Life and accomplishments of Nelson Mandela

Sermon, Westminster Presbyterian Church, February 23, 2014

According to a good friend of mine, a well-organized sermon sets forth three points. For Christians, the task seems easy. The person in the pulpit makes sure to speak of all parts of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Alternatively expressed, those in the congregation can be exhorted to think about Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. All these concepts have been central to our Christian beliefs for centuries.

Indeed, some argue that ‘thinking in threesomes’ may be quintessentially Western. Persons in East Asia, by contrast, think and act in terms of a basic yin-yang: complementary opposites whose value lies not only in the singularity of each part, but the unity of the whole and the interaction of the parts. On the other hand, our triune format has cognates in other major belief systems, whether religious or secular. Hinduism, for example, differentiates among Brahman, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; and Shiva, who destroys so that new life can come about. Consider as well the secular side. Many commentators depict western dialectical reasoning as Christianity in different guise. Readers of Hegel or Marx are familiar with three linked ideas, always in conflict with each other. The so-called ‘thesis’ generates its ‘antithesis.’ Their combination, or ‘synthesis,’ in turn generates a new cycle of thesis/antithesis/synthesis. And think as well of Freud’s familiar troika of Id, Ego and Superego, all engaged in uneasy struggle for dominance.

A few weeks back, the world mourned the passing of Nelson Mandela. Without question, he will be remembered as one of the 20th century’s overarching figures, morally and politically. He can be ranked as a ‘world historical individual,’ in Hegel’s terms. Looking at his long life gives us insights into our Christian heritage as well as how individuals armed with moral strength can help transform entire societies. Our spiritual growth can be helped by better understanding of Mandela’s life. And, perhaps paradoxically, we can comprehend better by viewing him in quasi-Trinitarian fashion.

Mandela wasn’t always known as ‘Nelson.’ This morning, I propose that we consider three names that were used for him. They reflect 1) different periods in his life, 2) shifting domestic and international contexts for South Africa; and 3) his personal qualities. Unless we understand the interaction of all these, we cannot grasp the life and accomplishments of this extraordinary figure.

Mandela went through phases, as all of us do. He appealed to distinct audiences at various points in his 95 year-long life. To each, however, Mandela preached the same basic message. He maintained unswerving values, notably pressing for majority rule in a country marked by centuries of brutal racial discrimination. A debonair, well-dressed gentleman of royal lineage, at home in the courtroom as well as in secret meetings of underground organizations, Mandela paradoxically found great satisfaction in the boxing ring. He spoke and practiced struggle, in a country bloodied by centuries of racial discrimination. Yet he acted in accordance with the second Great Commandment, as read earlier today. As Mandela wrote, "For to be free
is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

The three names of Mandela include ‘Nelson,’ ‘Madiba’ and ‘Rohihlahla.’ Each name reflected different aspects of this exceptional man. Let me start with the last and least familiar of these.

At his birth in 1918, five years after ruling whites had allocated 87% of South Africa’s land to themselves, the new-born Mandela was named Rolihlahla. This can be translated as ‘troublemaker.’ He remained a rebel against minority rule throughout his life, channeling it mostly but not exclusively through advocating the rule of law. Mandela willingly risked his life by advocating violence.

In 1960, after South African police killed 69 innocent civilians, Mandela’s organization, the African National Congress, dropped its non-violent policy, followed since it was established in 1912. Most of its leaders fled for their safety. Mandela remained behind, as commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe, or ‘Spear of the Nation.’ It carried out small-scale attacks on government military installations. The organization was quickly branded as a terrorist one (including by the United States). After several months hiding, Mandela was captured. In 1963, he stood trial for terrorism and treason, crimes for which death was the usual penalty. He surely deserved the title of ‘troublemaker’ in the eyes of the racist government. Mandela barely escaped the gallows in 1964, but then spent the next 27 years in jail – most of it in near-total isolation, chipping rocks on a sunbaked prison island. He could receive only one censored letter every six months. From 4:30 Friday to early Monday morning, prisoners on Robben Island were locked in their cells, denied food or fresh air. I’ve visited where he lived for nearly three decades: it measures barely 7’ x 9’.

While immured only a few miles from Cape Town, Mandela’s image throughout the world continued to shift. Perhaps because he was isolated from the press of daily politics, Mandela became a global symbol, a brave freedom fighter unjustly imprisoned for his actions on behalf of others. Justice resulted from the mobilization of global public opinion, international boycotts, and changes in the outlooks of South African business and political leaders. Rohihlahla/ Mandela struggled long and valiantly for change – ‘trouble-maker’ indeed against the dominant minority.

Let’s turn to Mandela’s second but surely his best-known name. ‘Nelson’ resulted from studying with missionaries. When Mandela went to school, his instructors couldn't pronounce names in the complex South African click languages. As part of their overall project of ‘civilization,’ they christened their Black students with new, Western-style names. ‘Nelson’ was bestowed on Mandela by his first-grade school teacher. Like other missionary workers, she inculcated British and broader Christian principles. No doubt the pupils at schools joined in singing ‘In Christ there is no east or west/ In him no south or north/ But one great fellowship of love/ Throughout the whole wide earth.’

Values of ‘love thy neighbor’ or ‘turn the other cheek’ had spread throughout the country from 1737 on, when the first missionaries arrived from Europe. The African National Congress with which Mandela became closely identified was laced with Christian ideals. It
strongly advocated non-violence – at least until the 1960 shootings and other repression proved the futility of Gandhian and ‘forgive 70 times seven’ strategies.

Most whites preached and practiced a harsh form of Christianity. Jesus’ precepts about ‘Love thy neighbor’ – the Great Commandment – became subordinate to ideas about inherent inequality by race. The so-called ‘sons of Ham’ were eternally damned in the views of many whites. Africans were required to address those of European descent as baas, or ‘boss.’ Household servants lived in ‘boy’s quarters,’ or commuted from squalid, segregated townships kilometers away from the pristine white areas. Few opportunities existed for Black entrepreneurs or professionals.

This is the context in which ‘Nelson’ grew into his role as a leader. Standing tall among his peers at 6’ 4”, dressed in well-tailored suits when his economic circumstances permitted, Mandela exemplified the type of African his teachers wanted to create. He stood out as a debater, as well as a boxer. At age 21, he enrolled in the only university open to African students, intending to become a civil servant. But he broke the conventional mold, fleeing an arranged marriage, and signed on as a law clerk. As years passed, Mandela/ Rolihlahla – grew into a world icon.

Mandela became endeared to his people and to the great majority of the world as a freedom fighter. Many of his opponents argued, as in suggested in Matthew 10, that he brought not peace but a sword. For example, President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher remained convinced during their lifetimes that Mandela was a ‘terrorist.’ They saw him as the most important challenger to their ally, the apartheid-based government of South Africa. Reagan and Thatcher far preferred to work with the prosperous albeit minority-dominated Western ally in the battle against global Communism. They weren’t alone. Although most human rights groups supported him, Amnesty International never declared Mandela a ‘prisoner of conscience,’ since he wouldn’t renounce the tactical use of violence to counter the force deployed by the government. Only in 2006 did Amnesty International shift its official stand, naming him an ‘Ambassador of Conscience.) Rolihlahla remained steadfast in his beliefs: only struggle would make South Africa free under majority rule. His consistent values come through in his statement, "Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again."

Following his 1990 release from imprisonment, the by-then gray-haired 72-year old became known as Madiba. In an anthropological sense, Madiba was an honorific. It reflected his clan background, as a member of the Thembu royal family. But this term came to bear many more meanings. Madiba became a sign of respect and affection. Mandela himself became a symbol of political dedication throughout the world. He recognized that, despite his long imprisonment, long-term peace for South Africa required cooperation among all races. His militancy moderated for a multitude of reasons. Many white leaders became willing to work with him. International public opinion turned decisively against the apartheid government. Economic and sports sanctions bit into the country’s standing. As majority rule became possible – something clear when Mandela was released from prison – he turned to the task of reconciliation. In short, he went through another transformation, to Madiba.
Without question, Mandela/ Madiba/ Rolihlahla is the ‘Father of his Nation.’ In a broader sense, however, he became South Africa’s nurturing mother after independence, bringing together a fractious family. And, to complete the three-fold metaphor, Mandela must be viewed as the Son of South Africa, equally adept in the languages of its European conquerors and several indigenous groups.

In the decades following his release after 27 years in prison, he didn’t lash out at those who jailed him. Madiba sought harmony, a philosophy of Ubuntu to establish a ‘Rainbow Nation.’ He knew the power of symbol. Movie-goers may remember the triumphant moment in ‘Invictus,’ when the 1995 Rugby World Cup finals were held in South Africa. Morgan Freeman appeared on screen wearing not Mandela’s usual well-tailored suit, but the tee-shirt of the Springboks, South Africa’s national team. Why was this unusual? Rugby (unlike soccer) was and remains played almost exclusively by South African whites — and particularly by Afrikaners, the vociferous upholders of apartheid. Mandela could forgive and work with those who had abused him and his people for centuries. He embodied, in short, a message familiar for all Christians.

Even during his decades in prison, Madiba sought to work with people of all communities so long as they accepted majority rule. After independence, he consciously reached out to others, not just members of his own movement. In particular, he made peace with the business establishment, recognizing that South Africa accounted for half the entire continent’s economic output. Mandela felt able to give only limited attention to action on HIV-AIDS or clamorous demands for immediate redistribution. Why kill the goose, etc…….

Maya Angelou recently published an appreciation of Mandela, entitled His Struggle is Done. This short book merits a different subtitle, rather than be called simply ‘A Tribute.’ More appropriate would have been a luta continua, ‘the struggle continues.’ South Africa remains a society riven by differences of class, color, ethnicity and the like. So too is our own country. Can a Mandela rise in American society? Can we find commonality? Herein lies our main task: to recognize that, irrespective of race, creed, nationality, economic circumstance or whatever, all people deserve respect. The obscene differences in wealth that mark this new gilded age, domestically and internationally, present challenges to all of us here today. We are equal in the sight of God, but must act to help others less blessed with privilege.

Mandela, like Martin Luther King, Jr., went beyond narrow conceptions of humanity to embrace us all. That message remains as valid today, February 23rd 2014, as in the time of Jesus. Yes, the struggle continues to make our world fair for all.

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1 A luta continua was the official slogan of FRELIMO, the pro-majority rule movement in neighboring Mozambique.