


Bishop's Message: People are Wonderful

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Dear Beloved in Christ,

It has been two and a half years now since the news of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's death interrupted the Christmas season with a sharp pang of sadness. At the time, it was well known that he had been ill. Still, when a light as brilliant as his passes into glory, we mourn our loss even as we celebrate the promises and the power of God that he proclaimed for decades.

I did not know him personally, but I did speak with him and shook his hand. It was one of the great honors of my life.

In September of 2005, the then-retired archbishop visited the General Theological Seminary in New York City where I was a student. He came to mark the opening of a new peace and reconciliation center in his name. My wife, daughters, and I waited our turn to greet an icon of the twentieth century and a towering witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. In our briefexchange, I was struck by his humility, joy, and the fullness of his presence with the seminary community that evening. My wife will tell you she remembers these things, too, as well as his huge smile.

Here was a man whose renown and impact were global, who was admired on every continent, and who was known the world over by a single name: Tutu. By the time I met him, he was a counsellor to presidents and prime ministers and a trusted voice in global affairs. Archbishop Tutu did not seek any grandeur or prestige for himself. When he shook our hands, it was not as a great man looking down but as a fellow child of God reaching across. He said, "God bless you," and I indeed felt blessed.

Intrigued and inspired, I learned of the profound challenges that had shaped him. He nearly died at birth. He contracted childhood polio and then tuberculosis in his teens. Like all Black men in his native South Africa, he was attacked and repressed by racism enshrined into law. As a priest and later as a bishop, he fought relentlessly against apartheid and was attacked mercilessly for his efforts. Some thought him too revolutionary; others were outraged by his insistence on non-violent means. For years he received hate mail, death threats, and obscene calls. It is all too easy to reduce his life to "winner of the Nobel Peace Prize." For as lofty of an achievement as that is, it does not come close to recognizing the heartbreak and pain he endured or how close to death his work took him.

I saw a quote some time ago from Archbishop Tutu that read, "Many people ask me what I have learned from all the experiences in my life, and I say unhesitatingly: People are wonderful. It is true. People really are wonderful." This is a stunning statement from a man

that many people tried to silence or kill. Yet I do not doubt for a second he meant that all people, in God's light, are wonderful and worthy of respect. Desmond Tutu embodied God's love for everyone, and that incarnated love became a potent force that reshaped world history.

During yet another fractious election year in our own country, I am heartened to remember that, indeed, people really are wonderful. Life is a gift, God is good, and the light of Jesus Christ shines as brightly and true as ever.

Blessings,

The Rt. Rev. Kevin S. Brown
