

Reflection for the Memorial Service for Nelson Mandela

Dec. 11, 2013

Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel, Morehouse College, Atlanta

The Right Rev. Robert C. Wright

(Bishop Wright was one of a number of invited speakers.)

Brothers and Sisters, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Good evening. Greetings to you this evening in the name of God, Yahweh, Allah and Jesus of Nazareth.

I bring greetings on behalf of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta: men, women and young people from Middle to North Georgia.

It is an honor to be with you tonight and to be focused on paying homage to President Nelson Mandela. Madiba.

I met President Mandela in September of 1998 in New York City. It was four years after he was elected as the first democratically elected president of South Africa and two months since I had been ordained.

He had come to the cathedral where I was serving to memorialize his friend Archbishop Trevor Huddleston and to address the United Nations.

What struck me most about meeting Mandela was how big he was. I am six-foot-two and relatively slim. Mandela was taller than me. Broader than me. He was big. Literally and figuratively. That's how I remember it. His smile was big. His warmth was big. His generosity, compassion and his ideas were big.

The world doesn't stop, as we have tonight, to honor small people. Some of us are shorter in stature than others. We have no choice in our physicality. But Mandela's life and accomplishments prove that being small is a choice.

He chose to be big. He grew before our very eyes. He grew past supporting a violent response to apartheid as an angry young man to becoming a nonviolent statesman as he matured.

He moved from refusing to learn the language of his oppressor to convincing his comrades that learning Afrikaans was essential to negotiating a brighter future for all of South Africa.

He increased in his capacity to embrace the enemy and overcome him through his gentleness and dignity. Did you know that they had to regularly change out his guards because he would take them over with his humanity as they spent time with him?

Ultimately, Mandela developed from being a prisoner attended to by jailers to inviting his jailers to attend his inauguration as president. He was big. Big, deep inside where it counts.

Maybe by his dying we might make a choice this evening. To be big like him. I don't think I subscribe to the great-man theory anymore. I think all of us can make great choices. Big choices. All of us have God-given capacity. And it is a shame not to use it in the service of truth and justice. Mandela made great and big choices to serve.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mandela's great friend, said of him, "He was not a lone wolf and he did not fall from the sky...he had a profound ability to empathize with people." He was produced by the community.

And as we memorialize Mandela this evening and all around the world and in our hearts in the days and months and years ahead, my prayer is that we would erect a memorial to Nelson Mandela not with bronze or bricks but by using our own flesh and blood to fashion our own personal tributes to a man who embodied the Apostle Paul's words perfectly: *We have treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.*

We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.

Thank God for the life and witness of Nelson Mandela. May his commitment to compassion ever be alive in us.



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