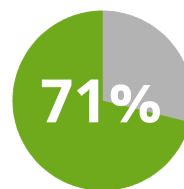


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“These Are the Words That Interest Me. Peace. Forgiveness.”



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I think fondly of my friend Etienne*, a Burundian and Anglican priest. While traveling to Burundi with a ministry partner in 2009, we dropped in on Etienne and his family. My colleague had met them some years earlier while teaching about equality of all people. As we sat together in the quickly waning late afternoon sunlight, Etienne recounted the story of how he, as a young boy, came home from herding cows in a distant pasture to find his entire family slaughtered—by their neighbors.

You see, Burundi experienced the same type of ethnic conflict as its neighboring and better known country of Rwanda. These genocidal civil wars were the product of generations of brutal and degrading colonialism, conscious pitting of one ethnic group against another, continual wounding of God-given dignity, and the resulting jealousy, anger, trauma and oppression. These soul-killing evils did just that: assassinate souls. Once the spirit of a human has been essentially killed, the soulless shell of a person can slay others without remorse. Dehumanization sets in motion a continuing cycle of dehumanization.

Twilight covered everything, bringing along an accompanying raucous rain that loudly pelted the roof, making it difficult to hear. Yet as we sat there, it was Etienne's words that caused our ears to strain, our hearts to be set on edge. Slowly, quietly, graphically, Etienne told of the cruelty, horror, anguish and fear that he and millions of others, on both sides of the conflict, suffered. Suffered is really not a strong enough word. What word would be an adequate descriptor? What word does justice to the intense physical and emotional agony and profound spiritual damage perpetrated? This is harm so traumatizing that the victim can easily become the aggressor. The abused often becomes the abuser. The cycle continues.

The night had fallen down hard around us, fully opaque, and the storm had taken out the electricity. We were enveloped in darkness, made gloomy by a single candle. Etienne's small son was now wrapped in his cradling arms. The two-year-old had been in that early evening period of time that every parent knows: the child was overtired, restless, unable to unwind and relax. Etienne had taken the little boy's shoes off to gently massage his tiny feet, hoping to woo a drowsiness capable of easing the child's nervous energy.

Etienne continued to speak. He told of his own struggle to forgive the people who not only violently hacked his family to death, but then took possession of his family's home, livestock and ferme, or farm. The former neighbors lived there on his property still, nearly forty years later. Etienne shared with us about his early shock, pain and bewilderment. He described his struggle to stifle rife anger. He had fought mightily with the question, "Is it possible to forgive when no retribution, no restitution, no justice has occurred? Yet, he had known Jesus' words about praying for enemies and the centrality of forgiveness in the Spirit-filled life. He recounted finally becoming totally exhausted. And then, somehow—miraculously—he gave in to the strong, loving arms holding him so tightly that he could struggle no longer. He knew he was caught by God's spirit speaking to his conscience, and he knew that only one balm could relieve the ache of his soul. It could not be retribution, or anger or violence. Only giving up the fight, he told us, living in radical trust and obedience, and extending forgiveness could save him to live again.

As he talked, tears welled up but did not spill out. My companion and I sat in stillness, sitting shiva, simply holding solidarity with our friend.

Each of us remained in reflection for some time. Then Etienne spoke again. What he wanted us to know is that he had not done the forgiving on his own. In fact, he did not know how he had done it. It was the Spirit's work. He was content with that for himself. But the

problem was that he was now called upon daily to help others turn away from the cycle of trauma and violence. He felt his teachings and encouragements inadequate, his prayers often dry, his wisdom too limited. The number of those needing help was overwhelming. This was his ongoing struggle. Now his face was wet.

Early the next day, out in the piercing sunshine, Etienne saw my business card. Along the bottom ran the words, peace justice equality mutual devotion forgiveness. The cards looked great, snappy. He studied it a bit and then turned to me. Pointing his finger along the bottom of the card, he sadly said, "These are the words that interest me. Peace. Forgiveness." He softly asked, "These two things...how can you help us with these two things?"

Etienne's eyes penetrated mine. His words tore open my heart. I had nothing to say. The words on the paper were, in truth, nice words that looked snappy. I could put them there because I believed in the words as Christian concepts. But Etienne needed far more from them, and from me, or from somebody, God knows. He needed ways to lead his parishioners toward healing, and I couldn't help him. I didn't know how to teach peace and forgiveness. I couldn't walk alongside and hand him tools as he tried to clear paths through confused, wrenched hearts to plant hope, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The people he loved and served needed new life. Transformation.

I think I mumbled something meaningless, I'm not sure what. But those interactions with Etienne, a big man with a tender healing heart, helped transform me. I knew I didn't want to spout nice words made vacuous because, in reality, I did not know what to do, or how to help. I wanted to ably bring learnable skills and comfort. And I somehow instinctively knew that I had to start by changing myself, my view of others, and grow in compassion. I had to carry peace within me, because I knew I couldn't give to Etienne or anyone else what I didn't have. I committed that day to learning how to be a person of peace and honestly living those words so easy to say but not practice: peace justice equality mutual devotion forgiveness.

I am praying that all people of good will, everyone open to the message of love one another and who believe transforming conflict through mutual understanding is vitally important, choose to contribute their voices, actions and resources to this holy work. I invite everyone to commit to learning, as I am learning, the sacred act of compassion and carrying peace within them. Will you join me in believing that peace is possible because Jesus told us it is possible? These are words that interested Jesus. Peace. Forgiveness.

"Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind." Paul's letter to the people of Philippi, chapter 2, verses 1&2.

* The name has been changed to maintain the safety of my Burundian friend.