of that day would fast and pray, fast and pray, fast for even weeks on end, to end Apartheid and protect the loved ones.

They [Tshenu and Mudzunga] were then banished into exile, which is how we crossed paths, because they ended up here in the Bay Area and Peace [Lutheran Church] became their spiritual home in exile. while Tshenu worked with the Human Rights Commission at the United Nations [and] Mudzunga was finishing her Master's degree in Education.

Those early years ('90 or '91) Nelson Mandela came to the Bay Area, too, for a huge gathering. Tshenu was one of the six official representatives who welcomed him at the SF Airport. He and Mandela had never met before. The two of them looked at each other, and wept. Mandela said, *'When are you coming home?'* Tshenu said, *'I'm not allowed to come home.'* Mandela said, *'We will take care of that.'*

There was a gathering at the Oakland Coliseum, packed to the full, celebrating the overturning of Apartheid. Tshenu eventually returned and served in the Parliament for 12 years. And, eventually, when Mudzunga went back, she was the Director of Education for the province of Limpopo.

But this strange incident occurred before they left. One day, out of the blue, Mudzunga got a call from our national ELCA church body in Chicago, telling her that the stipend providing their housing here in the States was now cut off. No reason, no excuse, no advance warning. *'It's gone, and you have to return to South Africa.'* Mudzunga said, *'We can't do that. We're living under death threats. We have three small children. What are we supposed to do?'* *'I don't know,'* the woman says, *'I don't know.'*

Can you imagine who was sitting in a church office in Chicago saying, 'It's time to cut those people off,' And then they did it. This is the institutional Church. This is why some of us have major problems with them. This woman in Chicago says, *'Just have your eldest daughter raise the children.'* Nzumba, whom you met [in Oct. 2023], was all of 12 years old! *'Raise two more children, you can do it, ignore the death threats, pretend none of this is happening.'*

Mudzunga turned to friends here at Peace— Marlene, Charlene, and others, Judy and Rich Collins—who said, *'We will not allow this to happen.'* And we began raising funds to keep them in their home. It went beyond the congregation of Peace to other advocates in the community—over \$20,000 was raised so she [and her children] could stay in their home and [she could] complete her Master's degree at Holy Names College. It's part of the reason they love the people of Peace—because we act on behalf of others in need.

Well, Partnership today.

After Covid everything was diminished, but we have entered a time of renewal. Calvin Neswiswi —whom some of you met (there were at least three delegations from South Africa coming here and we had four going there)—he is still advising [Partnership in Lwamondo Parish], but there is a new Partnership committee. Aletta Makhado is the new chair of the Partnership committee. When I first went [1996], there were seven Congregations and two Preaching Stations, that means developing congregations. Now there are, is it 12 or 13 Congregations? They keep creating new Congregations—and two more Preaching Stations. (Maybe we have something to learn here. Maybe? Maybe?) It's not about just wishing someone else would come.

Are there deliberate things we need to begin—prayerfully? We need them [Lwamondo] as much as they need us. The Church there is extremely well organized—there are Women's and Men's and Children's [Prayer] Leagues. But they are, like us, experiencing losses, diminished numbers, migration of the youth to places where they can find employment. Women are the primary attendees of worship—just like here.

Yes, and they are besieged like us with Fundamentalist Evangelical 'Prosperity Gospel' folks raising noise and commotion over nothing, using Christian language to co-opt what the life of faith is about. And the one thing they never talk about is the *crucified Christ*. Never. And that's why that is so dangerous. So dangerous.

A few brief things to know. They elected the first [Lutheran] woman bishop of the whole of South Africa, Reverend *Naledzani Josephine Sikhwari*, and we got to meet with her in Polokwane. She might be the first [Lutheran] woman bishop in the whole of Africa.

The Premier of South Africa is now Cyril Ramaphosa. And he's a Lutheran. And he grew up in Lwamondo, and Tshenu Farisani was his youth pastor! He [Ramaphosa] was the leader of the Youth Group. And the one thing everybody says about him is, '*His humility is astounding*'. Zwo Nevhotalu [a former pastor in the Lwamondo Parish], whom some of you met, was the one who persuaded him to take the [Premier's] office, and his integrity is beyond reproach. Also, Dr. Phophi Ramathuba [another woman] is the Premier for the Limpopo Province.

So this church is not in a little backwater struggle. Sure, like us, sure. But there is presence, and conviction, and participation in the larger good of the country which is astounding. So, this is absolutely a cross-cultural experience, and an integrating faith experience, which we need to discover the depths of, because so much is being offered to us, {and} to our friends in Laurel Galan and Lwamondo Parish.

[There's] much more to discuss, but this cross-cultural experience is happening in order to create a new culture. That's what this is about. I know it's small—it's so vast—just how insignificant in the universe, right? Except, where else is this happening? Tell me. and we've been given this tremendous opportunity to nourish and learn from.

Finally, that text from Jehoshaphat today was Mudzunga's deepest prayer for decades. *"Oh, Lord, we are overwhelmed. The vast array of our enemies is besieging us. They will not stop. We stand no chance. Our only hope is in you."* [2 Chronicles 20:12]

And Tshenu said to me, *"Freedom is great. It is great not to be oppressed and exploited. It is great not to be tortured and imprisoned, but freedom is not everything. Our lives still depend upon the grace of God. That is the only gift which can sustain us, and fulfill us when the world lets us down, time and time and time again. God's grace is sufficient."*

Amen.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.