

Genesis 9:18-28 (ESV)

¹⁸ The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) ¹⁹ These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the people of the whole earth were dispersed.

²⁰ Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. ²¹ He drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent. ²² And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside. ²³ Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father's nakedness. ²⁴ When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, ²⁵ he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers." ²⁶ He also said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. ²⁷ May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant."

²⁸ After the flood Noah lived 350 years.

The Rwandan Mirror to the Church, Part 1: Questioning Stories (Genesis 9:18-28)

While I don't want to be over-dramatic, I feel the need to warn you that today's sermon will include some disturbing subject matter; so listener discretion is advised. If you find you need to step out, that's okay. #

In our country, 1994 will likely always be remembered for the summer of O.J. Simpson and the media circus and racial tensions that consumed the country for the following year and a half. But in the spring of 1994, the nightly news was displaying images from the small African nation of Rwanda, where bodies - human lives - were being destroyed on an unfathomable scale. Beginning during the week after Easter, in early April, the Hutu people, who were in the majority in Rwanda,¹ began slaughtering the minority Tutsi people, as well as any Hutus who refused to participate in the killing. And after 100 days more than 800,000 were dead.

Now, unfortunately genocides have been no stranger to history, especially recent history, as we saw six genocides in the twentieth century alone, the most well-known being the Holocaust of more than 6 million Jews in Nazi Germany.² But there are two ways that the Hutu slaughter of Tutsis in Rwanda was unique.



- First, for the most part these were personal killings done by the community. In many of the other instances of genocide, there was often a significant buffer between most individuals and the atrocities taking place, as there were often special soldiers - such as the SS in Nazi Germany - who were tasked with carrying out the killings, making it possible many average citizens to plead ignorance, and technology - such as gas chambers in Nazi Germany or in other cases the rifle -

¹ Hutus were approx 84% of the Rwandan population in 1994 ("Machetes and Firearms: The Organization of Massacres in Rwanda" <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0022343306059576> p.12)

² **A Brief History of Genocide in the 20th Century**

"While the first genocide in the modern world was the almost complete eradication of Native Americans by European settlers, most scholars agree that the twentieth century saw at least six genocides. From 1904 to 1908, Germans colonialists wiped out the Herero tribe in present-day Namibia, killing some 65,000 people. From 1915 to 1918, the Ottoman Empire killed or deported all Armenians from their territories; as many as 1.5 million people were killed. The most well-known genocide of the twentieth century is the Jewish Holocaust (or Shoah). Over the course of seven years, from 1938 to 1945, at least six million Jews were killed, along with gypsies, homosexuals, Nazi resisters, and others...

"The UN adopted a Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. This is when we first started using the term genocide. Yet from 1975 to 1979, following the US war in Indochina (Vietnam), two million Cambodians — a full quarter of the country's population — died at the hands of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge. Beginning in 1992, the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosovic led a genocide against Muslims in Bosnia, resulting in more than 200,000 deaths. And in the spring of 1994, some 800,000 people were slaughtered in Rwanda. (Katongole p38-39)

provided some physical distance from the victims, even for those doing the killing. But this was not the case in Rwanda, where almost all of the 800,000 were killed by the hands of their own neighbors with machetes.³

- But what is also unique about these 800,000 killings is that almost all of them were perpetrated by Christians on fellow Christians,⁴ and I mean Christians who knew one another. In fact, in some cases the location where the killings took place was in the churches where Hutu and Tutsi had worshiped together.⁵

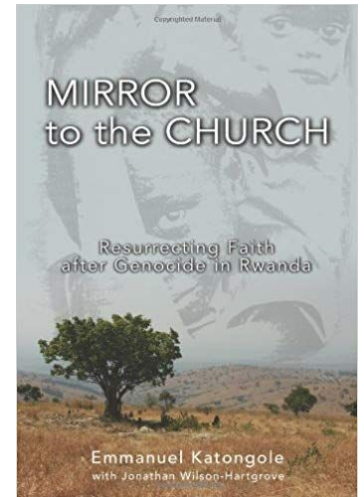
And all of this can only lead us to wonder: how could this happen? How could this have happened?

Well, this is the subject of a book titled “Mirror to the Church”, which I want to draw from this week and next. It is by a Roman Catholic priest named Emmanuel Katangole.⁶ Katangole is Professor of Theology and Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, but he is ethnically a Rwandan. In fact, Emmanuel’s father was Hutu, but his mother was Tutsi.

Well, in seeking an explanation for how this mostly Christian-on-Christian mass-murder could have occurred, it is tempting to assume that Hutu and Tutsi were two tribes who were always at war. In fact, this was a common narrative among Western media as it transpired in ‘94, to just assume these were “ancient hatred” and “age-old animosities” between two tribes who had hated each other forever.⁷ But that actually wasn’t the case at all. Katangole explains that in the pre-colonial Kingdom of Rwanda - that is, before the Europeans arrived - the distinction between Hutu and Tutsi had been social and economic, as its origin was historically from the kingdom’s division of labor.⁸ The Hutus, who were more numerous, were farmers, while the Tutsis raised livestock. And because cows were considered the main symbol of wealth in Rwanda, as in many African countries, this meant the Tutsis historically maintained greater economic power while the Hutus maintained greater numerical power. But it is important to emphasize that this pre-colonial hierarchy between Tutsi and Hutu had been purely based on social, economic and political factors, as opposed to ethnicity or tribe. Hutu & Tutsi all spoke the same language, they frequently intermarried, and were in community together. But *most importantly*, there is no record of any group violence of Hutus vs Tutsis prior to the arrival of Europeans arrived at the turn of the 20th century.⁹

Indeed, it was only after the arrival of European colonialists and Christian missionaries that *any* violence arose between these two groups of Rwandans. And this is because, when the Europeans came they brought with them a pernicious ideology about races & tribes that was intertwined with their Christian faith. #

And the reason that European racial ideology was intertwined with the Christian faith is because it had long been justified by a distorted reading of the passage we read this morning from Genesis 9. The passage describes one day after the big flood when Noah got drunk and passed out naked in his tent. And one of Noah’s three sons, named Ham, is said to have “seen his father’s nakedness” and told his two brothers, Shem and Japheth, about it. And so Shem and Japheth went and covered Noah up



³ A study shows that approx 52% of the killings were by machete, 16% by club, and only 14% by gun or rifle. (“Machetes and Firearms: The Organization of Massacres in Rwanda” <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0022343306059576> p.13)

⁴ “In a country that was over eighty-five percent Christian, almost everyone gathered on Easter Sunday to remember the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Katangole 18).

⁵ “Christians in Rwanda took up machetes, looked fellow church members in the face, and hacked their bodies to pieces” (Kongole 19).

⁶ <https://theology.nd.edu/people/emmanuel-katangole/>

⁷ Katangole: “I remember listening to BBC Radio during the genocide and hearing commentators talk about the Hutu and Tutsi ‘tribes.’ They lamented the fact that ‘ancient hatreds’ had been reignited and ‘age-old animosities’ had led to genocide.” (51)

⁸ “The chief of pasture, however, was usually a Tutsi. And the chief of agriculture was a Hutu” (54).

⁹ “There is no record of systematic political violence between Hutus and Tutsis before 1959” (53, 55).

without looking. But when Noah woke up, he spoke a curse over Ham - or particularly over Ham's son Canaan - for what Ham had done.¹⁰

Well, as far back as the first century B.C. in Judaism we can find evidence of this passage being interpreted in an extremely problematic and disturbing way: that associated both Ham's sin and Noah's curse on with dark skin color. Now, Genesis 9 never even says anything about Ham's skin, but the etymology of his name means "dark" or "brown", and so the legend developed that Ham was dark skinned. And then, from that a whole other legend grew that Ham's supposed skin color was a result of being cursed for violating sexual prohibitions on the ark. So, in other words skin color, was being linked with a level of one's sinfulness: that the darker the shade of one's skin was an indication of a greater level of sin or wickedness. And I am sure you can start imagine how dangerous these ideas could be, particularly for those Europeans looking to make a buck off of Africans' bodies (for slavery) and resources.

In case it's not obvious, I should say that Curse of Ham - also known as the Hamitic Myth - is one of the worst examples of the reckless and abusive interpretation of scripture you'll find. But this Curse of Ham ideology was advanced here & there through the Middle Ages - it was kept alive - until the 16th Century when it began to be picked up and used by European colonialists who sought to promote the myth of their being different racial types for economically motivated reasons. While the dominant idea up to that time had been that there was one single human race who descended from Adam & Eve, during this era, pro-slavery intellectuals began seeking to use the Curse of Ham to convince people otherwise, arguing that the three sons of Noah represent three sects of humans, who each had their own different fates and roles to play in the unfolding of history.¹¹ And these ideas paired quite conveniently with the categories for societies being either "primitive" and "advanced", which emerged in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The German philosopher Hegel popularized the notion that civilizations were "primitive" to the extent that they diverged from European norms, while Germany was considered the gold standard for human advancement.¹²

So what I'm saying is that for almost all of the European colonialists and missionaries heading to Africa in the 19th Century, this racial and societal ideology was simply taken for granted as true. Everyone they encountered when they arrived in Africa were seen through the lens of race, and worse through the idea of an inequality between the races that in their minds had been biblically ordained. So when Africa was subdivided up among European nations, Germany drew Rwanda, and when the Germans arrived there in 1897 and encountered these two social classes of Tutsis & Hutus, they decided these were actually two different races or ethnicities.¹³ And worse - get this - they concluded that the Hutus must have been descendants of Ham, but that the Tutsis, who had more power and wealth, were actually descendants of one of Noah's other sons: Shem, and therefore racially superior. In fact, the Europeans began teaching that "these two groups were "races" that had always existed... (that) in time, the Tutsi race invaded the land" to set up a more advanced civilization than the Hutu would've been capable of.¹⁴ So for the next half-century, the Europeans engaged primarily with the Tutsis, who they believed were destined god-ordained to rule over the "inferior" Hutus. And the seeds of genocide were planted.

Well, after World War I, the Germans' presence in Rwanda was replaced by the Belgians. But the Belgians perpetuated this same racial ideology.

¹⁰ It is notable that there is some debate among scholars about whether the description of Ham's sin as "seeing his father's nakedness" was actually an allusion to Ham taking a more serious action against Noah, such as castration or sodomy, given the severity of his punishment. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curse_of_Ham)

¹¹ Side note: Based on the curse of ham ideology, the official church doctrine of the the LDS (Mormon) Church prohibited black Africans from their priesthood until 1978. They officially denounced the Curse of Ham ideology in 2013. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curse_of_Ham)

¹² Katangole 55

¹³ "Along with their philosophy of history, Europeans brought to Africa the idea of race. As we have seen, Hutu and Tutsi existed in pre-colonial Rwanda as roles that determined people's place in society. But Europeans ascribed biblical explanations to these roles, insisting that they could see in Tutsis' physical features that they were descendants of Semites." 57

¹⁴ 57

- They taught that “the Tutsis were the “natural born leaders” and the Hutus were the inferior descendants of Ham.” They established European schools to both educate future leaders and to share the gospel of Jesus, as these schools were mostly run by Christian missionaries, but only Tutsi children were welcomed to attend them.
- And in 1933, Rwandans were issued identity cards, which stated their identity as either Hutu or Tutsi. As Katangole laments, “what had once been a social role and then a racial category was now an essential part of every Rwandan’s identity, frozen in time by a piece of paper that told each person who they were.”

In 1931, the King of Rwanda had been deposed by the Belgians and promptly replaced by his son who was promptly converted and baptized. And in 1945 Rwanda was declared a Christian nation.

But in the late 1950s, political division in Belgium opened the door in Rwanda for a Hutu revolution.¹⁵ And in 1959, the Tutsi king was assassinated, the Hutus came into power, and obtained Rwandan independence from Belgium. But in the process they massacred 20,000 Tutsis.¹⁶

But despite this violence, in the second half of the 20th century Rwanda would come to be viewed as a remarkable success story from the perspective of the Western Church, as a level of Christian revival spread throughout the nation that was unparalleled in any other African country. So by the 1980s, Christian mission journals and textbooks were holding up Rwanda as a model for the evangelization of Africa. And seminarians would study Rwanda “asking how they might use similar strategies elsewhere to share the good news.”¹⁷

So by the 1990s, 85 percent of Rwandans were Christian; meaning that on Easter Sunday 1994, easily three quarters of the country were in Church celebrating Jesus’ resurrection. And yet, in the couple of years leading up to ‘94 tensions between Hutu and Tutsi had been mounting. Officials in the Hutu government had been secretly stockpiling small arms like machetes and rifles.¹⁸ And in 1993 a far-right radio station (RTLM) was established with the backing of government officials and wealthy Hutus, stoking hatred with anti-Tutsi propaganda, calling them cockroaches who should be killed.¹⁹ And then, on the Wednesday after Easter 1994, the match was lit. The Hutu President of Rwanda’s plane was shot down by Tutsi rebels as it came in for a landing. And after this, the radio station began telling Hutus to “go to work”, which “everyone knew that meant get your machete and kill Tutsis.” And the radio would report Tutsi’s names and addresses.²⁰

And listen to how a Hutu man named Adalbert recalls the spell of tribalism overtaking him and his fellow believers in his Church. This is from Katangole’s book, which says,

“the Saturday after President Habyarimana’s plane crashed — the Saturday of Easter week — (Adalbert) went to his usual choir practice at the church in Kibungo. “We sang hymns in good feeling with our Tutsi compatriots, our voices still blending in chorus,” he remembers. But when they returned for mass the next morning, the Tutsis were not there. They had already fled into the bush. This angered the Hutus in the church, including Adalbert, and they immediately

¹⁵ “In Belgium, the aristocratic French had ruled the Flemish harshly for generations. In the 1950s a Flemish revolt led to a divided Belgium with separate governments and educational systems. With more Flemish priests sensitive to their people’s struggle serving as missionaries in Rwanda, the social movement for Hutu liberation was fomented...Flemish priests sympathized with the oppressed Hutu, who were already beginning to rise up and refuse the injustices that Belgian authorities and their Tutsi clients were committing against them. But the Hutus were not the only ones seeking change. By this time, Tutsis were growing dissatisfied with Belgian rule. King Rudahigwa was meeting with other African leaders and representatives of the UN to discuss independence. Soon he was found dead. Rudahigwa’s assassination created the perfect storm for a “Social Revolution” in which Hutus took over the Rwandan government and ultimately gained independence from Belgian rule. Much of the energy for this revolution came from Catholic priests and the Hutu students they had taught. What followed in 1959 was the first ever large-scale massacre — 20,000 Tutsis were killed. (64)

¹⁶ <http://atrocitieswatch.org/the-1959-genocide-in-rwanda/>

¹⁷ Katangole 19

¹⁸ “Machetes and Firearms: The Organization of Massacres in Rwanda” <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0022343306059576> p.6ff

¹⁹ Anti-Tutsi articles and graphic cartoons began appearing in the Kangura newspaper from around 1990.

²⁰ 85% of households owned at least one machete, as it was an agricultural tool. (“Machetes and Firearms: The Organization of Massacres in Rwanda” <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0022343306059576> p.7)

organized to chase after the Tutsi church members. “We left the Lord and our prayers inside to rush home,” Adalbert remembers. “We changed from our Sunday best into our workaday clothes, we grabbed clubs and machetes, we went straight off to killing.” Brothers and sisters who had sung together the day before were suddenly mortal enemies. ##

And the root of all of this horror is a mentality of tribalism that is incompatible with the Christian faith. And we can see this in some of our other scriptures today. In Matthew (4:12-22), we see that after John the Baptist is arrested Jesus immediately leaves the region near the big city of Jerusalem and head out to the sticks, in a move so unexpected that Matthew has to dig up a prophecy to explain it away. But in doing this, Jesus shows his value is for *all* people, not just for those in power or the elite of Jerusalem where his ministry will end. And indeed, Christ was born into a circumstance of tribalism, where the Jews were taught from the crib to hate Samaritans, and yet time and again Jesus ignores these dehumanizing prejudices.²¹ And then in 1 Corinthians (1:10-17) we see Paul coming up against the sinful tendency of tribalism within the church, where some believers were identifying as followers of Paul other of Apollos, and still others of Cephas (Peter), because of course it was bearing bad fruit. So tribalism of any sort is sin. Whether it occurs as an ‘us vs them’ within the Church or toward the outside world, whenever Christians are scapegoating other people for their own lack of peace it shows we are missing the very heart of the gospel.

And yet, tribalism can be a very difficult sin to see in ourselves. It is very tempting for us to think of tribalism as someone else’s problem. Americans and other westerners can be especially prone to think of tribes as an African thing, an African problem. And yet, tribalism is precisely what has raised the division and divisiveness in our country to unprecedented levels today. All of this stems out of propaganda from left and right, of white and black, of Christian and atheist that weights arguments inaccurately and unfairly and makes neighbors into enemies. Now we, of course, have no authority over anyone’s mindset but our own. And yet, to combat tribalism we need to be clear about its roots. And Katangole explains that tribalism is rooted in stories.

For example, the first European colonialists who arrived in Rwanda told a story that Tutsis had originally been invaders who had come down the Kagera River from Ethiopia (in the East). And according to the story, these invading Tutsis were ethnically superior and therefore had set up a more advanced civilization than the Hutus had been capable of. Now this wasn’t just some fairy tale people talked about; his myth was taught in Rwanda history books, and even believed & advanced by Christian missionaries. And so powerful was this story that in the 1994 genocide, the Kagera River was literally flooded with bodies of dead Tutsis, as symbolically the Hutus were sending them back back to Ethiopia.

But as Americans, we have stories like this, too. In the 1800s almost every American believed in the story of “Manifest Destiny”, which was the idea that God wanted the United States to spread out over the North American continent and take control of as much territory as possible, regardless of what had to be done with the “less civilized” Natives, whether through displacing them or just killing. The first genocide of the modern era was committed by *our* ancestors, and the U.S. government has never taken responsibility for this.

But tribalism based in stories isn’t just something that occurs over in Africa or in our ancient history. If we were to ask anyone today about how their enemies became their enemies, they would respond by telling a story. “Well, it all started when such-and-such politician did this” or “when this special interest group did that” or “when the atheists started coming after prayer in the schools” or whatever. This is how some of the stories about our domestic enemies go. But Katangole suggests there are even deeper stories that govern how Americans view life in relation to the world around.

For example, Katangole points out that American political theory is based in large part on the work of Thomas Hobbes, who was a 17th century philosopher. But Hobbes suggested that all humans are in



²¹ See, for example, John 4:1-26

a state of war with one another - that we will be driven only by self-interest - and that chaos can only be avoided through contracts between parties and nations where individual interests are surrendered in exchange for some greater benefit. And this idea has been so influential on the American mind that it's not even a story we have to be told, rather we just take it for granted: that a state of war between our nations and others is just 'inevitable' and 'the way things are'.

Additionally, Katangole notes that our capitalist economy is based largely upon the thought of 18th century philosopher Adam Smith, who emphasized that everyone is in competition for a limited amount of resources - again, at war - where everyone should compete and the strongest would survive.

So both Hobbes and Smith celebrated the pursuit of self-interest and greed. Now, you say, "Well, taken on its whole the influence of Hobbes and Smith has surely been a great boon! America is the most successful empire in the history of the world!" And maybe that's true from the perspective of worldly success and prosperity, and all of the nameless, faceless people who've become collateral damage along the way. Where the problem comes in is that, while most Americans have never heard of Hobbes or Smith, their stories tend to run deeper in our hearts than that of the gospel. And we may not even recognize it.

So there are stories we have been told or that we just take for granted and don't even have to be told, which may tend to run deeper than the story of the gospel of the kingdom of God. And *this* is what led to the genocide in Rwanda. And when a Cardinal visited Rwanda on behalf of the pope in 1994, he asked the assembled church leaders, "Are you saying that the blood of tribalism is deeper than the waters of baptism?" One leader answered, "Yes, it is." The story of tribalism was deeper than the story of the gospel.

Now how could a genocide like this occur in the most "Christian" nation in the world? Because in large part the missionaries had focused on converting Rwandans, not discipling them. In the box in your bulletin I've printed Jesus' Great Commission from Matthew 28 is that we should "**19** Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" and western evangelism has too often stopped right there. But Jesus continues into verse 20, saying, "**20** and (teach) them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Typically the Church's domestic evangelism and international mission work has been focused almost entirely on verse 19. And there are a few reasons for that, including 1) the distorted gospel that makes Christianity into being all about fire insurance of the afterlife. 2) But I think another reason for this tendency is just about ego. We live in a society that is all about numbers and size, so if western Christians want to feel good about ourselves and like we're being faithful to God, the tendency is to measure the success of churches or spreading with numbers of conversions. 3) And because, relatively speaking, conversion is much easier than discipleship. But only through discipleship do the stories we live by begin to be replaced by the story of God and his Kingdom.

What makes any of us susceptible to tribalism - to making enemies out of others within the Church, within the country, or around the globe - is when we fail to question the stories we've been told, as well as the stories we've just taken for granted & don't even have to be told. And yet, I get that this is a big ask. Would you believe that, even after tribalism claimed almost a million lives in Rwanda, they still use identity cards that distinguish Tutsi from Hutu? As Katangole says, the colonialists' story - that propaganda - had been so powerful that to this day the Rwandan people cannot imagine how they might live without these categories.²²

But as citizens of the Kingdom of God, we must recognize that this is the path to true freedom. To recognize and then question any and every story influencing our lives by holding it up against the person of Christ, this is the only way that so many fears and hatreds that enslave us can be rooted out. Jesus' invitation ""Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 4:17) is an invitation to repent of the anti-kingdom stories we've accepted uncritically as just being "the way things are", because that may *not* be the way things are in the kingdom.

Amen.