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Senior Sermon
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I spent the fall semester studying post-conflict transformation in Uganda and Rwanda. Though there are endless things I could say about Uganda, today it is Rwanda that has a lesson to teach us. While in Rwanda I lived with a family and studied the 1994 Tutsi genocide in which 1,074,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were murdered by the government and its satellite extremist Hutu rebel groups. Living with my host family, who happened to be Tutsi, was an illuminating experience, to say the very least. Hearing their stories of their fallen family members really changed me; and my research on governmental faith-based reconciliation regulations and what forgiveness is really like on the ground when it counts gave me a totally different perspective on God and the world we live in. Hearing people's stories and watching them live in the wake of such horrible experiences and then make the choice to move forward is really humbling.

Living in Rwanda totally altered everything I thought I knew about God, about being human, about what we are in relation to one another, and about who we were created to be. We must all face death, but these people live in a society in which it's nearly impossible to ignore. Every morning I watched my family wake to the realities of life that the universe had thrown at them. They begin the day by remembering those they lost, and then they are faced with a dilemma. Do they wallow in the death and in the sure hardship they'll face, or do they move forward? My family has made the choice to let life win, and they renew that commitment every single day. They forgive those who killed their families and they make the choice to love and to embody the redemption that this world needs. It's difficult. It's a hard path to choose to travel on, but Rwandese do it every day.

Part of this is faith, but a large part of it is the role of UBUNTU in their society. Some of you may recognize UBUNTU as the nearly entirely continent-wide philosophy of interconnectedness. UBUNTU is most commonly translated as "I am because you are." It acknowledges that we are relevant because we are in relation to one another. When one of us is joyful, we can all be joyful. When one of us grieves, we all feel the loss. We are all in this together, and my time in Rwanda showed me that it's time that I start acting like it. Let me just tell you a short story about something I experienced that really moved me, really changed me, really showed me what I'm supposed to be in this created world.

There are 6 official memorials to the Tutsi Genocide in Rwanda, but one that I visited really sticks out in my mind. The memorial is called Murambi. It sits on a beautiful hill where there once stood a village by the same name and where nearly 65,000 men, women, and children were murdered in the school in which they sought refuge. The memorial is simple - it is a couple dozen rooms filled with the immortalized bodies of the

people who died there so tragically, lying frozen in the positions in which they died. As I walked through them, I started to become overwhelmed with the row after row of faces and bodies and evidence of lives lived and families destroyed. The last room contained the same as all the ones before, but this one was different. On one of the platforms there was an old woman. Her hair was gray and curly and her arms cradled the fragile body of a very tiny baby. I stood there and found myself surrounded by hopelessness of this unspeakable horror. I looked at them and said the only thing I could think of: "I'm sorry. I don't know why we didn't come. I'm sorry." And that's all I could say. Until that moment, the silence had been heavy, but not accusatory. But now, the silence of the reassuring reply that would never come was devastating. There was no one left there to say "It will all work out just fine." There was nothing fine about this. There would never be a second chance for these people, never another sunrise, never another embrace from their families. It was hopelessness embodied. It was at this moment that I finally realized why my family had chosen the path that they had and had elected to forgive the people who killed their fathers, their sisters, their brothers, their nieces and nephews. There was death here, and that's all there would ever be unless they chose to create life from the ashes. My family had grown tired of waiting for a redemption and a right-making from God and decided that they needed to be the redemption that we all need. Be the re-creation, be the kingdom come.

Every day presents us with a perspective choice - do we let fear and death win, or do we embody life and hope? If the people of Rwanda, after all of that, can choose life, can choose to stop the violence in their own lives and stop hating people who killed their families, what am I doing holding grudges? What are we doing? We look for reasons to create divisions among us - politically, religiously, socially, in every way. It's what we do. We're humans. And we live in this messy world of death and violence and it sometimes seems endless. But we can't give up. So what do we do? What do we do here in Sioux Falls, so far removed from this type of tragedy, but not so far removed from death and pain? The best advice I heard this entire semester was given to me the day after I visited Murambi. I spoke with some women at a cooperative where they live and work. Hutu women whose husbands were prosecuted for crimes of genocide and Tutsi women whose husbands were killed by those men live together and raise their families together. When we asked them what message they wanted to us to take back to America, they told us a very simple answer.

"Tell our stories," they said. "If everyone knows what happened, they won't so easily let this happen again. But the only way to really protect one another is to love. We need to love one another." If we can just see one another as human beings and employ this beautiful concept of Ubuntu - that we are all connected, and that we were created to be in community with one another and to love one another - we can't lose. We become relevant to each other because we see each other for what we really are - created beings in relationship with a responsibility to look out for one another. We have this promise of grace, this God of redemption and never-ending new beginnings. Rwanda has showed

me the beauty of that thinking, and has provided an excellent example of embodiment of that grace.

But let's remember the fact that love is a formal commandment. It's a law, and what do we know about laws as good Lutherans? We can't fulfill the law by ourselves. A good friend once told me that the genocide has enough victims and that we don't do anyone any good being consumed by the grief of it all. Choose to let life crawl out of these ashes, and help it grow with your own hands. For those times when we, in an effort to be human with one another, end up being TOO human, the grace of God is there. We can go forward, sinning boldly and resting in the confidence that God's love is the umbrella under which we work. When we hear the promise of grace and are free as Paul describes in Galatians, then we will find ourselves not obligated, but desperately, passionately selfless in our service to one another. We can be this agape love that we receive every day...and if we can start living this way, maybe we CAN change the world, be the living words of Christ, and speak the reality of life into the darkness of death.

Benediction:

May God bless you with discomfort

At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships

So that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger

At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,

So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears

To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war,

So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness

To believe that you can make a difference in the world.

And when you find yourself more human than you thought,

may you rest in the promise of God's everlasting grace.

Go in peace, and serve the Lord.