

The Legacy of Nelson Mandela
A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

As I contemplate the life and legacy of Nelson Mandela, I resist calling him a hero. I resist putting him - all alone- on a high pedestal. I resist holding back the truth that he was, among other things, an armed freedom fighter, rather than a pacifist.

Nelson Mandela's contribution to South Africa and to the world- stands out in dramatic relief for many reasons. Like most great historic figures, he was a man defined by the time and place where he came to maturity. He was a man defined by his inheritance...his family roots. And finally, he was defined and inspired to rise above the injustice and oppression that was his life experience.

One thing I ask us to think about this morning has to do with the demands of the times and places in which we live. Throughout human history, there has been cruel oppression, legalized injustice, and bone-deep racism. As we look back, I call upon us to also look around...what are issues in need of truth and reconciliation in our place and time?

We live in history. Our liberal faith calls us to respond to the here and now...to this moment...to the needs and challenges of this moment.

I came across a poem I wrote several years ago- on the fifth anniversary of the war in Iraq:

In My Life
On the day I was born, Jews were still being led
To the crematorium,
As I walked the halls of my college, President Kennedy
Was killed in Dallas,
While I was teaching in inner city Chicago,
Dr. King was killed in Memphis,
While I marched to "take back the night"
Women's rights were still denied,
While I was ministering in Bethesda,
People jumped from the twin towers in NYC.
Even as I write, soldiers and citizens are dying,
Prisoners are tortured, an unjust war continues,
And yet, during tragic times and horrific loss,
Human hope survives- in protest, in outrage
In compassion, in prayers for peace and justice.

Throughout our lives...there is an historical thread of violence, oppression and inequality...and throughout our lives there is an historical thread of movements for freedom and justice.

Some of us here today were involved in the Anti-Apartheid movement of the 1960s and 70's.

We lobbied in support of boycotting products from South Africa. We remember the horrifying photographs of the Sharpeville, massacre near Johannesburg, where 5,000 unarmed people were fired upon by government police.

We followed the arrests, the trials, and the unjust sentencing of Nelson Mandela and others of the ANC..the African National Congress.

Some of us here today, were not yet born in those years...but, all of us are aware of the sacrifices and the accomplishments of Mandela. Many of us celebrated when He was released from prison on February 11, 1990...after 27 years. And we continued to celebrate in 1994 when Mandela became South Africa's first democratically elected president. He was 75 years of age. All of us were saddened by his death in December at the age of 95.

In his autobiography ,Mandela writes about the day he walked out of prison and into the crowd of reporters and television crews and supporters:

“When I was among the crowd I raised my right fist and there was a roar. I had not been able to do that...to raise my fist in solidarity...for twenty seven years...and it gave me a surge of strength and joy.

We stayed among the crowd for only a few minutes before jumping into the car for the drive to Cape Town. Although I was pleased to have such a reception, I was greatly vexed by the fact that I did not have a chance to say good-bye to the prison staff. As I finally walked through those gates to enter a car on the other side, I felt-even at the age of seventy-one- that my life was beginning anew. My ten thousand days of imprisonment were over.”

Can you believe this...that Mr. Mandela felt remiss in not saying good-bye to the prison staff! This brief paragraph lifts up one of the basic qualities of a good leader, of a good person.

The quality of humility. How else, but out of humility, could Mandela have survived his incarceration and at the end been strong enough in spirit to successfully negotiated the ending of apartheid with deKlerk, the president of the country that had kept him in prison all those years.

How else, but with humility, could Mandela have taught other prisoners to read while out in the hot sun at the prison quarry on Robben Island.

My son and I visited South Africa in 2003, I was there to officiate a wedding of a former congregant. As we toured Robben Island and looked into the small cell that had been Mandela's home...for so many years...the tour guide proudly told us that they too had been prisoners there....that they lived alongside Mr. Mandela...only a humble man would have elicited such pride in others.

Nelson Mandela carried humility like an inner light.

Humility is a spiritual virtue; the word is from the Latin, humilitas- meaning lowliness, meekness...

Humility does not mean undervaluing yourself. It means valuing others. Jewish writer, Jonathan Sacks, writes that humility signals an openness to life's grandeur and the willingness to be surprised, uplifted, by goodness wherever one finds it.

Mr. Mandela found goodness even in the prison guards.

Humility is the willingness to be open to and admire something greater than oneself. Humility does not mean undervaluing yourself. Within community, humility comes from the most human of moments, not when we are approaching perfecting in a task, but when we see wholeness shining through the broken places.

To be an activist, an idealist, to risk your life so others can have justice...it is essential to see the light, the wholeness even in the darkest times.

As I've thought about Mandela's legacy, I've also thought about another great activist who died recently...Pete Seeger.

Another humble man...another one who saw the wholeness in life, the goodness in others.

Both Mandela and Seeger were men of power...men who grew old and yet retained their inner light...and used that light to empower others.

Mandela was born in Africa on July 18, 1918.

Seeger was born in America, on May 3, 1919

Mandela's father was a Thembu chief, a leader of his people.

Pete Seeger's father was a musicologist and his mother was a musician.

Mandela died on Dec. 5, 2013 at age 95.

Seeger died on Jan, 27th 2014 at age 94.

Both men responded to the call of history...using their formidable talents to make a difference for good in their respective countries.

Both were called traitors by their government. Mandela because of challenging apartheid- Seeger because he refused to answer the charges of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Nelson was jailed. Pete was black-listed.

Neither gave up. Music of the people was instrumental in both of their lives. The African drumming and dancing inspired courage during the protests in Soweto. Folk songs inspired the peace movement in America.

There's a great quote by Pete Seeger.
"There is something about the power of participating. It is almost my religion. If the world is still here in 100 years, people will know the importance of participating, not just being spectators."

Pete Seeger's concerts were always "sing-a-longs."
You couldn't help yourself...and that was what he wanted...everyone to participate, everyone to sing along...to feel the power of the gathered voices...to feel the power of the words of peace and freedom."

In the early 1980s we took our daughters to a concert of Pete's in a very large auditorium in Chicago. It was cold, I remember, cause we had to stand in a long line to get in...
It was a place called People's Church in the Uptown neighborhood, It was a very run-down venue.

And it was full of families...and we were in the balcony very, very far from the stage... But we had been listening to folk song albums and tapes for many years...we had been singing together as a family ...we knew all the words...but as always, Pete would sing a line...and then ask the audience to sing the line with him...it was a wonderful and happy call and response.

And it had the same effect as any spiritual...sung in call and response, any prayer offered as call and response...the participation of many voices, created community...the thousand or so people spread out across this great hall...felt like family.

Music is a universal good. Music heals. Music humanizes.

After the negotiations that ended apartheid. After free and democratic elections resulted in the Presidency of Nelson Mandela...after all the bloodshed and hatred... came The Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A humanitarian choice that grew out of great tragedy.

It was an unprecedented attempt at healing a nation.
President Mandela named then Archbishop Desmond Tutu as Chairman of the Commission.

Tutu's voice was strong when he asserted that true reconciliation cannot be achieved by denying the past. The work of the commission could be no simple platitude of forgiveness, but a bold spirituality that recognized the horrors people can inflict on one another...and yet the commission retained a sense of idealism about what forgiveness, what renewal was possible.

The commission was not a criminal court. It was not established in order to punish or prove guilt.

It was established as a way of listening to people's experiences in the horrors that was apartheid...a way of hearing the wounds on both sides of the racial and power divide. It was a way to reclaim humanity for all...as all participants realized that our humanities are intertwined. Ubuntu. What dehumanizes you, dehumanizes me...what humanizes me, humanizes you.

This was restorative justice at a national level on an international stage. It was a spiritual experience of moral healing.

As Desmond Tutu wrote:

Theology helped us in the TRC to recognize that we inhabit a moral universe, that good and evil are real and that they matter. This is a moral universe, which means that there is no way that evil and injustice and oppression and lies can have the last word.

This is a moral universe and truth will out.

The world is now and will always be in need of truth and reconciliation. The world will always need those who carry light and goodness as their moral compass.

The world will always need music to bring healing.

The world will always need men and women who lead in the ways of peace.

Men and women like Nelson Mandela and Pete Seeger.

We were blessed to have lived to know their works.

Amen/Blessed Be