

Homo Homini Ubuntu

“*Homo Homini Ubuntu*” – “*Man is Ubuntu To Man*” – is title of the talk given on the wonderful African concept of *Ubuntu* at our M2/W2 Fall Promotional Event, October 27, 2012. M2/W2 (Man-To-Man/Woman-To-Woman) is the Restorative Justice/prison visitation agency I volunteered/worked with from 1974 to 2014.

Introduction

A chaplain friend, Tom James, used to tell this joke, with a point:

Question: *Why are Christians and criminals alike?*

Answer: *We are both people with **convictions!***

I'll return to the point of that joke.

Famous psychologist Sigmund Freud once quoted a popular ancient Roman proverb that went: *Homo homini lupus*: “**Man is wolf to man**”. He further claimed that despite most cultures’ Golden Rule of “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”, and despite that,

When once the Apostle Paul had posited universal love between men as the foundation of his Christian community, extreme intolerance, part of Christendom towards those who remained outside it became the inevitable consequence (*Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. and ed., James Strachey, WW Norton, 1961, pp. 58 - 63).

Similarly, a book by philosopher David Livingstone, *The Most Dangerous Animal: Human Nature and the Origins of War* (2007) presents humans as biologically “wired to fight”, and *murderous to the core*: Western civilization *in no way an exception!* Livingstone wrote:

The history of humanity is, to a very great extent, a history of violence (*ibid*, p. 57).

Over against this violence, over against a dominant Western individualism and highly competitive ways of how we in the West define ourselves (in school, sports, religion, business practices, etc.), is the powerful African challenge and vision of *Ubuntu*. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu say that

... [T]he Enlightenment ethos of ‘enlightened self-interest’ and ‘rational individualism’ [dominates Western culture]. The individual as free agent is the starting point for thinking about [Western] society, and this ... reduces community to little more than a collection of individuals who come together out of self-interest (<http://www.amazon.com/Reconciliation-Ubuntu-Theology-Desmond-Tutu/dp/0829811583/>, last accessed September 6, 2018”).

Even in our “coming together” we are competitive, we indulge one-up-man-ship, and we advance at others’ expense.

By contrast, to quote Tutu on *Ubuntu*:

Ubuntu is the essence of being a person. It means that we are people through other people. We can’t be fully human alone. We are made for interdependence, we are made for family. Indeed, my humanity is caught up in your humanity, and when your humanity is enhanced mine is enhanced as well. Likewise, when you are dehumanized... I am dehumanized... (*ibid*)

Ubuntu is also the *very essence* of Restorative Justice!

What is *Ubuntu* in practice?:

As an individual, when you have **Ubuntu**, you embrace others. You are generous, compassionate. If the world had ... **Ubuntu**, we would not have war. We would not have this huge gap between the rich and the poor. You are rich so that you can make up what is lacking for others. You are powerful so that you can help the weak, just as a mother or father helps their children. This is God's dream (<http://www.drfranklipman.com/archbishop-desmond-tutu/>, last accessed September 6, 2018).

Tutu draws on his own African *Bantu* culture and his Christian theology to explain that we are made in God's image above all as *people* in relationship *just as* God is above all *Trinity* in relationship.

A Christian West saturated with a competitive way of thinking about the relation between persons and society tends to focus so much on individual achievement, individual wrongdoing, individual salvation, it is to the detriment of focus on the Kingdom of God as a *healing community* that lives out **Ubuntu**.

A prison chaplain in Italy working with Red Brigade terrorists once wrote that *at the heart of every act of violence or terror is an unhealed wound*. An ex-prisoner friend once told his story of years in prison in terms of: all he really was looking for was "*a mother's love*".

Central to Restorative Justice is *encouraging healing of wounds, and reconciliation if embraced by all parties*. It is offering a "mother's love" – or in Jesus' terms "*the Father's love*" that is so like a mother's in nurturing healing – as we *all* acknowledge our own deep woundedness and constant need for healing.

We in Restorative Justice work, from a Christian perspective, attempt to show – like God! – solidarity with those in prison, as in the joke my chaplain friend used to tell, "*We are all people with convictions.*" This points to the old *Anglican Prayer Book* confession that we *all* are "*miserable offenders*", and "*there but for the grace of God go I.*"

At its most basic, Restorative Justice is a *peacemaking* not a *warmaking* reaction to crime, dedicated to the African practice of **Ubuntu** that holds out for justice in solidarity with all. Crime like sin is broken relationship crying out for restoration – "restorative justice", **Ubuntu** – in response: not for retaliatory brokenness (or as one person put it: "retaliatory dentistry")!

There is a delightful piece written and performed by singer/songwriter [Ken Medema](#) called **Ubuntu** that captures some of this spirit, and is briefly explained by him at the conclusion of the highlighted word.

Ubuntu, meaning we are most fulfilled as people – *most fully human* – through other people, in more theological terms is the *anthropological* (or horizontal) principle of the formal doctrine of the Trinity. **Ubuntu** points towards the profound healing ideal of the Gospel, namely *to restore broken relationship with others, to (re)create peace, to (re)create unity*. A passage by Saint Paul in II Corinthians 5 begins, "*If anyone is in Christ, there is a new [re]creation...* This is Paul's articulation of **Ubuntu** in Gospel-restored human relationships.

In context of the criminal justice system, **Ubuntu** is quite foreign to our highly individualistic Western culture that tends to think of criminals as enemies who are perpetually *alien*, perpetually *outsiders*. A September 2012 article in [The Walrus](#) magazine by two criminology experts claims that the then current [[Conservative](#)] federal government's crime policy holds in fact to a philosophy of: *once a criminal,*

always a criminal (See: [The Harper Doctrine: Once a Criminal, Always a Criminal](#)). If so, *Ubuntu* instead underscores the interrelatedness of all people, *including* of politicians *and* criminals. As in the entertaining Bruce Willis movie, [16 Blocks](#), *Ubuntu* shouts from the roof-tops: *People can change!* No one ever is shut out from *Ubuntu!*

Against that popular ancient Roman saying quoted by Sigmund Freud, *Ubuntu* resoundingly asserts: *Homo homini Christus!*: “**Man is Christ (not wolf) to man!**”. And as such, to be fully human the only face shown to the world should be the Spirit of unity and peace. This is first principle of being Church – of being human. *Homo homini Christus...* Or to add an African *Bantu* word to that long-dead Latin language: *Homo homini Ubuntu*: “**Man is Ubuntu to man!**” **We humans are Ubuntu to others.**

To conclude: *Ubuntu* means in the beginning was God in a community of love, and in the end our destiny is that all things shall be gathered up in God in a community of love! So with Julian of Norwich, we proclaim: “**All shall be well, and all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well!**”

We proclaim: UBUNTU!