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The Theology and Politics of Ubuntu

When President Obama presented remarks at the memorial service for Nelson Mandela, he spoke of the African concept of Ubuntu. He said:

There is a word in South Africa—Ubuntu—a word that captures Mandela’s greatest gift: his recognition that we are all bound together in ways that are invisible to the eye; that there is a oneness to humanity; that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others, and caring for those around us.

In a theological sense, Ubuntu begins with the belief that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God, and the *imago dei* confers a certain dignity upon every individual that ought to be recognized and respected. When we disregard this fundamental theological and ethical fact, we insult God.

Ubuntu tells us that the goodness of God is intrinsic in humanity; that no matter how deeply we bury that goodness under a thousand thoughtless, careless, harmful acts; no matter how that goodness becomes lost in a fog of fear and delusion and confusion and deception, it is still there. This idea of the intrinsic goodness of the human being extends to the idea that justice is the binding moral force that holds the universe together.

So, in the face of extreme injustice, Mandela and others believed with an unshakable certainty that they would win in the end because justice must prevail.

This faith in the intrinsic goodness of every human being and in the justice of creation is the faith that fueled years of struggle. It was the faith that kept Nelson Mandela through 27-years of prison. It was the faith that allowed him to maintain his dignity throughout his years of incarceration, to treat his jailers with respect and to finally forgive, not only as a means to an end—a peaceful multiracial society—but as an end in itself.

Ubuntu was the moral logic behind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa that allowed for the horror stories of apartheid to be told and to be forgiven. It helped ordinary South Africans and their leaders to look for the good in others, even in their oppressors. It helped them to see that our own humanity is tied to the humanity of the Other.

Thus, we have an obligation to give the respect we want others to give to us. We have an obligation to work to end injustice in all of its forms not only for the sake of the oppressed but for the sake of the humanity of the oppressor.

In his autobiography—*Long Walk to Freedom*—Mandela writes:

I know as well as I know anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man’s freedom is a prisoner of hatred; he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. . . . The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity.

Ubuntu tells us that we earn our humanity. We become more or less human depending upon the justice of our relationships. And this is the Ubuntu starting place for political reasoning. Our society and the laws that codify our values ought to provide a context of justice and respect for human dignity. This means we have a duty to provide for the least among us. Income inequality that leads to poverty of body, mind, and soul, the transfer of wealth from the bottom of society to the top is not only bad public policy. It is also a violation of our common humanity.

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