

July 17, 2011

Pentecost 5, Proper 11, Year A

Genesis 28:10–19a

Romans 8:12–25

Matthew 6:24–30,36–43

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Just a week ago, on Saturday, July 9, tens of thousands of people gathered in Juba, the capital of South Sudan. During a ceremony, the flag of Sudan was lowered, and the new flag of South Sudan raised, and the crowd cheered. They celebrated the independence of South Sudan – a new nation, carved out of Sudan.

Sudan had become independent from Egypt and Britain in 1956. Since then, the mostly Arab north and the mostly black African tribes of the south had engaged in decades of civil war, albeit with about a decade of peace in the '70s and '80s. The civil war had re-ignited in the early '80s when the northern controlled government in Khartoum began a process of Arabization to unify the unruly and massive nation – Sudan had been roughly the size of Europe. The government imposed Shari-a law, the Islamic code of conduct.

Since 1989, the de-facto President for life of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir brutally imposed Arabization and bears responsibility for horrendous suffering. About two million southerners have been killed, and millions more displaced. The International Criminal Court has indicted him on charges of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. To no one's surprise he has not been arrested, but he won't be vacationing on the Cote d'Azur.

Many people in Sudan continue to suffer, in particular the dwindling number of Christians remaining there. Sudanese Episcopal Bishop Andudu Adam Elnail says, "We are facing the nightmare of genocide of our people in a final attempt to erase our culture and society from the face of the earth." On Thursday, the Episcopal News Service reported the discovery of a mass grave, indicating mass killings, discovered next to the compound of an Episcopal church.

That Christianity exists in Sudan is astonishing. A few decades ago there were very few. Foreign missionaries had been expelled in 1964, and they had made, or so it seemed, little impact on the indigenous animist religions. They had tried to introduce Western education and worship with little, if any, success. I notice with Jesus often what appears to have been a disaster or a failure bears tremendous fruit.

Today South Sudan, a country of maybe ten million, is mostly Christian. During years of fierce persecution, the Episcopal Church of Sudan has grown to

five million members, twice the size of the Episcopal Church here. How did that stunning growth happen? What made Christianity attractive?

During the decades of civil war, many southerners took refuge in big Arab cities, and they found themselves isolated and separated from their ways and traditions. Many found solidarity and acceptance in Christianity, and it became a way to distinguish themselves and to reject Shari-a and Arabization as well as colonialism. When they returned home, they brought Christianity. The Diocese of Bor, the home of the Lost Boys of Sudan, had only four parishes and four priests in the early '80s. A decade later it had 230 parishes and 120 priests. One particularly charismatic Bishop of Bor is reported to have confirmed 10,000 people in a day.¹

A man walking amid the throngs in last weekend's celebrations carried a hand-painted sign that said: "From today our identity is southern and African, not Arabic and Muslim."² From the reports I've read, it seems that Christianity has helped Southern Sudanese re-define themselves and renew their identity. They appear to have united under Christianity to distinguish themselves from their oppressors, and my hope is that the positive, non-ethnic aspects of Christian identity continue to strengthen there, that they and all Christians, you and me, see and identify ourselves not by what we are not, but primarily by what we are: adopted children of God, members of God's family, part of Jesus Christ himself.

The positive Christian vision of what humanity can be has inspired many remarkable acts of courage and generosity there. A couple years ago when Ugandan rebels attacked southern Sudan, ten thousand refugees suddenly appeared at a town of Mundri, a town of about ten thousand, and like most Sudanese towns quite poor. A reporter described it:

Townspeople and refugees alike gathered at the cathedral, and the church agreed to take the refugees in, with each Mundri family making room for a refugee family under its roof. Tribe did not matter: all were fed and housed for seven days, until the United Nations relief began arriving. Why are you doing this? the guests asked. Because God wants us to, was the reply. How will we all survive? The Lord will provide.³

Their faith and love gives me hope for what I might be. It shows us true Christian faith and identity, what we hope we're becoming.

In today's passage from his letter to the Romans, Paul is writing about our identity in Christ, that we see ourselves as adopted children of God, that we accept this new life as God's beloved children, and we go forward not timid, not fearful, but expectant, trusting that God is a loving father, and living with confidence that we are have an inheritance more glorious than our wildest

dreams and longings. Like Jesus himself, we go through hard times, but it all comes out well. We can trust our identity in Christ.

In 1997 Gary McPherson, a musician, did a study to figure out why some children became musicians and others didn't.⁴ He randomly selected 157 children as they chose an instrument and began to learn how to play it. Some mastered their instrument and developed as musicians. Others didn't. McPherson started looking for a good indicator of whether a child would become a musician. He found that it didn't have much to do with having a high IQ, or strong math skills, or a good ear, or a sense of rhythm.

The best predictor was how the children responded to the question: How long do you think you will play that instrument? The children who expected to play for only a short time typically did not develop into musicians. Those who expected to play for a few years did alright. But some in essence said, "I'm going to play it forever. I'm going to be a musician." Those children developed into musicians. They identified with what they wanted to be. "I'm going to be a musician." That attitude, that aspiration, that vision of their future fueled their development. It motivated them to do the work.

How we define ourselves makes an enormous difference in how we live: our behavior, our decisions, our attitudes. Seeing ourselves as children of God organizes our life, gives us a vision of what real life and vitality is. Our identity as children of God is not rigid. We grow and learn as children grow and learn. We can re-invent ourselves. What it means to each of us to be a child of God evolves. As we go through life, we adjust so we don't become stuck, lifeless.

In our culture many other visions of what we might be compete for our allegiance. Not long ago I heard Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, talking about what our culture offers. He wondered about the influence financial institutions have on us and asked, "What are the sorts of behavior we reward?"⁵ What do you think? I thought, "It's often highly aggressive, highly competitive, highly self-seeking, highly manipulative, highly individualistic behavior. It's often greed and ruthlessness."

Then as he continued to talk Rowan Williams answered his own question with a question, "Have we not begun to create a kind of human being, whose default setting is really profoundly selfish, profoundly introverted?" What do you want to be: master of the universe or child of God?

Of course, most of us are attracted to both identities. We're split. I come to mass, and rely on this community of Christian friends, to help renew my identity in Christ, my sense of what really matters, to help keep me from going too far off the rails.

In today's letter, Paul mentions two aspects of our identity in Christ. First, we should expect to be part of the sufferings of this present time. Most of us are blessed that we haven't had to endure starvation, persecution, violence, and the suffering of so many Sudanese, but we all have travails and challenges – in every home, in every heart there's hurt, scars from loss and disappointment, from injustice, abuse, loneliness, illness. Who does not groan inwardly? We all do.

Things are not all the way we want. We try to be grateful for what is, and to find blessings in what is, but we can't be entirely satisfied with what is. We want the future to be different. And this is a second aspect of our identity in Christ. We have hope. The suffering today, what's wrong today, does not compare to what will be, the glory that awaits us, the inheritance we're sure to have.

If everything now was okay, we wouldn't need hope. People who have hope have experienced pain and loss, but we do not let it defeat us. We hold to a vision for a better future. Otherwise we'd have a Stepford existence: conformist, robotic, docile, submissive, bleak, passionless.

Hope is the knowledge that new things are possible. Hope motivates us to work for that better future so that it's becoming present now, so that we experience renewal, re-invention, re-creation now. Hope revives our imagination of what human beings can be. Hope helps us see our place in God's family, that we are his beloved daughters and sons.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

¹ Jason Byassee, "How the Church Grew in South Sudan," *Christian Century*, December 14, 2010, pp. 31–36.

² Maggie Fick, "South Sudanese Savor Independence," *The Washington Post*, July 10, 2011.

³ Byassee.

⁴ David Brooks, *Social Animal*, Random House (2011), pp. 134–35.

⁵ Rowan Williams, Crisis and Recovery book launch, September 28, 2010. <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/941/crisis-and-recovery-book-launch-28th-september>