

## **Ubuntu: I Am Because We Are**

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**Ezekiel 29:1-10a, Luke 12:16-21**

I wish someone had raised the question during that January interim at Macalester, was it my sophomore year? Someone, maybe an international student from the African continent?... It may have shifted everything, I wonder.... Pierced a hole in the western philosophical tradition so many of us were being shaped in... I wonder a lot now 40 years later...

I think it was an interim class, one of those intensive classes in the middle of the coldest, darkest time of the year, January in Minnesota, when I took a class on *existentialism!* Intense, to say the least. 10 below, dark at 5, only one subject matter for that entire month, huddled together, in conversation, with a dozen students and a professor every morning and then alone in the stacks in the library every afternoon reading Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus... thinking, thinking, thinking about the mortals search for meaning in a meaningless existence. "Life is absurd." "We suffer, then we die." All of this existential philosophy of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century built upon the bedrock of the western philosophical tradition 300 years earlier with Descartes's dictum: "I think therefore I am." (why is it always the French?, some secret ingredient in those baguettes?) All of this is to say that the only true reality is in your mind, you alone, in this existence.

Yes, I wish a student had raised their hand and said: "But what about Ubuntu?"

This, another, very different foundational belief, from another civilization, (not from the western European enlightenment tradition), Ubuntu belief challenges, pierces even, that hyper individualistic, lonely, existential belief. Ubuntu. "I am because we are." Or you can translate it... "A person is a person through other persons." This bedrock belief says that a human being is part of a larger more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental, and spiritual world.

I think therefore I am..... or?..... I am because we are?.... Hmmmmmm.....

This past Thursday we learned that the Minnesota Lakota artist Dyani White Hawk won a prestigious MacArthur foundation grant. Known as a genius grant, her first words were not about herself. She sees a big web of people: She says "That web is so immense. I don't think it's possible to fully understand it. I just feel like it's generations worth of sacrifice, love, prayer, and work. And I'm grateful for it." She's been raised with an ubuntu kind of belief.

Our scripture today features two very self-centered characters, kind of the opposite of dyani White Hawk.

In the gospel of Luke Jesus tells the parable of the rich man who happened to own really rich soil—good farmland. I wonder if he inherited it from his ancestors through some kind of homesteading act... He thought to **himself**, what should **I** do? **I** don't have any place to store **my** crops. Then he said, This is what **I'll** do. **I** will tear down **my** barns and build bigger ones. **I** will store **my** extra grain in them. **I'll** say to **my** soul, ...(he's still talking to himself. What a lonely person...) **I** will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' "We may imagine that his greedy wealth has isolated him. But he does not care or even notice. He knows himself to be self-made, self-sufficient, so he never even looks around for another..."

And in the Hebrew scripture, Pharaoh is so self-centered and deluded that he believes that the Nile River, one of the world's great rivers, like the Mississippi, not only belongs to him, but that he made it. He said (stomping his foot and getting angry like a toddler) "My Nile is my own. I made it for myself." What gall! The truth is just the opposite. The Nile gave the land of Egypt its abundance.

Does this sound familiar? This imagined sense of autonomy.

Individualism has always been a strong and valued part of our American culture. But it needs to be held in good balance with another strong aspect of our culture— communalism. Think town meetings. But something has been happening the last several years. This balance is being undermined by a troubling and even dangerous movement towards hyper-individualism. Often called liberty, the word itself liberty seems to magically rile people up. Liberty is being defined now in an extremely troubling and even dangerous way. And this liberty mood is spreading like wildfire across our land via the internet and the radio.

No gun control

No mandatory vaccination

No regulation

Government, hands off... get out of my life... I'm an American.

This supposedly unencumbered reach for wealth, control and power, clothed in the mantle of liberty, hooks those as Walter Brueggeman writes "wannabees who have no chance whatsoever at becoming wealthy or powerful." The Pharaohs and larger barn billionaires are stirring up these wannabees in dangerous ways in our land.

Where is God in all of this?

What does God say to the rich man in our bible story? It's jarring. Right after the rich man speaks to his own soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." God says to him with cutting clarity: "You fool!"

And Pharaoh, what does God say to him?

I am against you,  
Pharaoh king of Egypt,  
the great dragon sprawling  
in the midst of its channels,  
saying, "My Nile is my own;  
I made it for myself."

And again, for emphasis, just verses later, "Because you<sup>9</sup> said, "The Nile is mine, and I made it," <sup>10</sup> therefore, I am against you."

And God punishes Pharaoh and Egypt for their distorted life philosophy and the resultant societal set up. Another way to look at this is that there are consequences when things get wildly out of balance. Consequences when the people forget the Creator's intention for shared abundance. After 40 years of punishment by an angry God, the chastened Egyptians are led back home. It is written: "And I God will restore the fortunes of Egypt, and bring them back to the land of their origin, but there they will be a lowly kingdom." God right sizes this nation's ego, makes them small.

Oh you Pharaohs and rich landowners, when you forget Ubuntu, things go terribly awry and the creator gets angry, understandably angry, really angry.

Oh you who are puffed up with ego, you need to work on this because it is not good for your soul. Otherwise, on your death bed you will realize that you were a fool.

Besides, your belief is all wrong. It is not true. It is not possible. No one is self-sufficient. God provides enough and we are all interconnected. You are living a falsehood.

So interconnected we are... so dependent on one another, we are! All of us are dependent on our collective welfare.

And there's more truth to be had... Let's pull down the façade right now. It's not only the poor in our land who "receive welfare." "The average rich and middle-class family draws on the same number of government benefits as the average poor family." Think student loans. Think homeowner subsidies. Think all the tax breaks that mostly benefit the upper classes. The

political scientist Suzanne Mettler posits that every year the richest American families receive almost 40% more in government subsidies than the poorest families. Is it because of the welfare delivery system that we delude the wealthy and shame the poor? “We could flip the delivery system to achieve the same ends, say extending welfare to the poor by cutting payroll taxes for low-income workers while replacing the mortgage interest deduction with a check mailed to the homeowner each month. Same difference.” (Desmond)

Sorry I’m getting a little wonky. That’s not my job as a preacher.

In faith-based organizing there’s something called an “agitation”. During a one on one you learn what a person’s deepest passion is, what motivates them, what keeps them up at night... And then, in days to come, you agitate them to actually do something about it .... You remind them that their calling is stronger than any obstacle.

Walter Brueggemann, a Hebrew scholar and public theologian, he’s been agitating me the last couple of months, through his book, and it’s a very slim book, [Ancient Echoes, Refusing the Fear-Filled, Greed-Driven Toxicity of the Far Right.](#) The seeds for many of the sermons this month come from Brueggeman. He writes:

*“I believe that the communities directly funded by the biblical tradition, the synagogue and the church, are summoned and authorized to speak out on the force of right-wing ideology on behalf of hospitable neighborliness. It is now high time for the synagogues and their rabbis, and the churches and their pastors, to speak out about this crisis moment in our society. These communities have a deep stake in the flourishing of democracy, and a solid reason for refusing and resisting the propensity of fascism that wants to reduce political influence to the privileged and entitled few. I have no doubt, Brueggeman continues, that if there is to be a sustained resistance to the current turn among us from greed through fear to violence, it will be based in such communities that have staying power, courageous leadership, and that are deeply and knowingly grounded in the biblical text.”*

Mayflower church, are you in? Are you ready to resist?... Are you ready to spread this message? Are you preparing yourself to articulate the truth in your own habitats, your neighborhood, your work, your family... How will *you* resist the fear filled, greed driven toxicity of the far right? How will *you* help our nation regain its beautiful balance of individualism and collectivism? Are you willing to show up when you are called? Is the ubuntu mindset slowly but surely entering you, coloring how you look at the world? Shaping how you see reality?...

Descartes and Sartre, move over...

## Sources

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