

HOLDING EVERYTHING TOGETHER

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends, I bring greetings to you from Burundi in general and those from the Kamenge Friends Church in particular. I have been the General Secretary of the Burundi Yearly Meeting of Friends since 1993 until the year 2003. Now I am pastor of the Kamenge Friends Church, a congregation of about 600 people who meet every Sunday for worship, fellowship and sharing the word of God. My wife Felicity and our children send their greetings and I have with me one of them, Daniella who can speak on behalf of the others.

Along with my ministry as pastor, I am the founder and coordinator of a local, independent and interfaith organization called Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Services. It is a ministry that I clearly felt God calling me into, to serve the needy and to heal the wounds of the victims of various types of the effects of war.

My country Burundi, which is located in the central part of Africa, East of the Democratic Republic of Congo, West of Tanzania and South of Rwanda, was one of the most beautiful countries of Africa. In fact, for years some people called it the Switzerland of Africa because of its many green hills, good climate and most importantly its ethnic people, the Hutu, the Tutsi and the Twas who share the same language, same culture and same background.

Unfortunately, Burundi has been experiencing tragic political and social conflict between the Hutu which compose 85% and the Tutsi which compose 14% of the total population. Bloody events, series of killings and genocidal activities have darkened the Burundi history as early as 1961, 1965, 1972, and 1993 until today. You can imagine that everyone has been affected by these atrocities. The killings of 1993 alone, when the 1st Hutu democratically elected president, Melchior Ndadaye, was assassinated by a group of Tutsi soldiers, took the lives of more than 250,000 people, both Hutu, Tutsis and Twas. And between 400,000 and 500,000 in different countries. Another 350,000 people live as internally displaced in 226 camps in various sites within Burundi, according to a 2004 UNICEF report. And this war situation has now been aggravated by the HIV and AIDS pandemic.

More recently, a regional initiative was put in place by presidents of countries around Burundi, which also were affected by the Burundi crisis, either by the flow of refugees, or the formation of armed rebel movements, and which threatened security and peace in the whole region. The initiative's objective was to help mediate the two warring ethnic groups, Hutu and Tutsi to agree on a power sharing system and to restore peace in the country.

It was the late former Tanzania president Julius Nyerere who first brought the Hutu and Tutsi politicians to the negotiating table. When Nyerere died, former South African president Nelson Mandela took over the leadership of the Burundi Peace process, and now the vice president of South Africa Jacob Zuma is the mediator, with Yoweri Museveni, president of Uganda as the chairperson of the Regional Presidents' Council that monitors the peace process.

Today a peace agreement known as the Arusha Peace Accord has been signed by almost all the 34 political parties. In December 2003 a cease-fire was signed between the Government and the strongest armed movement FDD-CNDD which has now turned into a political party. Only one armed movement FNL-Palipehutu has not yet signed but it has agreed to come to the negotiating table because of the international community and the strong UN peace keeping force that is vividly present in Burundi.

While, I recognize the need for the involvement of the international community in the Burundi conflict, I believe it must be a responsibility of Burundi people to come to a realization that they have a role to play in establishing lasting peace by themselves. We Burundians must embark on a process to promote a culture of peace that our children and grandchildren will inherit.

This culture of peace is possible. God has created us in His image and the image of God in us embodies strong and practical human values that unfortunately we have not applied. Those values include a capacity to make peace, a capacity to love, being able to forgive and a possibility of reconciliation, etc. I agree that for the case of Burundi, those traumatic events have caused those great values to go to sleep. The psychotherapists may call this a "state of the left hand brain that has gone down". If this is true, we need a type of healing that will awaken the values in us to their full potential.

Our organization Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Services is trying to play a role. After realizing that the healing of our nation will be a long and difficult process, we decided to adopt a simple approach which could be applied by everyone and through which a healing process can be channeled. We called it Compassionate and Active Listening.

As an organization, we have trained so far about 800 on the subject of Understanding Trauma, Listening Techniques. We have established 24 listening centers, 34 support groups of people who

meet once a week to listen to one another, explore their common situation for a better healing process. We believe that compassionate listening is a strong and effective remedy for the healing of our nation, and it works.

In neighboring country, Rwanda, where about 1,000,000 people were slaughtered in about 100 days of genocidal atrocities, they have put big posters at public areas and road junctions which read: THE TRUTH WILL HEAL OUR NATION. In our healing sessions, we encourage people to share their experience and listen to one another compassionately. As the speak truth to one another, even if it may be painful to recall the horrors they have seen, to repeat the awful words or sound they have heard and for the listeners to hear the crimes committed by their own ethnic group, this process has proved to be effective.

Listening to one another is an act that has been used even during the peace negotiations in Arusha. I have been privileged to attend one of the negotiation processes as an observer in the year 1999. Nelson Mandela used a mechanism where he allowed every politician to put in words whatever he had on heart regarding his/her experience in politics. Most of them spoke about hardship, frustrations, threats and losses they have encountered in the Burundi governance. I was not sure if Mandela used this method therapeutically for healing purposes but as a result, after these politicians listened to each other not compassionately, I saw them share glasses of beer in the hotel where they were staying. A healing process had begun!

It is my opinion that healing is dependent on the need for one another. It is a person that God uses to heal one another. No one will say that he/she will heal him/herself without an in put, encouragement and care from somebody else. The Banyamulenge of Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo say: “One tree is not a forest”, which simply say that one person on his/her own is useless. In South Africa the Zulu say that “A person is a person because of other persons”. Also, it was Ambassador Adlai Stevenson who said on 9th June 1965 at the Economic and Social Council in Geneva that the earth is “a little spaceship on which we are traveling together dependent on its vulnerable supplies of air and soil” (John Stott, 1998). Which I interpret to mean that being conscience of one another and the realization that I must use the resources at my disposal knowing that somebody needs it, will make me peaceful. It also means a respect for one another and that my neighbor’s peace is my peace.

In the Bible, Paul talks about the same concept when he wrote to the Colossians in the 1st Chapter and verse 17, that “In Christ all things hold together”. This the them of our gathering today. While I would not want to dwell on a theological debate, let me simply suggest only three points for our reflection on the issue of “Holding together”.

First, let us be reminded that Colosse was a cosmopolitan city, lying in the Lycus River Valley in what is now Turkey, on the major trade route between Ephesus and the Euphrates River. Its population was composed of Greek, Jews, Phrygians and the Roman army veterans. (Revell, 1990)

Even though Paul did not establish a church in Colosse, there was a congregation of believers to whom a man called Epaphras was ministering.

“You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf” (1:7).

It was this person, Epaphras who visited Paul in Rome during his imprisonment around 62 AD, and told him about this group of believers. It was the news that Epaphras shared that prompted Paul to write this “In Christ” Epistle. Some Bible commentators say that there were serious errors in their beliefs that Paul wanted to address, even though he started his letter by describing them as being “holy and faithful” (1:2).

One of these errors was the exaltation of elemental spirits, that is, angels or planetary lords as intermediary between people and God:

“Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions” (2:18).

Another error was the emphasis on ascetic and liturgical practices that were thought to produce spirituality:

“Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day (2:16).

Paul’s response to these errors was to tell them in details who Christ is. He believed that if they knew who Christ really is, they would not be confused or remain in error. I remember the story of the Anglican Archbishop Luwum in Uganda, during the regime of Idi Amin Dada. In speaking about a good governance, he said that “it was no use to argue that a stick is crooked. You only need to simply bring a straight one and lay alongside it”. The concept here is that knowing Christ makes one capable to differentiate what is wrong and what is right. Unfortunately in many of our Friends meetings we tend to imitate the errors that Paul rebuked in the Colossian congregation. Sometimes we tend to look

at ourselves as not being able to approach God until an elder does it for us. Or do practices that exclude others during worship with an excuse that they produce spirituality.

Let us look at our three points.

The Force behind holding together:

According to this letter, Paul says that what makes all things hold together is Jesus Christ. That is why he takes time to teach the Colossians about Christ's supremacy, that Christ is:

- a) Image of God, v.15
- b) Firstborn of Creation, v.15
- c) By him things were created, v.16
- d) Things were created by him and for him, v.16
- e) He is before all things, v.17
- f) In him all things hold together, v.17
- g) The head of the church, v.18
- h) He is supreme because: he is beginning and firstborn, v.18
- i) God's fullness dwell in him, v.19
- j) In him God reconciles with all, v.20

Since we are not Colossians and we know who Christ is, let me suggest that the force behind holding all things together is LOVE, that we get when we believe in Christ. I am not saying that those who do not believe in Christ do not have love. I am saying that their loving actions are hindered without and greatly facilitated by the belief in Him.

Love knows no barriers. It transcends beyond cultural, national and spiritual backgrounds. Love makes it possible to hold together former enemies. In 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, Paul tells us what love is:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Melchiad is a Hutu who loved his Tutsi neighbors. During the time when Hutu were killing Tutsis, he took three Tutsis and hid them under the banana leaves in a hole where he kept his bananas before he squeezed them into banana beer. When Tutsi soldiers came to rescue Tutsis, Melchiad did not run away as all other Hutus in the village did. He stayed around his house to show the Tutsi soldiers where he hid their fellow Tutsis. Unfortunately, the some of the soldiers tortured Melchiad out of anger for the Tutsi that were killed by the villagers. We treated Melchiad even though he is today on crutches, but he tells his story of risking his life for others with a mile on his face.

The inclusiveness of holding together:

Paul uses a small but powerful word to say what holds together. Note the term “All”. Paul says, “all things...!” Even though he does not say “all people”, I believe he implies relational beings that are capable of holding together. Even if it may not be what Paul is saying, I would like to suggest that we Friends hold together. Not only Friends but all human being should hold together. I believe it was God’s intention when He created us to first of all hold together with Him and then hold together with one another and finally hold together with all the creation. Remember, what we said earlier that we are who we are because of others. We may be from different backgrounds, different races, different theological persuasions or school of thought. We may be blacks, whites and colored as they used to say in South Africa. We may speak different languages. It does not matter whether or not we are evangelicals, liberals and conservatives. We must ALL hold together in LOVE.

This holding together is inclusive. Nobody should be left out or discriminated on the basis of gender, sexual orientation or geographical background. The human rights movements have understood this truth more than churches. I once used to have a bumper sticker that I got from the American Friends Service Committee that read “No Human Being Is Illegal”. Business companies understand the strength of holding together and that is why they merge to make their profit much bigger. Look at the airline companies like KLM, Northwest and Kenya Airways holding together! Today Kenya Airways is the biggest money making airline company in Africa. It always fly full. In Uganda because the whole country held together even with those affected and infected by the HIV and AIDS, the country has been able to reduce the spread of this killer disease from 36% to 6% according to the latest statistics.

I might not know what divides you up in this country religiously and politically but the message from God to us today is that we may hold together. In Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, during the time the rebels who were then led by the late Kabila, arrived in the city to topple Mobutu Sese-Seko, there was a lot of fear and the whole city was tense for three days, according to Sita Luemba the national evangelist of the Church of Christ in Congo. But when all the different denominations held together in prayer God answered and the rebels took over with no casualties.

Holding together requires actions

There are things that we have to do when we hold together. Those who have read “Unlocking Horns: Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Burundi, by Lon Fendall and I, know that my favorite scriptures are those in the book of James where it is stressed that faith without works is dead. It is not enough to know and believe that we must hold together. We must do something. In the small western country of Benin, among the Hausa people, those who worship the same animal cannot make war with one

another. Because they are held together by the worship of that animal. They know that they cannot refuse to give their daughters to one another for marriage.

Holding together will require you to do something. It may involve you taking the courageous step to cross the gap and speak to the other side. It may be to make a telephone call or write a letter to say sorry. It may cause you to lay aside your other work to and be available to that activities. In Burundi when 4 people carry a sick person or a pregnant woman to the hospital for delivery of the baby they have hold together the balance of the stretcher. A few years ago, at Musama, about 20 women carried a log of tree on their heads, for 3 miles to make a roof of their church in construction.

Holding together may require you to be a volunteer in a ministry probably where you will have to leave the comfort of your home. It may me asked of you to make a sacrifice of your time and probably of your life. I know some American who held together with Africans in hospital ministries in Africa and as a result did not get their pension when they returned home.

It may be required of you to make a financial contribution. You may be requested to travel. You may be invited to make a speech as you have invited me. By the way, I really thank you for selecting me to be your guest speaker among many other gifted speakers and officials in those other Yearly Meetings in Africa and Europe. I had wanted to return to USA and share my work and visit people I lived with during my two years at George Fox University. I am grateful that you have made this possible.

Back to the actions of holding together. In holding together you may have to stand together with those you do not share the same opinion for the sake of the glory of God. We, in Africa, as we watched on the television, have been amazed by how the American people helped strongly and wholeheartedly the Tsunami survivals in Muslim countries which hate Americans a lot. You may have to bow down and suffer with the needy and cry with those who are crying and laugh with those who are laughing.

Those who know the Burundi churches are aware that unity among different denominations is weak because of the concept some big and old churches do not want to associate with new and small churches. But more recently, actually last month, when news spread that the population of the northern provinces of Kirundo and Muyinga were struck by a famine and that it was becoming like in Somalia some years ago or the Darful of Sudan in these days, they forgot their disunity and prejudices of one another and held together to help feed the hungry. In holding together they raised about \$40,000 within the country, something we had never held about in the Burundi history, for the church to raise such amount without a help from outside. Hundreds of young people volunteered to go and help in the distribution, something that we are calling a revival!

In conclusion, please let us reflect on those things. Let us remember that it is LOVE that must hold us together. On who hold together it is ALL. And, holding together involves ACTIONS.

Let us sing together the little chorus that says:

“Bind us together Lord”