

Robert Holum
Pentecost 5
July 9, 2006
Rwanda Commissioning Sunday

Mark 6:1-13

“Listen! Listen! – God is calling! Through the word inviting, offering forgiveness, comfort and joy.”

This is a day of calling. Let us pray. God of the all the nations and tribes of this earth, it is your good design that all your children are one and that all your children are wanted, for life, and not for death. Fill us with this good news, and send us forth to share it and to live it. AMEN.

The calling to this day started for me and for us a few years ago when a very special man, a Lutheran Pastor named John Rutsindintwarane, came to us from Tanzania, where he had been raised in a refugee camp, and from Rwanda, where he had returned as a grown man to serve as a Lutheran Pastor. John had been called to a ministry of reconciliation among people who had murdered their neighbors in a systematic effort to wipe them out and take their land. Now murderers and survivors were living next door to each other – by necessity – and attempting to overcome the hatred and the fear and the awful shock of what had happened in 1994. The Lutheran Church in Rwanda had sent Pastor John to the US to study peacemaking. He had heard about Luther Place and our ministry of Shalom, *peace with justice*. He wanted to come and live in our midst as a pastor in residence and get to know Luther Place and N Street Village, and we were glad to invite him, knowing that to host this man was to host the experience of his people, and that it was going to change us.

During the Lent and Easter that he was with us, John did something relatively few of us are able to do. He spent an equal amount of time with members of our congregation – educated, healthy, comfortable, hardworking participants in the economy and society of our country, mostly of European origin – and with participants in the N Street Village programs – wounded by homelessness and hopelessness, in recovery from life on the margins of a society that questions their right to survival every day. John Rutsindintwarane, whose name, I believe, sounds like a prayer, believed that here, on this little block of N Street, spending equal time on both sides of the street, he had found a model of ministry that could help the people of his wounded land. He saw a model of ministry that combined spiritual healing with educational and psychological and economic healing. He saw a model of ministry where haves and have-nots worked side by side. He saw a model of ministry that avoided the American obsession with the quick fix, with instant rewards, and that understood healing as a journey from brokenness to wholeness. He saw a model of ministry that avoided the American obsession with individual success or failure and lifted up community values, because here we recognize that the visible brokenness of a homeless person is like the tip of the iceberg. Here at Luther Place and on N Street we understand that the visible brokenness of a homeless

person begging on the corner reveals the hidden brokenness of a society that neurotically pretends to be comfortable while increasing numbers of its members suffer and are left behind.

Pastor John said, “I want to help God create this kind of ministry in my country. A ministry of shalom. A ministry of peace with justice.”

Pastor John Rutsindintwarane, whose name, I believe, sounds like a prayer, found a life partner, Robin Strickler, a gospel-believing social-justice-seeking professional educator, who shared his vision. And now that ministry is being launched, in Rwanda, and our life is being changed. The reality of Rwanda is becoming our reality as today we commission 14 beloved members of our community to take an incredible journey into the heart of the human dilemma and into the heart of God’s gospel of reconciliation. We are good Christians. We know, in our heads, that to follow Jesus means to forgive one another, and to forgive even our enemies because our vision of God’s kingdom is so powerful. But in Rwanda to forgive the enemy is a demand of day-to-day survival. We are good Christians. We know in our hearts that we are called to share our surplus bread with the hungry and to share our extra coat with the naked. But in Rwanda we face the reality that fixing the visible brokenness there means addressing the hidden brokenness here in our own toxic society. There is a spiritual blindness required to live in the US. To travel to Rwanda is to be healed of the spiritual blindness that lets us turn aside and pretend that all is well as long as our people have jobs, and gas is cheap, and my neighborhood is safe, and poor people live on the other side of town, and we can protect our borders. It is a journey into the heart of the human dilemma and into the heart of God’s gospel of reconciliation that our 14 beloved brothers and sisters are undertaking in our name, thanks to Pastor John and Sister Robin’s invitation,

I want to personally thank you, and also to thank the membership of the congregation and family and friends in the broader community who are supporting you. What you are doing is exactly what God and Jesus and the Spirit hope the community of faith will do in this world. Our call is to a world where all God’s children are wanted, for life, and for shalom, not for death and brokenness. You are undertaking the risky journey that is a model for us all, and we are thankful.

I also want to challenge those of us who are not going, physically, on this journey, to go along spiritually. There is always a certain amount of risk when we travel outside our comfort zone. There are the risks of infection our bodies aren’t used to. There are the challenges posed by potty breaks in a country where rest room facilities aren’t what you’re used to. There’s the terrific spiritual vulnerability that comes when you confront the reality of our divided world, when you walk both sides of the street. There is the risk of being overwhelmed, a risk of cynicism, hopelessness and despair.

Jesus makes plain in our gospel lesson for this morning that risk is an inescapable part of God’s plan for reforming the world, God’s plan for transforming the people in it. The exercise freaks like to say “no pain, no gain”. If you don’t push your muscles and your lungs and your circulatory system beyond their comfort zone, you aren’t increasing your

capacity for physical challenge. In a similar way, Jesus tells the disciples as they head off to proclaim the Kingdom, “no risk, no reward:”

“He called the twelve (we have advanced the kingdom slightly, we are sending 14), and began to send them out, two by two – (everybody gets a buddy to check in with –) and he gave them authority over unclean spirits.”

Make no mistake, you are headed into spiritual combat with the forces of racism and genocide which are still alive in Rwanda and in our world. God has given you, in the gospel and in the community of faith, the capacity to defeat those forces.

“Take nothing for your journey, except a staff” – well, that’s easy, that’s Vicar Sarah, who came to us a seasoned veteran with her experience in the Peace Corps in Malawi, and her skills in organizing mission trips from the Center for Global Education, and who has done such a competent job of pulling this trip together. “Take your staff, and take care of your staff” which also includes Pastor John, and Robin, and the workers in the field who will support you during your time in Rwanda.

“No bread, no bag, no money in their belts, but to wear sandals and not to take two tunics.” Travel light, in other words, so that the people hosting you have the dignity of being responsible for your welfare. Part of your mission is to receive the hospitality of people whose level of material welfare is probably considerably less than what you’re used to and to experience gratitude. Take the necessities – which includes shots, malaria medicine, toilet paper and adult diapers – but leave the luxuries at home. Don’t humiliate your hosts with things we take for granted and they can never attain. Trust God to supply what you need.

“When you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place” – understand that the most powerful offering you have to give is your presence, your witness and your personal attention and love, not the money you will bring to support the mission.

“If any place will not welcome you, and they refuse to hear you, shake of the dust of your feet.” Know that, as the murder of 1/7 of the population of Rwanda was taking place in a 100 day period in 1994, personal appeals for help to the UN and the State Department and to President Clinton were ignored. Don’t be alarmed or surprised if there are people who still feel a bit of resentment. Be honest, be real, be open, but also don’t take things too personally. You are only responsible for your small part, not the whole mess.

“So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.”

Oil in the Bible signifies joy, celebration and praise. Take your joy with you, in song and in prayer and in humor. Make simple human connections. Share your love of Jesus and of justice, share your frustration and anger at sin and injustice. Share your faith that God is active in our world and that resurrection is still a possibility. Risk being open to the awful pain people still experience because of what has happened. Risk being ignorant of

how to solve that pain. Be present to it and believe that by being present, you are part of the solution.

And then come home and tell your story.

And this is the challenge to those of us who are not making this journey to Rwanda physically: use the time between now and August 13 to prepare for the return of this holy delegation. Inform yourself about Rwanda – a reading list will be provided and adult forums are being offered. Apply yourself to prayer by name for the members of our delegation as they prepare, as they journey, and as they return. They will come back changed and with a story to tell that will burn in their hearts, and they will need your hospitality and your love.

If you can, include in your reading Immaculee Ilibagiza's testament, *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*. Immaculee and seven other women survived the slaughter for 91 days by hiding in the bathroom of a local pastor's home while neighbors killed her entire family with machetes, garden hoes, and grenades. She tells her story realistically and simply. It is a page turner. She writes:

“One night I heard screaming not far from the house, and then a baby crying. The killers must have slain the mother and left her infant to die in the road. The child wailed all night; by morning its cries were feeble and sporadic, and by nightfall, it was silent. I heard dogs snarling nearby and shivered as I thought about how that baby's life had ended. I prayed for God to receive the child's innocent soul, and then asked Him, *How can I forgive people who would do such a thing to an infant?*

I heard his answer as clearly as if we'd been sitting in the same room chatting: *You are all my children...and the baby is with me now.*

It was such a simple sentence, but it was the answer to the prayers I'd been lost in for days.

The killers were like children. Yes, they were barbaric creatures who would have to be punished severely for their actions, but they were still children. They were cruel, vicious and dangerous, as kids sometimes can be, but, nevertheless, they were children. They saw, but didn't understand the terrible harm they'd inflicted. They'd blindly hurt others without thinking, they'd hurt their Tutsi brothers and sisters, they'd hurt God—and they didn't understand how badly they were hurting themselves. Their minds had been infected with the evil that had spread across the country, but their souls weren't evil. Despite their atrocities, they were children of God, and I could forgive a child, though it would not be easy...especially when that child was trying to kill me.

In God's eyes, the killers were part of His family, deserving of love and forgiveness. I knew that I couldn't ask God to love me if I were unwilling to love His children. At that moment I prayed for the killers, for their sins to be forgiven. I prayed that God would

lead them to recognize the horrific error of their ways before their life on earth ended—before they were called to account for their mortal sins....

That night I prayed with a clear conscience and a clean heart. For the first time since I entered the bathroom, I slept in peace.”

Like Immaculee, may you, our blessed travelers, discover God in a new way in the shadow of a holocaust. And may we, your companions on the journey, be blessed and changed and empowered by the witness you will bring. AMEN!