

**A Christmas Eve Reflection:
“Living out the gospel of grace, reconciliation in Rwanda”**

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For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. (Titus 2:11-14)



In Rwanda, “this present age” means living in a post-genocide world, where everything is colored by the brutality and betrayal of neighbor killing neighbor with machetes and clubs in the horror of 100 days in 1994.

To say “no” to the worldly passions that surround these memories is no easy task. The fear of “the other” and the desire for retaliation, even after all these years, is strong. Some of my students in theology are survivors of the genocide, while others are sons or daughters of perpetrators who are serving time in prison for their participation. They know the fears and the feelings.

As Christians and theology students, they are required to live together and study together. Doing so requires them to live “self-controlled, upright and godly lives,” to practice their faith and the hope that is spoken of in verse 13, “the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Yet this is not an escapist hope that ignores the feeling or reality of their situations. They wrestle every day with the same feelings as the rest of the population. But they wrestle with those feelings in the hope of their faith by embracing the power of the gospel that brings salvation, not hope just in the future. Their hope provides them with power today—the power to learn, understand, and work with people who once were enemies. They practice daily the “no’ to . . . worldly passions” and learn to live out a gospel of grace and reconciliation.

Benoit serves as an example. Benoit’s father will spend the rest of his life in prison for his actions, but Benoit refuses to be a captive of the feelings of shame or revenge that might accompany the son of a perpetrator. He studied theology and lived in the community for four years and is now an ordained minister serving a congregation of survivors and former perpetrators. When he was assigned to the congregation, it was deeply divided, with some refusing to sit on the same side of the church with “the other.” Many never went into others’ homes for fear of poisoning, a possibility that was widely rumored. They refused to give up “their church” but would not accept one another.

When Benoit asked me to preach at his church in the spring of 2018, I was amazed at the difference in the feeling of the congregation from the first time I preached there three years earlier. In that short time, some people had “moved across the aisle” to begin the slow process of forgiving and rebuilding trust. There was an openness in sharing that was not there before, a gentleness of spirit that I had not felt the first time I was with them. There was a joy in the service that I had not experienced before. When I asked Benoit about it, he gave me a broad smile and said, “I’m just trying to be like Jesus, to live among them and love them, like Emmanuel—God with us. I eat with them.”

Benoit's willingness to be vulnerable and risk the possibility of being poisoned speaks volumes. He has preached and taught forgiveness and reconciliation, but even more he has modeled it. Living among them, he exemplifies "a self-controlled, upright and godly life in this present age."

The process of reconciliation is a slow process, for change happens one relationship at a time, one heart at a time. But it is happening.

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