

## Reconciling All Things, Chris Rice, Emmanuel Katongole (2008)

As Protestant and Catholic churches do not share the Communion Cup, we knew the Church's brokenness was at the heart of our restlessness at Duke Divinity School. Many of our students and other Christian young people are eager to serve in South Africa, Sudan, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Mississippi. They return very restless and are never the same. Cardinal Emmanuel Wamala reflecting on Emmanuel's presence as an African Catholic at this protestant seminary in America, offered striking words: "You have not made him more Catholic. You have made him more Christian."

Start the day with the newspaper or with a quiet time and you'll soon face the sin that separates us from God and puts up walls between people. The worst evils were committed not only in the name of evil but also in crusades in the name of fixing what is broken.

Diversity fails to deliver a vision that makes it worth deep personal, cultural and national sacrifices such as being transformed by strangers, engaging enemies and absorbing pain without passing it on. Often reconciliation has been invoked as a naïve, "can't we all get along?" sentimentality or as the agenda of the powerful to "move on" without facing intricate demands for justice. The challenge is--Whose justice? **The definition of justice is not self-evident. If it is to make sense or lead to a transformed vision of human relations, it requires a story.** Acts of injustice can be punished, repented of, publicly named and denounced, or even repaid, but they can never be undone. The quest for reconciliation and the quest for justice are closely connected to the quest for truth. One insufficient version of Christian mission is reconciliation without memory, jumping over the past too quickly by offering cheap grace to those who have done wrong and never repented. A future of shared life with enemies requires a long journey of persuasion and transformation of hearts, minds, and desires.

**In the absence of a clear vision, reconciliation has largely become a matter of relief, mediation, advocacy and conflict resolution, the exclusive terrain of "experts."** This reconciliation as firefighting transforms the church into a social agency. A movement called the Christian Community Development Association addresses the deep racial segregation of the church.

Christians should step back from the dominant expectations that reconciliation has to do either with personal salvation alone or with mediation and conflict resolution (hence the dominant images of reconciliation as either escapist evacuation or emergency firefighting), to either hide from the social realities or to act. **The fire is raging. What we need is water to put it out. Christians are to reconnect the world of fires and firefighting to the story of God--the water of the word.**

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is beyond our vision. We are prophets of a future not our own—a different way of seeing and engaging the world around us. Stillness is a posture not only of learning to see what is going on in the world but of learning to trust God and His vision for our redemption. Christianity offers distinct gifts of seeing, speaking about engaging and being transformed within the world and its brokenness. **Without being well articulated, the vision can't be sustained.** It is inevitably replaced by dominant social visions. God's life-giving vision grows out of a story and that story is about a quieter revolution.

The first part of the story is about God and what God has done in Christ. The second is about the transformation this has brought to the world and the lives of individual people. Before Reconciliation is about us, it is about God and His mission in the world. The dividing line between good and evil runs straight through each one of us. So the journey of reconciliation begins with a transformation of the human person. The people at Voice of Calvary in Jackson, Mississippi taught me about a "quiet revolution." Part of this long, revolutionary process was my own conversion from my deep desire to be a "fixer" to seeing my need to be changed by people radically different from me—including many of the very people I had come to fix. We begin by attending to the story of God, memorize its most poignant phrases and asking where God wants to speak them again through us. With Jesus and John Perkins we learn to say, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:24). We grasp the vision only as we learn to inhabit the story. The quest for reconciliation in the world is a journey with God.

The gift of reconciliation is given to all who are in Christ. A call to be Christ's ambassadors of reconciliation intends to unseat other lords—power, nationalism, race or ethnic loyalty as an end in itself—and give birth to deeper alle-

giances, stories, spaces and communities that are a “demonstrating plot” of the reality of God’s new creation in Christ. Put simply, reconciliation both names the church and requires it to be the sign and agent of God’s reconciliation.

The vision of reconciliation as a journey stands in stark contrast to seeing reconciliation as an achievement, event, strategy or program. A journey with God is to let go of control. Creation takes God time. This biblical vision is important in sustaining our patience in the pursuit of peace and reconciliation

We know that the gift of reconciliation takes time to unfold. But the creation story helps us to see that time itself is God’s gift to the world. **The work of God’s reconciliation includes taking time to cultivate habits of ordinary peaceful existence—habits like listening, welcoming strangers, planting gardens, raising children and keeping house (Jer 29:5-7).** When we take time to cultivate both the land beneath our feet and habits that make for healthy existence, we are actively receiving the gift of God’s peace.

We also discover the “in the beginning” story that if peace and harmony are gifts from God, conflict, violence and war result from our efforts to grab what we can receive only as a gift from God. God tells Adam and Eve, “I will give you everything you need. You can only receive it. You can never take it.” But this is exactly what Adam and Eve attempt to do. In the story of the Fall, Adam and Eve grab hold of the only thing God has not given to them. When we live by a posture of seizing and grabbing in an attempt to be in control of our destinies, we lose the gifts of harmony and peace.

**Our original sin is the attempt to secure for ourselves what can be received only as a gift.** As a story, scripture can be read through the central plot of Creation, Fall, Promise and Restoration—a plot that is in essence the movement from old creation to new. Scripture invites us to see the shape that the journey to new creation takes in the history of a particular people. The same drama plays over and over again. We see our human desire to secure what we need without God, without His promise of renewal and restoration and the theme of movement toward new creation.

We need examples of people who travel well—saints whose lives were fundamentally reshaped in light of their anticipation of “things not yet seen,” a cloud of witnesses

who reshaped the present according to a vision of the future. The entire community of “anyone in Christ” is invited to live this way. We are not called to be heroes, but saints, caught up into the cloud of God’s grace.

The Christian ministry of reconciliation is about learning to identify, care for and smooth the unique pebbles God provides for us as we confront the Goliaths of this world. We are called to work on skills of forgiveness, self-giving, and costly love of the enemy. From outlaws to rednecks, Spencer Perkins embraced his enemies on the ground of West Jackson, Mississippi. The story of God not only gives Christians motivation to work for reconciliation and peace in the world, it also reshapes the way the challenge is understood and provides concrete alternatives to our usual version of reconciliation.

Infatuation with race, tribe, and nation can be idolatry. The gift of God’s story calls us to a journey beyond reconciling the races to a serious determination to name and resist the privileges, ungodly desires, patterns of life, identities and loyalties that have come to be regarded as normal simply because they are part of our racial, cultural, national or tribal identity. What God declares good about creation is in part the harmony God creates between different creatures. Pentecost is where differences are not dissolved but restored to their proper order through a new communion where “we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God” (Acts 2:11). We must learn where cultural resources and differences can be celebrated and affirmed in contrast to where they obscure or even resist God’s plan of building a new and genuine communion of people with diverse histories--the communion Pentecost foreshadows.

In the biblical tradition, justice is an aspect of God’s *shalom*, a notion that carries with it the idea of completeness, of life—personal, relational and national. Without a shared story and vision of life, society as a whole cannot agree on what justice means. There can be no justice without reconciliation—and certainly no reconciliation without justice. In this dynamic journey, not only justice and peace but also truth and mercy meet. The early Christians did not start out with a quest for justice. Rather, they were captured by a fresh story of God’s new Pentecost, and as they were drawn into the story and its communion, they found themselves practicing a far more radical version of justice than they ever imagined.

Though Rwanda was a deeply “Christian” nation, neither Hutus nor Tutsis questioned the racial identities assigned to them by colonial authorities. **Prior to the genocide, Rwanda was considered one of the best-evangelized countries in Africa--the killing happened amid explosive church growth. The church was clearly part of the story of brokenness.**

The first language of the church in a deeply broken world is prayer—a call to see and encounter the rupture of this world so truthfully that we are literally slowed down. We are called to a space where any explanation or action is too easy, too fast, and too shallow—a space where the right response can only be a desperate cry directed to God. We are called to learn the anguished cry of *lament*.

Lament is not despair or whining. It is a cry directed to God by those who see the truth of the world’s deep wounds and the cost of seeking peace. We have to unlearn 3 things: speed, distance, and innocence. The more we learn to lament, the more we see the need for time to grow, forgive and learn how to love. Lament views speed with pessimism. Reconciliation is slow and fragile. Every city has its forgotten communities, its geographies that are avoided. So often we prefer to work superficially and move quickly to “solutions” that only mask our brokenness. Lament calls us to unlearn the habits of speed.

Like real estate, lament is about location, location, location. It is the language of people and places who know they are in crisis, not in control. **God draws very near to the most vulnerable—not because they’re any less sinful, but because they are the most sinned against.** When we draw near to them our call is not first to “make a difference” but to allow the pain of that encounter to disturb us. The church was in Rwanda when all of this was happening. Christians—even priests—joined in the killing. This could be said also of other deeply “Christian” places from Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland to South Africa during apartheid. Christians are guilty of intensifying brokenness in many places. We have so often reproduced society rather than offering a witness to it.

**40 years after legal segregation, where do the trajectories of America’s racial history live most deeply? Not in the well-integrated military or the workplace or the local mall, but in the ongoing, de facto segregation of the Christian church. 90% of white Christians continue to worship in all-white congregations and 90% of African-American Christians in**

all-black congregations, and everyone plays along as if this were normal. This is why learning to see and name the truth about the brokenness of the church itself is such an achievement.

We do not see the depth of our captivity. We prefer reconciliation without repentance. Learning to lament is nothing less than entering a way of dying to self that is the very heart of the journey of reconciliation. If lament is a way of dying, it is also the path toward being raised into something new. To the extent we do not experience a shattering, something new cannot break in. The relationship between lament and hope is crucial. Reconciliation without lament cheapens hope. **Lament gives birth to a more radical vision of hope.** To be deeply bothered about the way things are is itself a sign of hope. Those who are not easily consoled have entered a place of restlessness. They’ve opened their hands to accept a different vision, a better hope.

3 ways to learn and engage the discipline of lament are pilgrimage, relocation and public confession. Pilgrimage is a posture very different from mission. The goal of a pilgrim is not to solve but to search, not so much to help as to be present. The pace is slower, more reflective. There are so many efforts to make a difference that do not make *us* different.

The practice of public confession is a way of unlearning innocence, to draw near and tarry with the pain of the world by naming the truth and remembering the awful depth of brokenness. The prayers of lament in Psalms were public prayers. It is critical that we learn how to pray like this and confess in explicit relationship to the brokenness of our own contexts. **To learn to lament is to become people who stay near to the wounds of the world.**

**Hope in our world is often confused with optimism and success. This is why we must learn to lament before turning to hope. Reconciliation without lament cheapens hope.** Training in Christian hope starts with remembering at the table of bread and wine. The biblical vision of hope is intimately connected to images of flourishing, shared life and deep transformation with repentance. Hope looks like “communities of resurrection,” proving that **neither distance nor assimilation is the best choice. It never disconnects the question of whether we can reconcile the nations from whether we can live in peace and forgiveness with those nearest us—in our homes, at work, in worship and even on the road.**

The only way divided lives and communities are deeply transformed into a new way of life together is *slowly*. Hope celebrates small signs of transformation, because the politics of repentance is the accumulation over time of many moments that together amount to lives decisively turned toward the “other.” The unique gift of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is not that it unveiled the truth about historic injustices, but that it did so within an atmosphere of mercy and forgiveness. This was possible only because Tutu had already been transformed into a man who could not envision the future without forgiveness. In other words, if a new South Africa is not possible without the unique gifts of the TRC, the TRC was not possible without the forgiveness of Tutu—a sort of “X factor” in the South African experience. The formation of such people through repentance is what hope requires. Without the politics of repentance, those on top may be coerced into change, but they will never be truly transformed. And the victim who gains power is always in danger of becoming the next victimizer.

There are reasons why many of history’s most recent ambassadors for peace have been assassinated—Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Anwar Sadat. We plant in hope, not certainty. The essence of the church is to exist as the sign of a reality beyond itself.

The alternative to homelessness requires the daily work of homemaking. Only when we’re present to the world’s brokenness do we ask what is required to respond to the need. Through incarnation, reconciliation ceases to be spectacular and becomes the purpose of our everyday lives. Without the story of God pointing to incarnation as both a model

and a pattern of Christian living, we can never develop the patience or the skills necessary for the long haul of the Christian journey of reconciliation.

In a world where loyalty to Christ is constantly contested, the ministry of reconciliation calls forth a specific kind of leader who is able to unite a deep vision with the concrete skills, virtues and habits necessary for the long and often lonesome journey of reconciliation. Wherever we find hope in a broken world, we see the significance of such everyday leaders. The story of the ministry of reconciliation always begins in the humility of everyday life, with someone responding to a gap. This is also where leadership begins.

Learning to tell the story over and over again is crucial. The leader does not have all the answers, but he does have a story in which wisdom, faith, a compelling sense of call and vocation, and skills of improvisation have been learned. Within the journey itself, leaders gain the wisdom to trust that God will provide what is needed for the next step. One of the greatest skills leaders must learn in the journey is the art of improvisation—of navigating very concrete contexts with the right measure of knowing and not knowing.

Over time, as leaders are present to the gap, their response grows and becomes more visible, public and pronounced. An alternative to the way things are takes on a distinctive shape and texture unique to the particular gap and its location and context. The leader sees and shapes into visibility a rich externality of what “good news” looks like—something unexpected, deeper, and more radical than was thought possible. [www.dukereconciliation.com](http://www.dukereconciliation.com)