

Theological Reflection on Reconciliation and Peacebuilding

Scott APPLEBY

Catholic Peacebuilding Network Conference

July 27, 2006

Bujumbura, Burundi

The texts for today's reflection, brothers and sisters, are four in number.

The first comes from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 4, verses 16-21. The event described, in which Jesus reads from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah and announces a year of favor from the Lord, takes place immediately after Jesus has been baptized in water and in the Holy Spirit and is launching his public ministry. In this passage Jesus provides the key to his ministry and mission on earth. He has come to proclaim and to inaugurate a jubilee, a time of favor, a moment of grace in which longstanding debts are forgiven. All that follows in Luke's Gospel may be read within this framework, as an elaboration of this proclamation and a working out of its details. In this new dispensation, the time of fulfillment, the world is turned on its head: the blind see, the lame walk, the prisoners receive their liberty. Certainly not business as usual!

Some of Jesus' hearers, apparently, do not get the message, or do not want to get the message. Who can blame them? The new dispensation not only plays havoc with their sense of justice, proportion and order; it undermines their cushy system of social stratification, hierarchy and power dynamics. It deconstructs the logic of rich and poor, landed and landless, debt and penalty, retribution and condemnation.

The second passage for our consideration is taken from the Gospel of John, Chapter 8 verses 3-11:

Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in their midst, they said to Him: "Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?"

This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them: “He who is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone.” And again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, departed one by one beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, Woman where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”

Four comments on this scriptural passage:

1. Let us translate *in the midst*: “in the public space or the public square.”
2. We in the West (the United States and Europe) tend to read scripture through our Western eyes and perceptions where everyone is an individual, not in the first place a member of a family or tribe. This was not the case in the Palestine of Jesus’ day, and it is not the case in Africa, where the basic unit of the society is not the isolated individual but the collective—the family, the tribe, the kinship network. It is useful to keep this in mind when we hear Jesus challenging the woman’s accusers. They already exist in a web of relationships, a web in which the woman herself exists, and in this case we may say, a web in which she has been trapped. In this sense the sin is, yes, the sin of individual actors, but always enmeshed, interwoven in this larger social fabric. Jesus subtly but unmistakably calls attention to this interconnectedness by his invitation for people to step forward who are not themselves implicated in some way in this sinful social situation which we call original sin, the sin of our condition. No one dares to do so.

Consider, then, our human situation, suspended as we are between the sinful patterns and structures we are born into, on the one hand, and the arena of personal freedom, the freedom to choose over against the sinful situation that shapes us, on the other. How should we parcel out guilt and accountability in such a complicated situation? Overwhelmingly complicated, overwhelming complicated is the problem of discerning a way to conceptualize and act wisely

with respect to our situation. The novelist Martin Amis says he never takes “Freud” into account—that is, a view in which human agency and freedom is constrained by behavioral determinism, by psychological and social factors, dating from childhood, that condition the person—because “I cannot tell a coherent story as a novelist if I concede too much to determinism; there would be no heroes and villains, no good and evil nor moral accountability, and hence no drama of human freedom, no story to tell.”

In thinking about how to think about accountability, guilt, punishment and forgiveness, then, we could err grievously in either of two directions : by denying innocence to anyone and shading everyone, even the child, with responsibility for the collective crimes; or, we could err on the other extreme, by scapegoating, by placing the burden entirely on one perpetrator and denying our complicity in the world we have together created, sometime by our cowardice, our silence, our fear of speaking out against evil.

3. Jesus does not deny or seek to destroy the web of relationships binding together the woman and her accusers; rather, he sees to transform the relationships, to set them on a new footing—just as this morning we heard of the efforts in the Rwandan base communities to transform relationships around the act of repentance and forgiveness. Jesus does not deny or downplay the sin, just as he does not pretend that there are no actual debts to be canceled in the jubilee year: the debts are enormous, the sins profound. But he does not condemn the person, because he wants not one of his sheep to be lost; rather, he offers forgiveness. But Jesus’ offer of forgiveness is more than, something other than, putting aside the offense and removing the penalty: it is a forgiveness that invites, that commands a new relationship. Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more. No reconciliation can occur unless it is built on the solid ground of a forgiveness that is acknowledged by the forgiven one’s willingness to enter into a transformed relatio. Entering into this new relationship is penance enough! for it is to accept a new discipline, to take on the horrible burdens of self-transformation, of entering into a new covenant of mutuality, of mutual caring and concern. This is indeed a harsh and dreadful love to which Jesus binds his offer of forgiveness: go and sin no more. Authentic personal transformation is grueling enough; it is both retributive and restorative justice of a kind.

4. Wouldn't you like to know what Jesus was writing on the ground?

The third passage is taken from Matthew, traditionally known as "the Gospel of the Church," chapter 26, verses 33-35. "Peter answered and said to Him: 'Even if all are made to stumble because of you, I will never be made to stumble.' Jesus said to him: 'Assuredly I say to you that this night before the rooster crows you will deny me three times.' Peter said to Him: 'Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny You!' And so said all the disciples."

We Catholics venerate Mary, the Immaculate Mother of Jesus, as the symbol and embodiment of the Church. But let us remember that we also call Peter saint, the rock upon which the Church is built. What a reed this rock was! How shameful his behavior! Yes, he grew and was converted and became a great saint. But his greatness lay, in part, in his never forgetting his betrayal of the Lord and thus never confusing himself with the Lord (or with his sinless Mother). This is why I have always treasured the legend that Peter insisted that he be crucified upside down, lest he presume to aspire to the example of the Lord in every respect. Peter's humility, not the Lord's perfection, is our model of imitation in this respect. The Church, including its bishops and priests, betrays her Lord every day, in one small way or another. On some days, the betrayal is enormous. Unless the Church constantly and publicly repents and acknowledges itself as a sinner on the road to salvation, as Vatican II put it, it can never lead its sinful people on their road to salvation. It can never be a successor to the apostle, including this great apostle Peter who carried his betrayal of the Lord with him as a mark throughout his life and turned it into a strength through the forgiveness and the new relationship with the Lord, which the forgiveness required. Does the Church in America, Latin America, Asia, Europe engage in repentance on a regular basis? I was once told that Pope John Paul II received the sacrament of penance daily. I am comforted by this tale.

The final text for our reflection is the parable of the Prodigal, found in Luke Chapter 15, verses 11-32. I shall not read the parable, for you are familiar with it, but would lift up three elements of it, with which you are also familiar. First, there is no hedging or qualification or apology for the prodigal son, or watering down of the severity of his sin: he has made certain choices, he comes to an awareness of his bad choices in the parable itself and Luke has him down in the

muck with the swine, in case we did not understand the depth of his self-degradation. Truth is told about him, and personal responsibility is not escaped. Second, the prodigal one of course is the father, who is lavish and spendthrift with his grace and cannot wait to reclaim his lost son. But wait he must, because forgiveness cannot be transformed into reconciliation unless and until it is acknowledged and accepted by the son. Third, and most important, Jesus makes clear the scandal this whole story represents. Take this to heart: the reconciliation process is inherently unfair by our usual reckoning. Not by jubilee standards, perhaps, but by conventional conceptions of justice, retribution and restoration. The repentant son is heading home rehearsing his apology; the prodigal father is so eager to forgive that he is not even prepared to listen to the details; they are in the past. Even worse, the faithful elder son is supplanted by the perpetrator, who is given the ring of power and promoted for his repentance. Reconciliation creates new problems, in this case the jealousy of the elder son, who might harbor vengeful sentiments against his younger brother.

Is this a model that the modern nation-state could possibly follow?

Application to Reconciliation

How might we apply these and many other scriptures to the concrete realities of the Great Lakes region? First we must say that the region is blessed with this harsh and dreadful love of our Lord, because the Church has been plunged directly into the heart of what the gospel is all about: this complex of sin, guilt, betrayal, violence, hatred and yet redemption, forgiveness and grace. The opportunity for the new covenant, the new *relatio*, is present here.

Second, we must ask about the relationship between religion and culture. This morning we heard about the Church's increasing involvement in the Gacaca courts of Rwanda. It is widely agreed, and I do not presume to challenge that wisdom here, that processes of reconciliation must be culturally specific and draw upon the deep wells of indigenous concepts such as *ubuntu* in the case of South Africa's TRC, for example. And we also know that these so-called traditional cultural ways and means are themselves evolved and adapted to the specific circumstances. The question raised by our conversations in this conference is the proper balance between recognition and respect for cultural forms, and the challenging and transformation of those forms. One speaker began to develop criteria for reconciliation in Rwanda; we should like

to learn more of the resources for these criteria and how the blend of Christian and indigenous elements is managed.

In one sense of course the genocide in Rwanda is a powerful condemnation of the Church to the degree that it is responsible for Christian formation over against culture where needs be. We almost despair when we witness the vast abandonment of the teaching of love of enemy and nonviolence. Yet we must never forget the counter-examples of heroism, resistance, self-sacrifice, cases in which Rwandans showed the courage of their Christian convictions. And the current efforts toward reconciliation seem thoughtful, courageous and honest. Still, we might ask where we find the CHRIST AGAINST CULTURE model in the contemporary Church, or the CHRIST TRANSFORMING CULTURE model, and how we might nurture that model even alongside the more familiar CHRIST OF CULTURE model, in which Catholics, a sacramental people, celebrate the graced nature of the world and of human beings and the societies they create.

Third, there are weak and strong versions of reconciliation. A weak form is marked by failure to acknowledge at least some portion of the truth of what was done, the atrocities committed, by a failure to acknowledge sinful social structures, and by failure to engage in *relatio*—constructive relationship building with the other. This morning we heard requirements of what we might call a strong concept of reconciliation, including confession, repentance and compassion. Reconciliation cannot be forced: it is the end point of a long and difficult process of truth-telling, confession, apology, repentance and acceptance of the apology. To demand reconciliation in the wrong context might be counterproductive, leading to greater resentment and animosity.

One consideration in building a strong concept of reconciliation is the question of tension with the state. What is the appropriate relationship between the Christ of the Jubilee and his scandalous notion of forgiveness and reconciliation and the building of a new community, on the one hand, and the mandates of a state that must govern through the rule of the law of the Gentiles, as the evangelist Luke describes the power by which the secular world is governed?

Fourth and finally, we must consider the need to live “in between times.” We have heard powerfully this morning about the complexities of reconstructing community after genocide and the accompanying traumas. Reconciliation in Rwanda, as in South Africa, Mozambique and elsewhere, occurs within the context of ambiguity, partial truth, partial lies and a fragmented,

unreconciled community: “Living in the meantime” is our way of being. One speaker this morning said that there is “No reconciliation if there is not unification of the community.” This formula acknowledges the principle of the organic, community-centered nature of our identity; but it also provokes despair: the community is never fully unified. Speakers mentioned quantitative and qualitative measures of progress toward reconciliation: how measure the transformation of a human heart? How to live in the meantime? How to create platforms for sustaining the community in the midst of ambiguity, continuing violence and division? How can we weave webs of reconciling relationships in the absence of wholeness?

Application to Peacebuilding

Reconciliation is about relationship building—and mutual, self-donating relationships, Catholics believe, are rooted in the internal life of the Triune God. Indeed, this is what we proclaim in the doctrine of the Trinity: that self-giving love is the very life of God.

But this bit of theology and mystagogy does not lead in Catholicism to a sectarian approach. We are a church not a sect or enclave. Catholics cannot give up on the larger society; we are church not sect. Catholics have always engaged the society beyond the church: since the time of Constantine, it was the state that was engaged; but now with peacebuilding, the shift is to civil society as the partner of engagement.

Let us then consider the evolution of the Church itself, in a post-Christian era, where the communities are being reborn. I was intrigued to hear about the “camps of solidarity” established by the Church in Rwanda. This approach seems to me to be worth exploring as an image of what we are to be about in Catholic peacebuilding. The nineteenth century American Protestant evangelist Dwight Moody said that there was a great storm raging in society and God had given him a lifeboat to pull the drowning into safety. Is that an apt metaphor for the Church in this troubled region? Are you building an alternative society within the society? John Paul Lederach writes of the need to create space for relationship-building toward peace. Is this what the Rwandan “camps of solidarity” are doing?

Conclusion

This notion of an ingathered, post-trauma, reconciling community that could be the seed of a new larger, transformed society or nation is perhaps too utopian. Such idealized worlds will

never dissolve the mystery of the Kingdom, what Rahner termed the Absolute Mystery of God. One thing we say in CPN is that we are not the Red Cross (that is, a ordinary humanitarian agency): we have a different vision of the relationship between our efforts and what might count as “success.” We will not conquer the world; He has already conquered the world. The Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world. Lord, I believe; help my unbelief. Help me to have the courage to participate, unto death if necessary, in the work you have already accomplished.

And so we come again to the question: what was Jesus writing on the ground, when the revenge-takers and retributive justice crowd were attempting to embarrass him into condemning the woman caught in adultery? Many have opined that he was listing their various sins. I prefer to believe that he was providing a one-word commentary on the meaning of the example he was about to set, a gloss on what he was teaching the forgiven woman, and all of us, about how to break the cycle of violence. The word Jesus was writing over and over in the dirt?

Hope.