

*Landmarks on the Road to Reconciliation*

Acts 8:26-38

Bishop Desmond Tutu told this story: Once upon a time, there was a family that owned a bicycle, and it was their livelihood. The father used it to get to work on time and to take his children to school. The mother used it to go to the market. Then one morning the bicycle went missing, and the family began to suffer. Their life deteriorated. Time passed and one day there was a knock on their door. The father opened the door and there stood one of their neighbors with the bicycle. ‘I am truly sorry for what I did. Will you forgive me?’ the neighbor asked. The father agreed with a nod, eyeing the bicycle. ‘Thank you’ said the neighbor. And then he turned around and left, with the bicycle.<sup>1</sup>

Today we are finishing this series of messages about the sights—the landmarks—on the road to reconciliation among people who see the world differently. People who live among their differences: racial, political, human. Reconciliation means coming together after we have been in conflict. Maybe while we are still *in* conflict. And that story captures the difficulty of it, doesn’t it? Being reconciled with a neighbor sometimes is necessary even when the problems are not fixed, when we’re a long way from fully addressing injustice, when there is no real peace. When there is still a lot of work left to do to make things right. Bishop Tutu finished that story and said, ‘Reconciliation—the shift that will change us—is what it will take to not chase that neighbor down and wrestle that bike away from him.’

I want to tell you another story today, not from the Bible, but from the place where the Bible’s stories come from. The characters in this story are real people, alive today. Here they are, in their own words.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTRG3A2g5RM> (3:35)

Robi Damelin’s son David was an officer in the Israeli army in 2002. A Palestinian sniper shot and killed him at a West Bank checkpoint, while David was doing his job. David’s killer is in an Israeli prison now. Robi has never met him, but she has tried to. She believes that if he had known her son David, he never would have killed him.

One day Robi was speaking to a group, and a Palestinian man was sitting in the audience, near the front. She could tell he wanted to say something to her so when she finished speaking, she went up to him and just said, “What?” “I just wanted to tell you that the day before your son was killed, I drove through that checkpoint and this very tall guy in uniform—David—came and said, ‘Look, I’m very sorry but I have to check your papers before I let you through. It’s my duty. It’s like paying income tax. I’ll do it as fast as I can.’ And then, this Palestinian man said, he and David got into a long conversation. ‘And the next day [he said], when I heard your son was killed, I was so sorry.’ They had exchanged their humanities, that man and her son—and knowing that has helped Robi live with her loss and put her on the path of peacemaking.

Bassam Aramin is a Palestinian. You may have noticed in the film that he limped; he had polio as a child. When Bassam was 16, he and some friends found a pile of weapons in a cave they were exploring. Some of those kids took the grenades they found and threw them—badly—in the

direction of an Israeli military patrol. No one was hurt, but they were all arrested. Bassam hadn't kept up with his friends because of his limp, but he too was arrested, convicted and sentenced to 7 years in prison.

While he was in prison, Bassam watched a TV documentary about the Holocaust. He watched it skeptically; he'd always been sure that the story of 6 million Jews being killed was an exaggeration. But when he saw the documentary, he understood something more about the enemy he'd grown up hating. He wanted to understand more. So he began to study the Holocaust, that historical moment when the Israelis had been the object of genocide. After he was released from prison, Bassam went to London and studied more; he did a master's degree in Peace Studies.

Bassam got married, had six children, lived as normal a life as you can in occupied Palestinian territory. And then, one day in January 2007, his 10-year-old daughter Abir left school with some friends and walked to a candy store. She bought one of those necklaces made up of little candy circles on a string, that children love. You eat one piece of the candy chain at a time. And as she walked out of the store onto the sidewalk, a jeep filled with Israeli soldiers drove down the street. A soldier fired a rubber bullet, randomly, just to keep order. The bullet hit Abir in the head. She died two days later.

The soldier was prosecuted; there was no reason for him to fire at children. But eventually the case was just closed; there was insufficient evidence to convict. Once in court, Bassam had a chance to talk with the man who had shot his daughter. He said, 'If any day in your life, you want to recognize that you committed a crime, you did something wrong, you harmed somebody, and you want to find me to forgive you, always I will be there. I will forgive you.' No response, but two months later, Bassam saw him again in court. 'I could see the change,' Bassam said. 'He's a human being, not a serial killer. He recognized that he killed a kid...who had tears, and a heart, exactly like him. He didn't have the courage to look at me and my wife that day either. But one day he will come. And when he comes, I will forgive him.'

In Bassam's village, a playground was built to honor his daughter Abir. A hundred Israeli soldiers came and built it.

Life is messy. We hurt one another, sometimes unforgivably. We put armies and systems in place thoughtlessly, and sometimes with the *purpose* of hurting people. Sometimes we are the family that needed that bicycle just to get along. And sometimes we are the neighbor who stole it. We are, all of us, people who are flawed, broken. We're filled with insecurity and anger and fear, sometimes with good reason and sometimes beyond rationality. Who we are comes from the story of our lives, what we were taught about how to see the world, our own histories.

Robi and Bassam met in an organization called Parents Circle. It's a group of parents—Palestinian and Israeli—who have lost a child in the conflict between their people. The organization's agenda is simply to understand each other: to recognize the immenseness of one another's loss, and to see that each side of that conflict has a different history. It's to understand that the differences between them aren't bad; they're just complicated. It's to become friends, even in a world that remains unrepaired.<sup>ii</sup>

And maybe that's the first step to any healing, any reconciliation.

There's a story in the Gospel of Mark, where Jesus heals a blind man. First Jesus spits into his eyes. Then Jesus asks him, "Do you see anything?" The man says he can see people walking around, but they look like trees. They're blurry, like a camera out of focus. Jesus touches his eyes again and this time, Mark says, his eyes opened all the way. He could see everything clearly. There are lots of things I don't understand about this story, but I wonder if it means that change happens in steps; and if the first step isn't often something as human and personal as spitting in each other's faces. Taking the very insides of ourselves and putting them on the outside with people we've decided to try to trust.

If that story is about healing coming in steps, then that helps me see the story we just read from Acts as another landmark on the same path. Phillip comes up to a vehicle that's moving. He runs alongside it for a while, and then he gets in. He sits next to a guy whose race, gender, class and nationality all made him different, even suspect. First they make a human connection, and then the conversation opens toward a common faith. "Is there any reason I couldn't be baptized?" the Ethiopian eunuch asks Phillip. Well, an hour ago there might have been several. Now, no. None at all.

I am pretty sure that we are not going to fix 400 years of racism in this country during our lifetimes, or make a final peace in the Middle East, even eliminate our resentment about that neighbor who took the bicycle. But maybe we can take a first step. Maybe our work, in this time, is to get close enough to listen to one another. Stand under someone else's story until we understand it. Humanize our histories. Exchange our humanities.

So here's what you might do sometime in the next week, or weeks, or months: Get to know someone who is so different from you, you can't possibly imagine what it feels like to be them. Listen carefully to their story. Be curious and open; ask questions until you understand. Take that story in until you can feel what he has felt, until you can tell her story as if it's your own.

As if that story matters as much as yours does. Because it does.

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<sup>i</sup> Bishop Tutu told this story in a lecture at New York University School of Law on October 23, 2006. Retold by Ishmael Beah, in the foreword to *I Am Not Your Enemy*, by Michael T. McRay

<sup>ii</sup> Stories are from *I Am Not Your Enemy*. For a literary version of these stories, read *Apeirogon*, by Colum McCann