

ODD BODIES – a SERMON

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I knew there was something odd about this congregation when I got a call from your pastor, Rev. Nelson Okanya inviting me to speak on your international day. As a Catholic priest it is not every day that I receive a call from a Mennonite pastor inviting me to speak to a Mennonite congregation. This was a first. However, when I realized that Harold Camping had predicted that the end of the world would be May 21, I thought oh perhaps this was some kind of joke? Pastor Nelson knew that we were all going to be whisked away at 6 pm May 21 – so as a final joke on an unsuspecting Catholic priest was to invite him to an event the day after the end of the world! Part apparently the end of the world did not come (or let me put it this: you and I were not whisked away together with the elect – we still have a lot to work on!); and we are here this morning. Still, it still feels odd to me. Being here just outside the U.S. Capitol makes it even more odd! I am never sure when I come to DC – whether to celebrate the moment as a pilgrimage (to a shrine), or to dread it! At any rate, I find myself – at a Mennonite congregation outside DC – over my head - and you my dear friends are way over your heads, for having invited me. This is odd. But of course that is what the church ought to be - the Body of Christ. What an odd body! This is the oddness that Paul is speaking about in the text of scripture this morning, Romans 1: 1-13. In the text, Paul speaks about the different members that make up this body. However, the fact that the Body of Christ has many members, which are all different, and yet all belong together as one body – that does not make Christ’s body an odd body. All bodies are like that. That is not what makes the Body of Christ an odd body. What makes it odd is its location and mission in the world. That is why Paul frames the discussion of the different parts of the Body of Christ with the crucial verse: “Do not conform yourselves to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you make discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”

That is what makes the Body of Christ unique and odd. It does not fit within the categories (the standards of this age) – that is what makes it odd. And yet, for Paul that is the only way that this body is able to seek what the will of God is - what is good and pleasing and perfect.

There is something about being a community of immigrants that places us in a unique place where we might be able to understand what Paul is talking about. For the full force of Paul's exhortation to the Romans is to call the Christians to a kind of "immigrant" existence. To be the Body of Christ is to be an immigrant community. That is why for CCF to have members representing more than 40 countries is particularly significant. And so, when I think about what Paul is saying in relation to your mission at CCF – and your location here in the nation's capital, I see CCF as uniquely positioned to live out Paul's exhortation. The celebration of this your International day provides a good opportunity to reflect on and remember what an odd body CCF is – but even more significantly, the church of Christ is called to be in the world. I would like to share four stories, which help me personally to make sense of – and thus real – this sense or Christ's body as an odd presence in the world.

The first story is about my own experience of growing up – and how that taught me that to be the body of Christ in the world is to learn to speak with an accent. Since many of you have been reading my book, *Mirror to the Church*, you know my story. I was born and raised in Uganda. So, I consider myself a Ugandan. I grew up eating Matooke and speaking Luganda. But my parents were born and grew up in Rwanda. In the late 40s they migrated and settled in Uganda. Even though my parents learnt Luganda, they always spoke it with an accent. It was not only the accent, in a conversation, especially when they were animated, they would even at times go back and forth between Luganda and Kinyarwanda; or throw in one word of Kinyarwanda here and there... Quite often the one they were talking to would only get a sense of what they were talking about, and not the full meaning.

As kids, my siblings and I always felt embarrassed by our parents' accent. This was particularly true when our friends from school would come over. But also, my father, a very outgoing, dynamic and engaging person, had decided to run, and actually was elected, the

PTA president, even though he himself never went to school. So, in his role, he would regularly come to school for meetings- and occasionally even address the whole assembly. It was so embarrassing!

So, my brothers and I undertook the challenge to try to get our parents speak proper. My father would not even give us the time. But with mother we tried. We would have her repeat a sentence or a word. She would try. We would correct her, and she would turn to us surprised and say, 'that is exactly what or how I just said it.' I guess she did not even know that she spoke Luganda with an accent. Unknowingly, that was a key lesson about Christian faith; and the Body of Christ. I read Paul's statement in Rom 12:2 and immediately say: that is about learning to speak with an accent. Otherwise the Body of Christ just conforms to the patterns of the place it is located, and becomes just 'American', Republican or Democratic – which makes it uninteresting.

Secondly, I think about the story of a young man, Melance Ntahompagaze, whom I meant on my first visit (my first pilgrimage to Burundi in Aug 2009.), and how that how taught me that to be the body of Christ in the world is to learn to live in the in - between.

Burundi is a very small country – south of Rwanda. It is a very beautiful county; and also a predominantly Christian country. However, with the long history of ethnic hatred between Hutu and Tutsi, the blood of tribalism tends to run deeper than the waters of baptism. The social history of Burundi is a history of ethnic massacres and counter massacres. In 1993 there was a massacre at Kibimbi, not too far from Gitega: a hutu mob rounded up tutsi students and teachers from the Friends (Quaker school), along with some neighbors, and crammed them into a gas station, and set the gas station on fire. Over 120 people were killed. Melance together with a few others survived the smoke, and heat and crawled out of the smoldering ruins. At first Melance did not what to do. Most of his friends were dead. With time he got together with a few other young people, some Hutu and some Tutsi, and they organized themselves into a peace-team – committed to live as friends, and to go into the communities and invite Hutu and Tutsi to form 'peace-teams'. An organization, MiParec (ministry of reconciliation under the cross) supports their work. They peace teams –small teams of hutu-tutsi together, work together in fields, celebrate weddings and other events,

and go into the villages and on hillsides, inviting both Hutu and Tutsi to a new life of friendship and fellowship. It has not been easy, Melance admitted to me, “most of the times we are suspected by both communities. But the peace teams have also been a source of friendships.”



Melance Ntahompagaze (middle) in front of the Kibimba memorial

When I read Paul’s words, “Do not be conformed to the standards of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, I think about Melance and the peace teams, and the unique space; the space of in- between, a kind of wild space that the peace teams are. But more specifically I think about that young man, Melance. His name “Ntahompagaze” in Kirundi means “no where to stand”. He is living true to his name. It is something like this, I think that Paul is talking about. For to be a Christian – to not confirm to the patterns of this world’ is to be “Ntahompagaze” (no where to stand). That is what the story of Antioch confirms. Jews, Greeks, Gentiles came together for the first time, as a new community. It is

in Antioch that the followers were first called Christian (Acts 11:26). They did not know what else to call them. They were neither Greek nor Jew. They called them 'Ntahompagaze' – followers of a strange way...

Being an immigrant already somehow prepares one for the life of Christian Ntahompagaze. For the gift that comes with being an immigrant is the gift of often having more than one home. The challenge of course is that in itself makes one 'homeless' – as one never fully belongs to any one of them. I am particularly aware of this gift and challenge. I remember my own experience growing up. My parents would constantly talk about going home, and plan for a visit to Rwanda, but as soon as we were in Rwanda, they would immediately talk about going back home. This constant going back – this in between – meant that we never fully belonged to any one particular group – but to both. If it meant that we never full fit in the politics of any one group. The story was made even more complex when we were in Rwanda by the fact that my parents were Hutu and Tutsi. It is this 'Ntahompagaze' experience that creates a deep identity crisis. I continue to feel this same 'confusion' as Hutu-Tutsi, Rwanda – Uganda; African – American; A catholic priest – at a Methodist university: so, "who am I"? Who are "my people"? I think it is this kind of confused, Mestizo identity – that the Christian calling points to as it prepares for a new sense of belonging – a "new we" – beyond tribe, race, nation, denomination. Something about Paul's words, "Do not conform yourselves to the patterns of this world" seem to confirm this experience, which many immigrants can relate to.

That is why, in reading this text, I also think about the story of Abram and Sarai and how that has confirmed to me that that God creates this odd body the church, through re-location. In real estate it is all about 'location, location, location'. In Christian life it is about re-location, relocation, and relocation! Ask Abram and Sarai. They were both advanced in years. They had lived a full life and were almost ready for retirement. Their call to "leave your father's land to a new land I will show you" (Gen 12:1-3) could not have been but a total and unwelcome surprise. Even though it had promises of blessings attached, I could almost hear Abram saying: "Who?" "Me?" – "Thank you, but no thank you. You have already given us a lot (well, Sarai and I do not have any children, but see what else you have

given us....). We are just fine.” But I could also hear God pressings on: “Abram, you do not understand: In a way it is about you and Sarai, but it is really not about you. “I will make you a great nation; and I will bless you. I will make your name great – **so that** others may find a blessing in you.”

I do not know what brought you to America in the first place. I hope CCF provides an opportunity for people to tell the stories of their coming to America. Each one, I am sure has more than an interesting story. I suspect there must have been a dream – to make it in life; to make a living; perhaps it was a promise of success and blessings! It might also be that God is already making true this dream: you are not only able to take care of your family here, but every month, you are in the line at the Western Union, or MoneyGram, sending back support, education, medical care to others in your home country or village. Others are perhaps already finding blessings in you. That is very good. Beyond these material blessings, the point of your being drawn from your land is for you to be a new community, a new people. The promise of Abram is for this new people (a great nation; a great multitude); that is why Abram is given a new name, Abraham (Gen 17:5: the father of a multitude); and Sarai becomes Sarah (17:15-6), “blessed”). It is new view of this new people – multitude – that Abram and Sarai are called out from their land. This is the biblical story. It is a long story, which does not end with the covenant at Sinai, but with the multitude of Revelation 7:9 “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.”

Speaking about palms of victory reminds me that there is another story, another angle, to this odd existence that Paul speaks about in Rom 12: 2: “Do not conform yourselves to the patterns of this world...” The verse immediately before that, Paul speaks about sacrifice: “I urge you brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.” There is a lot of urgency and passion in Paul’s words: “I urge you... I appeal to youto offer your bodies as a sacrifice.” It is as if Paul was aware that this is a call that could very easily be overlooked. Given its cost. The

odd in between into which the church is called is a place of sacrifice, even martyrdom. The story of the young seminarians at Buta continues to speak to me very profoundly as a reminder of the sacrifice, this deep sense of worship, which reveals the true victory of what the church as the body of Christ is about. This is another story I discovered on my first pilgrimage to Burundi in August 2008.

One evening in the fall of 1997, shortly before dawn: militias group, headed by a fierce woman commander, attacked the seminary; they ordered the high school students to separate, Hutu on one side, and Tutsi on the other. Three times the order was given, but the students refused to separate. So, the commander ordered the rebels to open fire. The students fell, and others tried to escape. In all, 40 students were killed. The rector heard the gunshots from his house, and crawled under his bed. One of the students who had been wounded ran to the rector's house, and called for the rector to open the door for him. When the rector opened the door, the boy dashed inside the small house, and gasping for breath told the rector: "Father, we have won. They told us to separate and we refused. We have won." And he collapsed and died!

As we heard the story told to us by Fr. Zacharie Bukuru, who was the rector then. As we stood in the cemetery with the neat rows of 40 graves, and looked at the "martyrs of unity" mural with the painting of the young seminarian martyrs holding palms in their hands. As we drove back to Bujumbura that evening, it was the words of the seminarian – the words of the seminarian, "we have won" kept ringing in my ears. His and his friends' sense of victory haunted me. It is still does. Is it something like this Paul has in mind when he says, "I urge you....offer your bodies as a living sacrificedo not be conformed the patterns of this world...so that you can seek what is good, pleasing and perfect!"?

Odd bodies. Odd Victory. We won!



Buta Martyrs gravesite and memorial

As we come together here at CCF on this international day to celebrate who are the Body of Christ, drawn from all nations, languages, cultures and tribes, let us recognize what an odd body we are. Let us heed Paul's encouraging invitation: "Be transformed by the renewal of your minds..." Let us therefore dare to be God's new people in the world; always standing firm to resist the tribalism of race, nationality, ethnicity that would let us live as divided people. Let us through our accents and accent constantly pin to that new future. A future that is good, pleasing and perfect according to the will of God who called us together. Let us be encouraged and inspired to know by the examples of Melance Ntahompagaze and his friends; by the seminarians of Buta, Sarai and Abram to know that we are not alone. And that in fact, we this cloud of witnesses, we too can already say, "We won." And for this victory, may all honor, power and glory belong to our God. Amen.