

Ubuntu
I Corinthians 12:12-27
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational Church
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What are your summer camp memories?

I first went to church camp as a preschooler when my parents were youth directors. Attending children's or youth camp was an annual tradition in my upbringing. I have fond memories of the Grand Lake Baptist Association's campground outside Grove, Oklahoma. I especially remember the giant weeping willow tree, sadly no longer there, which was fun to hide inside. And there was another tree, near the First Baptist Miami cabin, where I always sat for my personal prayer and Bible study time.

In June I participated in the Faith and Fine Arts camp at Kaleo, our United Church of Christ/Disciples of Christ campground on the North Loup River in the Sandhills near Burwell. Going to camp again, for the first time in many years, has reawakened my memories and affections.

This year at Kaleo the curriculum used every week of camp was entitled "Peace Works." There is a double meaning to that title. If peace is to be achieved, it takes work, particularly work on our part. The title also means that peace works in the sense of it is effective, capable, and successful.

The curriculum explored this theme through a variety of concepts that originate in various cultures—Aloha from the Hawaiian Islands, Heiwa from Japan, Shalom from Judaism, etc. Each day at camp there was a word for the day, and the campers learned about these concepts and what they can teach us as tools for peacemaking.

I really enjoyed this curriculum and so when I got back from Kaleo I said to Katie, "Let's do a worship series with it." Katie had directed Senior Camp this year, so she had worked with the curriculum as well. We sat down to brainstorm and quickly put together a worship series, ideas for Sunday school with the kids, and we thought of various camp-related activities we can do during the series like hiking, kayaking, tie-dying, etc. Aloha will be the word of the day for our Homecoming Sunday, so I encourage you to wear Hawaiian shirts to our annual picnic. On Sunday, September 8 Erin Heckerth-Brown, who taught the art group at Faith and Fine Arts camp this summer and also created a beautiful new art piece for Kaleo, will be with us and we will create a new art piece for our courtyard. Our series will conclude with our children taking over worship as they share what they have created from the theme Peace Works. We hope you'll enjoy this experience of Summer Camp at First Central.

Today's word is *Ubuntu*. Please say that with me, "Ubuntu."

Ubuntu is a Nguni Bantu word from Southern Africa. Its simplest translation is "humanity," but the word contains a richer sense of the quality of what it means to be a

human. This is conveyed in a common phrase *“Ubuntu ngumtu ngabanye abantu,”* which translates “A person is a person through other people.”

Or, to put it more simply, “I am, because you are.” Who we are, our identity, is intimately connected with other people and vice versa. To be a human is to be in community with other people.

From this core idea an entire philosophy and theology of Ubuntu developed. One of its key proponents has been Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Ubuntu ideas helped to shape his fight against apartheid in South Africa and his leadership of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission when apartheid ended. In 1992, Archbishop Tutu described Ubuntu:

Ubuntu refers to the person who is welcoming, who is hospitable, who is warm and generous, who is affirming of others, who does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for [this person] has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing they belong in a greater whole, and know that they are diminished when another is humiliated, is diminished, is tortured, is oppressed, is treated as if they were less than who they are. What a wonderful world it can be, it will be, when we know that our destinies are locked inextricably into one another's.

A proper understanding of our humanity, our selfhood in community, then leads to right action. When we are kind and generous toward others, we embody Ubuntu. As one website I read stated, “A person who behaves in these ways . . . is a full person.”

To be a full person, then, is to be someone who behaves well toward others. To treat others with dignity, kindness, and respect is an expression of our humanity. Someone who disrespects other people, therefore, is not fully a person. When we disrespect and mistreat others, we are actually harming ourselves, robbing ourselves of our full humanity.

So one way we work for peace is by gaining a proper understanding of our humanity and the obligations to right behavior that flow from it.

Paul's letter to the church in Corinth develops similar ideas to this traditional African concept. Paul writes that God's people are the Body of Christ. We, each of us, have different gifts and positions, yet we are all needed; we must cooperate together in order to be effective and faithful. If you dishonor or disrespect someone else and their unique gifts, then you bring harm to the entire body. This hurts God's work in the world.

The camp curriculum explains,

we need each other . . .—in mutual relationship—not only for the common good, but indeed, to survive. When we each bring our open-minded, open-hearted, diverse gifts and talents to build communities, we become something more. We know that we are always in the process of becoming, having never completely fulfilled our potential. In partnership with others and with God, we do our best to fill God's world with beauty.

Archbishop Tutu helps us to tie these ideas together. In the contemporary lesson for today that Marilyn read, Tutu proclaims that to disrespect another person is not simply wrong,

it is also blasphemy, for it violates who we are created to be in the image of God, a divine fellowship.

And, so, I invite you at the start of this series on peacemaking to do three things. First, to recognize your own value as a human being created in God's image, and how your identity and worth are interwoven with others.

Second, I hope you will commit yourself to the building of community in all your relationships with other people. In what ways can you be kind, respectful, generous, and hospitable with everyone you encounter?

Finally, let us experience our shared joys and challenges. When others are joyful, that is ours to share. When others are in pain, that is also ours to share.

Peacemaking doesn't have to involve the big, grand, society-wide projects. It begins with the simplest acts of human kindness. As Archbishop Tutu has preached, "What a wonderful world it can be, it will be, when we know that our destinies are locked inextricably into one another's."