



Sermon for the 21st Week of Pentecost, October 30, 2022

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

Mr. Ian Hicks, Jr. Warden

[Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4](#)

[Psalm 119:137-144](#)

[2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12](#)

[Luke 19:1-10](#)

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love.

Considering today's readings, in Habakkuk despite strife and contention, we are asked to have faith. "... but the righteous live by their faith."

In the psalm, verse 144 "The righteousness of your decrees is everlasting; grant me understanding, that I may live."

In the Epistle "... and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing." Which I interpret as a call to greater caring within our community. Then in our Gospel reading, Jesus forgave Zacchaeus the tax collector.

In short, we are asked to:

- Have faith;
- Understanding and forgiveness;
- care for our community;

These are all good Christian principles, but what do they mean? What are the implications for us today? How do we think about this given all the turmoil that seems to surround us in our country that is so ideologically divided? How do we deal with this locally and nationally?

Let's consider some practical applications of these principles:

Allow me to take you back in history and visit South Africa. Geographically it is an exquisitely beautiful and diverse land. Historically it has experienced tremendous turmoil. Many of you may have been aware of the political system of Apartheid, in which the white Christian Nationalist minority government was in power, and majority of the population (not white) were disenfranchised and forced to live as second-class citizens. They were pushed into residing in townships, designed to supply an economical labor force to the nearby white towns and cities. Full segregation was the rule of law. And it wasn't only white versus non-white, but also there were serious divisions by language between English and Afrikaans speakers, Zulu versus Xosa speakers for example. In every way there were great divides which often led to conflict and sadly, the spilling a lot of blood.

In July 1918, some 800 miles east of Cape Town, a child was born in the village of Mvezo in the Transkei. This child enjoyed a normal carefree life in the village and surrounding countryside. He grew up, went to

university and ultimately became a lawyer. His name: Nelson Mandela. He set up law practice in Johannesburg but was forced to commute daily to and from the township of Alexandria. Mandela simply wanted to be free to live as a normal person in the country of his birth. Eventually he became part of the movement to try change the government. He was captured and charged in the Rivonia Terrorism Trial near Johannesburg and found guilty. Fortunately, he escaped the death penalty and was sentenced to life in prison. You can read all about this in his autobiography, "The Long Walk to Freedom."

All Mandela wanted was a fair deal. The vote. A normal life. A family life. He remained the icon of the African people as someone who could lead them out of oppression. He spent 27 years imprisoned on Robben Island just off the coast of Cape Town.

As the liberation movement gained momentum, strife and contentiousness increased. There were occasional bombs going off in lockers and garbage cans near shopping malls. There were numerous border skirmishes, and all white men were conscripted into the military on completing high school. (In my case I specialized in anti-urban guerilla warfare and military intelligence.) That's another story for another time. As a member of a commando unit, I was subject call up at any time and report to my unit within 90 minutes of a phone call, should the need arise. And it did.

Over time Janet and I made our plans to emigrate – we simply did not want our children growing up disrespecting people based on color. We were also in a country that was rapidly descending into increasing unrest and likely civil war.

By the late 80s. Cross border warfare was increasing; internal unrest was increasing and warfare between tribes was increasing with the slaughter of some 15,000 people for the period mid 80s through mid 90s. (reported by CNN in May 1997). Prime Minister Botha had the courage to release Mandela from prison. In February 1990 Mandela became a free man.

In the book *Playing the Enemy* by John Carlin, we read that between 1990 and the one person one vote elections in April 1994, despite tumultuous developments Mandela prevailed and became the first black President of South Africa, leading the African National Congress (ANC) to power. The road was brutally tough. During the lead up to the election the then president, President de Klerk, declared that the alternative to negotiations was "a devastating war." The country came incredibly close to this war when an Afrikaner Resistance (AWB) foot soldier assassinated Chris Hani, who was a friend of Mandela's and chief of staff of uMkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the African National Congress. Chris Hani's funeral was attended by thousands. It ended with a thrilling call for peace and unity from Bishop Desmond Tutu.

The Afrikaners were getting ready to defend themselves under the leadership of General Constand Viljoen, the former commander of the South African armed forces. He set about building a massive military capability.

Viljoen knew war and he wanted to avoid it. He wanted to meet with Mandela. He and his immediate advisors stepped through the doorway of Mandela's home and there was Nelson, smiling warmly and

apparently delighted to see them. Nelson invited Constand to take a seat next to him in the living room (sitting room) and offered him a cup of tea! Which Mandela himself poured for his guests! The general was surprised by the respect shown by Mandela, who certainly did not mince his words and commented that the Afrikaners had done he and his people a great deal of harm. Yet somehow, Mandela had a great deal of respect for them, the Afrikaners. He went on to talk about the decency of Afrikaners. Mandela was doing the courtesy of speaking to the General in his own language of Afrikaans.

Mandela and the General agreed there would be no winner if there were a war. And that was the beginning of scaling back the risk of war.

In his dealing with people, Mandela made it clear “You don’t address their brains, you address their hearts.”

You don’t address their brains; you address their hearts. Hmm – think about that!

Fortunately, the outcome was the one person one vote in April, 1994. When asked why Viljoen decided on peace he replied “The character of the opponent - whether you can trust him, whether you believe he is genuinely for peace. The important thing when you sit down to negotiate with an enemy is the character of the people you have across the table from you and whether they carry their people’s support. Mandela had both.

So, considering today’s readings, where does this lead us?

Care of the Community:

Mandela, fiercely devoted to unity in his country and among his people, avoided divisive speech, at least later in his life. In general, that included religious discourse. However, his Christian beliefs were evident in the way he lived his life and in many of his statements on forgiveness, love, equality and optimism. Refer to <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/content/page/selected-quotes>)

In an address to the 8th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1998, Mandela stated:

“You have to have been in an apartheid prison in South Africa to appreciate the further importance of the church. They tried to isolate us completely from the outside. Our relatives could see us only once every six months. The link was religious organizations, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and members of the Jewish faith. They were the faithful who inspired us. The WCC’s support exemplified in the most concrete way the contribution that religion made to our liberation.”

In this statement, Mandela recognized the positive influence of faithful people from all over the world and their effect on him personally. (The message for us: Maintain our faith.)

In a speech July 12, 2008, in Soweto, just outside Johannesburg Mandela said: "A fundamental concern for others in our individual and community lives would go a long way in making the world the better place we so passionately dreamt of."

Mandela's acute observation of the power of selflessness is reminiscent of the biblical ideal to "love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22:39).

On forgiveness:

In the Forward of "The Long Walk to Freedom" autobiography, Nelson Mandela met President Bill Clinton in Harlem, New York in 2013. (The forward was written by President Clinton).

Mr. Clinton asked him: "When you were leaving prison after twenty-seven years and walking down that road to freedom, didn't you hate them (the Afrikaners) all over again?"

Mandela replied: "Absolutely I did, because they'd imprisoned me for so long. I was abused. I didn't get to see my children grow up. I lost my marriage and the best years of my life. I was angry. And I was afraid, because I had not been free in so long. But as I got closer to the car that would take me away, I realized that when I went through the gate, if I still hated them, they would still have me. I wanted to be free. **And so I let it go.**"

Bishop Desmond Tutu's words about forgiveness support Mandela's action:

The only way to experience healing and peace is to forgive. Until we can forgive, we remain locked in our pain and locked out of the possibility of experiencing healing and freedom, locked out of the possibility of being at peace. March 22, 2014

"Forgiveness is not merely about changing our perspective of others;
it's also about changing ourselves."

Nelson Mandela led a nation into harmony and prosperity, simply by applying Christian principles. Can you imagine, being unjustly jailed for 27 years, how much hatred and anger we might have? And yet, Nelson managed to change and forgive. As actor Morgan Freeman, portraying Mandela in the movie *Invictus* said to his lead bodyguard when he took office as President of South Africa: "Forgiveness liberates the soul, it removes fear. That's why it's such a powerful weapon."

As Jesus said to his disciples in Luke 17: "If your brother wrongs you, reprove him; and if he repents, forgive him. Even if he wrongs you seven times in a day and comes back to you saying, "I am sorry", you are to forgive him."

In today's Gospel Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector had become rich through doing wrong. He was willing to pay back four times as much that which he had defrauded people of. Those who saw Jesus wanting to stay at the house of Zacchaeus grumbled, probably because they felt one of them should have been chosen by Jesus for a visit. Yet Jesus went the way of forgiveness of one who realized his shortcomings. Matthew 6, vs 14 puts it clearly; "For if you forgive others the wrongs they have done, your heavenly

Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, then the wrongs you have done you will not be forgiven by your Father. “

In Romans 16:17 Paul warns us to be aware of strife; he wrote: “ ...keep your eye on those who stir up quarrels and lead others astray, contrary to the teaching you received.”

Concerning community, in Matthew 18: 20 Jesus puts it succinctly – “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in their midst.” Bishop Gretchen made the point during her address at the recent diocesan convention that we cannot do God’s work alone, nor as a single congregation. It takes all of us working together.” As a community of believers, we can accomplish so much more.”

If Nelson Mandela could keep faith, face tremendous strife and yet change and forgive the people who put him in prison for 27 years, then unite a country, how much can we accomplish by going to our Lord in prayer, listening to His word, then there is nothing to stop us from

- Having faith;
- Understanding and becoming more forgiving;
- And taking more care of our community.

Amen