Last summer, on the way home from Tanzania, I stopped in Rwanda to visit a priest whose reconciliation ministry I have much admired and for whom our older daughter was working as a volunteer intern. One morning, in a community some two hours’ drive from the capital city of Kigali, we were welcomed by a group of perhaps one hundred women and men who had gathered to share with me their experience of both the genocide and reconciliation.

The principal speaker was Agnes, a genocide survivor. She, a Hutu, was married to a Tutsi, a member of the minority ruling tribe whose power was originally established by German colonists and sustained by the Belgians. In the genocidal revolution of 1994, Agnes’s own aunt orchestrated the mutilation and murder of Agnes’s husband, by Agnes’s brothers, in a manner too horrific to describe here. As well, they slaughtered four of Agnes’s five children. Even though Agnes was Hutu, because her husband was Tutsi and she had borne Tutsi offspring, she was beaten, passed around to be sexually abused by a series of men, infected with HIV, and left for dead. Taken to the hospital by a compassionate soul, she was nursed back to some semblance of physical health, only to be rejected by her Tutsi in-laws because it was not only her tribe but her family who had murdered their son. She had no home, no community, and understandably no ability to open her heart to anyone.

Some years later she was invited to participate in a group of genocide widows and the wives of imprisoned “genocidaires” (the perpetrators of these killings), convened by a Rwandan priest with an irrational confidence that God’s love can be born in even the most desolate of places. In the beginning, as Agnes tells it, she could not look at these other women, let alone speak to them. But over time, as they cautiously shared their stories with one another (and later with the murderers themselves as they completed their prison terms and were returned to the community), she began to experience the fidelity of God through a renewed sense of self-worth and hope that could only have come to life from somewhere deep and divine. She who was despised and abandoned by all, whose heart was rendered seemingly impenetrable by the unimaginable losses and abuses she had suffered, who had lost not only the lives of those she most loved, but really her own life as well, was not abandoned by the God who created her in love. In the fidelity of God’s love, she was quite literally brought back to life.

At the same meeting we also heard from John, one of the genocidaires who, after completing his prison term was now voluntarily building homes with other released prisoners for the survivors of their ruthless rampages. He spoke of the difficult process by which he was coming to terms with the unimaginable things he had done and how the work of reconciliation was work of his hands as well as his heart. At the close of our meeting we were invited to visit a house being built for a now crippled man by the very men who had so severely beaten him. As we toured the simple building, the priest pulled me aside to explain that the presence of a bishop was a very rare thing in this village and that both the builders and the owner had asked if I would bless this house of their reconciliation, this tangible icon of God’s relentless fidelity. I was humbled to do so, and in my life in the church, few experiences have moved me so profoundly.

In the heat of the African summer I was starkly aware of Immanuel, God with us. Through the work of this reconciliation group, these survivors of the genocide, both the abused and the abusers, have been brought back to life by the God who abandons no one and who finds in each of us a place for love to be born, again and again and again. These many months later, my prayers are visited quite regularly by the remembrance of Agnes and John and their companions who have become for me models of active waiting for Immanuel, for God to be with us, born anew in even the most desolate and desperate places of our lives, those places within our souls where goodness and peace may have become unimaginable.

May Immanuel, the love of God that came to be with us in Jesus, be born anew in your life, and especially in those places where you most yearn for it, yet least believe it possible.

The Rt. Rev. Mark Hollingsworth, Jr.

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