Desmond Tutu is on my mind. For Lent this year, Fr. Eric Stelle of St. John’s Episcopal and I have been presenting every Wednesday on “The Saints for Today.” Each week, we take a look at a different Christian from history and look at how they balanced reaching out in solidarity to those who are different from them while still maintaining their principles and focus on the Gospel. This past week, I shared the story of Desmond Tutu.

Tutu, of course, was one of the leaders in the struggle to dismantle apartheid in South Africa during the last half of the 20th century. I have been amazed and humbled to learn not only of his work, but of how deeply and genuinely he cared for not only the Black South Africans suffering under and resisting apartheid, but also the White South Africans who feared, hated, and rejected him. I talked about him and told stories of his life for a half an hour on Wednesday, and I won’t repeat myself here except to tell this one story to give you a taste of what I’m talking about.

Tutu was elected Bishop of Johannesburg in a very contentious election in 1985. In fact, he wasn’t elected, he had to be appointed by the Synod of Bishops because the election stalled in the assembly. Anyway, after his appointment, one particular White priest who was a critic of Tutu’s and very opposed to his nomination fell ill and spent two weeks in the hospital. Each and every day of those two weeks, his new bishop called him to offer him support and pastoral care.

As amazing as the man and his life are, I find myself equally amazed this week by the very idea of apartheid. It seems so alien to me to have such deep-seated and ingrained distain for another human being, especially based on something as arbitrary as skin color or ethnicity. And yet, such prejudicial racism is real; so real that there is a day set aside every year—this day, March 21—to acknowledging the toll of racism and to recommit ourselves to ending it.

Although apartheid was the official government policy in South Africa, we are, of course, not strangers to the idea here in America. In our own country today, we are still dealing with the aftermath of slavery and the lasting effect it continues to have on our national consciousness. We as a nation have internalized those ideas and experiences into our social psyche. Whether we agree with them or are actively working against them, they still shape us to this day.

I was appalled to come across a quote from Hedrick Verwoerd, the one-time Minister of Native Affairs in South Africa, who said, “There is no place for [the Bantu (a native tribe)] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour ... What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice?”[[1]](#endnote-1) I was, however, equally appalled to read that Tutu himself had internalized these terrible ideas. Once when traveling on a Nigerian plane, he recalls having felt a “nagging worry” on discovering that both pilot and co-pilot were black, the result of being conditioned to think that only Whites could be entrusted with such positions of responsibility.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Racism has been ingrained in American culture almost from the very beginning. It’s been called America’s original sin. I wonder today if it might also be called America’s “old covenant.” We often talk about a covenant as a promise or a contract or an agreement, but it might just as easily describe a pattern or a paradigm, a framework that establishes how things are. Racism is a part of our national paradigm, our national covenant. Our problem—a problem shared by much of the world at this point, exported and spread by European colonialism in which America played a seminal part—is that although we ended the practice of slavery, we never changed the paradigm.

After either escaping or being emancipated from slavery, the first hurdle that Black Americans faced was the fact that they had nothing—no money, no property, no means to make a living. Everything was owned by White Americans. Folks who managed to escape sometimes found a means of supporting themselves, but after the end of the Civil War, the country had a glut of newly free, newly impoverished people with no means of supporting themselves. The solution, if you can call it that, was sharecropping: many of these people went back to work for the very people who had formerly enslaved them, receiving only a share of the crops they produced as compensation. Slavery was officially outlawed, but in essence still practiced. And thus, the old covenant continued.

If we are ever to really escape the shadow of slavery and racism, we will need a new paradigm. After apartheid ended, the nation of South Africa was faced with a massive problem: the White citizens who had formerly held all the power were still living in South Africa. The new, democratically elected government in South Africa had a choice to make. They could have done to the Whites what the Whites had done to them: they could have retaliated, simply turning apartheid against the people who had invented and used it. Or, they could have tried what America tried: institute some nominal laws and policies designed to protect freedoms and tried to pretend everything would be fine. But there was too much animosity, too much anger and frustration. Those non-solutions were part of the same old, European paradigm. So instead, the new president, Nelson Mandela, and the new Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, began bringing about a new paradigm. They formed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

This new paradigm didn’t operate under the same retributive, individualistic rules that the old apartheid government had. Those rules and patterns had caused the problem; they could not be counted on to solve it. So instead of relying on Western ideas about justice, crime and punishment, the South Africans turned to distinctly African ideas.

In many African cultures, justice is restorative rather than retributive. Simply put, this means that when someone commits a crime, the focus isn’t on catharsis for the victims or punishment for the guilty, but on health and healing for the whole community. The guilty are still held accountable, but there is an awareness that they are still a part of the community, and a communal solution must involve healing for the perpetrator as well as the wronged party, and indeed the entire community.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission heard the testimonies of people who had experienced the horrors of apartheid—violence, imprisonment, persecution, humiliation—but also those who had committed the horrors. Both persecutors and persecuted had the chance to hear from one another, to bear witness to the wrongs done and the effects of those wrongs, and then to work together to decide how to move forward and bring healing. It was a long, arduous, emotional process, one that continues today. It was far from perfect, but most of the people involved agree that it did bring about healing and began repairing the damage done by apartheid.

This is perhaps more than we can say about what’s been done in our own country to attempt to bring about healing after chattel slavery and segregation. Now, a century and a half after emancipation, many think that it’s too late to do anything, and many more wonder why we can’t just “move on.” How can we move on when we are still living under the same covenant, the same paradigm, that created the problem?

The thought of trying something new is frightening. Those of us with privilege are afraid of losing that privilege, of being forced to give up what we consider to be ours. People worry about opening old wounds, about the difficulty of figuring out what is fair and just, about being taken advantage of, or being perceived as taking advantage. The same old antebellum fears wear new faces and convince us that our safety or social order is in peril. Perhaps for these reasons, conversations about reparations or criminal justice reform have yet to gain much traction.

If we are to move ahead, we will need to find a new way of being, to make a new covenant with one another. Of course it’s frightening to consider starting over from scratch, to be faced with the possibility of failure. I can only imagine that similar fears gripped the hearts of those who first heard Jeremiah preach about God’s new covenant. When a people’s entire identity is founded on the old covenant, any mention of a new covenant can be terrifying, no matter how rosy the promise.

It is for this reason that Jesus says, “Those who love their life lose it.” He is not issuing a commandment or making a threat, he’s stating a fact. As long as we remain focused on ourselves and our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of those in our tribe, those who look or think or act like us, we will just keep circling this drain, drawing ever closer to the big drop. In order to break out of the cycle of fear and hurt and loss, Jesus says, we need to paradoxically stop focusing on our own wellbeing; to learn to ‘hate’ our lives. I wonder if we wouldn’t do well to take a page from South Africa’s book and focus instead on the health of our whole community, our whole nation, rather than just trying to protect what is ours. Maybe we need our own Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

This kind of letting go is tantamount to death; but Jesus reminds us that, thanks to God’s promise, death is often the gateway to new life. A new covenant can be a hard promise to which to cling, but along with that promise is the assurance that we never walk the road ahead alone. Jesus doesn’t just tell us about new life, he shows it to us. By letting go of his own life, laying it down for those he calls friends—the very people who betrayed, rejected and killed him—he experiences new life, life which he shares with us. “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” he tells his friends; the question for us is whether we have the courage to follow where that Way leads us.

In South Africa, with the help of Archbishop Tutu and others, they were able to step out in courage and find healing, to let the old covenant die and find new life in a new way of being. Their journey is far from over, but I still wonder if it isn’t a testimony to the truth of Jesus’ words, and an invitation to us to take a similar leap of faith if we truly wish to see the end of racism. Maybe, just maybe, Jesus was right: if we let go of our lives for the good of all, we will end up finding new life that is eternal.

1. *Clark, Nancy L.; Worger, William H. (2004). South Africa - The Rise and Fall of Apartheid. Seminar Studies in History. Pearson Education Limited. pp. 48–52.* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Gish, Steven D. (2004). Desmond Tutu: A Biography. Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press.* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)