

Desmond Tutu speech
"Tribute to Community"
August 5, 2005

Archbishop Tutu: Thank you very much. Thank you. Madam Governor, Mr. Mayor, President, friends, ladies and gentlemen, I greet you in the name of our Lord and Savior, good evening. (Applause) I thought there were a few more people in the room. Good evening.

Audience: Good evening.

Tutu: Ah, that's slightly better. What a fabulous celebration. Isn't it fantastic? (Applause) I don't know why we want to spoil all of this beautiful rendition, come and spoil it now by letting me speak. We've listened to a superb orchestra. (Applause) Sojourner Truth Choir. (Applause) And wasn't the Harlem Boys Choir just something? (Applause) It's wonderful to be here with you tonight. Thank you for having invited me to come and share with you. And it has been a very great joy and privilege for me to have been made an honorary citizen of this beautiful, beautiful city. I'm glad to be part of you. (Applause)

I didn't imagine coming here that I would see quite a massive, impressive statue that honored the Underground Railway. I didn't think I would see a massive statue of a black woman in this place. (Applause) You have a fantastic city. Wonderful, wonderful. Let me ask your indulgence for just one other thing before I begin my little piece.

This afternoon I was introduced to a lady who today is celebrating her 80th birthday.. I think we should just give her a very warm clap on being 80 years young. (Applause)

I think it's a bit unfair to have a governor who is beautiful and then she turns out to be smart as well, and then so eloquent. (Applause) She's going to be a very, very, very hard act to follow but I'm just a mere man. My wife on one occasion was driving and she tried not to look too superior, but in front of us was car with a bumper sticker that said "Any woman who wants to be equal to a man has no ambition." (Laughter)

So you can see, I mean, why I run away from home. Heartiest congratulations to the Kellogg Foundation on celebrating its 75th anniversary. Well done. Especially in the area of advancing the well-being of the marginalized, the poor, and the disadvantaged, and on really helping to make a telling difference in the lives of so many here in Battle Creek, but also throughout the world, notably in Africa. As you know, I come from South Africa. Not always such an obviously well-known fact, it seems. In 1996 my wife and I were in Atlanta for the Olympic Games and we were traveling on the MARTA. Somebody thought they recognized me and asked for my autograph. I tried to look suitably modest as I was doing the honors for a few fellow passengers when one woman came up and thrust a piece of paper for me to sign, and as I was busy getting down to

signing, she looked around and said "Who is he? Who is he?" Very good for the soul, I thought.

This South Africa was deservedly the world's pariah because of its obnoxious policy called apartheid. It was a vicious system of racism, injustice, and oppression. The vast majority of that land of blacks were devoid of any real political rights and of course were hugely discriminated against in all fields of life. Their human dignity was trodden carelessly under foot. For instance, there were road signs that read: "Natives and dogs not allowed." No subtlety whatsoever about what the privileged whites appeared to think of their black compatriots. There was another road sign declaring: "Drive carefully, natives cross here." Somebody changed it to read: "Drive carefully, natives very cross here." (Laughter)

Indeed, natives had every reason to be cross. They lived in ghetto slum townships segregated by law from the salubrious, electrical elite, tree-lined suburbs reserved for whites, which had all the markings and the usual community facilities taken for granted in a well-run city. Good paved roads, running water, sewage processors, libraries, swimming pools, parks, well-appointed and equipped schools, etc. Almost all these were conspicuous by their absence from the black residential areas. The government spends seven times per annum in education on one white child what it spends on a black child. Every aspect of life was segregated. Public transport, church, school, hospitals, etc. If a black person was critically injured in an accident and an ambulance reserved for whites arrived on the scene, it would not convey the injured to hospital, even when it was a real matter of life and death. Blacks had their movement severely restricted by the so-called Pass Laws requiring all blacks from 16 years old to carry a kind of internal passport, which the police could demand at any time. It was a statutory offense for a black person not to have it on their person when asked to produce it. Thus there was considerable resentment and anger. It was a disaster waiting to happen. The system was designed to knock the stuffing out of blacks, to hound them into docile, conforming hewers of wood and drawers of water for the whites. Perpetual serfs in the land of their birth where they did not even have the vote. This vicious system, so totally unjust and immoral, could be maintained only by equally unjust and immoral means. The apartheid system played havoc with the rule of law and so opponents of the apartheid government were detained without trial, subverting thereby due process, or they were banned for five years or more.

The Kellogg Foundation knows a good thing when they see it. For one of those working for this foundation in South Africa was one such who had been detained many, many times and who, with his wife, at one time served banning orders. Banning condemned a person to a twilight existence as a prisoner at one's own expense. A kind of house arrest. Those who were detained were almost always kept in solitary confinement and routinely tortured. And several were assassinated, sometimes being blown up with explosives and then thrown into crocodile infested rivers. Now this sounds like so much hyperbole, but it is based on the evidence that perpetrators themselves gave as they applied for amnesty to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. What was expected? In the face of the intransigence and viciousness of the apartheid state, what did the oppressed do? They

were confronted with a formidable phalanx of military and police might. Their community was also riddled with informants, and they should really have thrown in the towel. Wonderfully, exhilaratingly, they did nothing of the sort. Against great odds they grouped and organized, espousing nonviolence and passive resistance. Mahatma Gandhi had been a young lawyer in South Africa. He was thrown off a train for daring to travel in a whites-only compartment and there began to develop his nonviolent philosophy. The oppressed formed organizations such as the African National Congress, and the Indian Congress and others campaigned for the inalienable rights of their members. They employed conventional nonviolent methods such as bus boycotts, demonstrations, petitions, etc. In 1960 there were huge demonstrations against the grievous passed laws. One such demonstration of unarmed civilians was turned into a massacre when the police shot and killed at least 69 persons, most shot in the back as they were running away. That was an important watershed. The apartheid government banned the people's political organizations, the African National Congress and the Pan African Congress, which now went underground or into exile. These two organizations jettisoned their nonviolence, saying that reluctantly they'd had to abandon nonviolence in face of the brutality and violence of the state. Apartheid's oppression was intensifying and the intransigent rulers were seemingly firmly ensconced in power, supported often by Western governments who followed hook, line, and sinker, the South African view of being the last bastion of Western civilization against the depredations of a rampant Soviet communism. We were in desperate straights. In 1976 black school kids decided that enough was enough and rejected the imposition of Africans as a medium of instruction and so the Soweto uprising, and South Africa would not be the same again.

Those were somber times, but this was when people showed their mettle. Many of our leaders either went into exile or were sentenced, such as Nelson Mandela and others, to very long terms of imprisonment because of their commitment to freedom and justice and respect for human rights. Those were awful days. But they were also exhilarating days. People refused to throw in the towel. People refused to have their stuffing knocked out of them. It was amazing. People in various sectors of society organized, and galvanized others into action. There were women's groups such as the Black Sash. There were detainee parents support committees. There was the end-conscription campaign that agitated for the end of conscription for whites in the South African defense force. There were severe penalties for avoiding conscription. The faith communities were in the forefront of the mobilization of the people. Inspired by the charismatic Steve Biko, the opposition groups amalgamated to form the United Democratic Front. We were not allowed to quote him or to show his image, but Nelson Mandela became a potent source of inspiration to the end-apartheid struggle, and the world was galvanized into demanding his release, and that of all South African political prisoners. Yes, we were fortunate that the world supported us and we won a spectacular victory over the viciousness of apartheid. (Applause)

Why did we win? We won because the world, you, supported us. It was fantastic. Many around the world boycotted South African goods on our behalf. Many demonstrated on our behalf. Many were even arrested on our behalf. And yes, today we are free. Today we

are a democratic land. Today we are seeking to be nonracial. We are seeking to be non-sexist. Our victory. Our spectacular victory is your victory as well. (Applause)

Frequently, in the bad old days, we used to come around asking for help. We said, "Please help us. We want to overthrow this vicious system." You gave us the help, yes, and the goal was achieved. What an incredible privilege it is to be able to come back to those, from whom we solicited help to say you gave us the help we asked for, we have succeeded, and now we come back to you to say thank you, thank you, thank you. (Applause)

Now, now, I know that you are very reserved and shy, but you know when someone has helped to remove shackles from your wrists, from your ankles, you don't let them go away. So I discovered, I discovered that I had a magic wand. When I wave it over people, as I am going to be doing, it turns you into instant South Africans. So I say "fff". (Waves hand over audience) (Applause, laughter)

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. So ... oh, yes, of course. You return to your former shy, reserved self. But it is ... that is for real. It may seem to be extraneous, but I'm seeking to convey the deep, deep passion and feeling of a mother whose child disappeared because they were abducted, and she comes to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and says please, please, can you help find even just a bone of my child? Please can you help so that I can give even just that a decent burial? And then I can have closure. I come seeking to speak on behalf of millions who want to say to you, you don't know what you accomplished. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. (Applause)

So we won first because, yes, you helped. Second was the caliber of our leaders. Had the immovable grand knight like Pieter of Newport been president still, it is highly unlikely that he would have done what Mr. F.W. declared in 1990. Those were breathtakingly courageous initiatives that Mr. de Klerk announced, and he must be commended very, very warmly for his courage. I think you should give him not too big a clap but... yes, yes. (Applause)

But can you imagine had Nelson Mandela been consumed by hatred and bitterness, baying for the blood of his tormentors and his people's oppressors, can you imagine what would have happened to our land? South Africa would have been devastated by the racial bloodbath so many had feared and predicted. Mercifully, quite almost incredibly, he emerged from jail as magnanimous, eager to promote not revenge and retribution, but reconciliation and forgiveness. And so the miracle of South Africa came to be. You know at his inauguration as the first democratic and elected president of South Africa, one of the VIP guests he invited was his former white jailer. So, the pariah was transformed into the global flavor of the month. The repulsive caterpillar metamorphosed into a glorious multicolored butterfly. (Applause)

The segregated, alienated land gave us the rainbow people of God. Nelson Mandela, the erstwhile terrorist, became a colossus in moral stature. We won because of the resilience

of the people who refused to give in even when the going got tough and when things were desperate.

Third, we won because this is a moral universe. Good, right and wrong, evil, matter. It is a moral universe so that injustice and oppression can never ultimately have the last word. (Applause)

No, this is a moral universe where good is stronger than evil. Where love is stronger than hate. Where light is stronger than darkness. Where life is stronger than death. So that we are able to say "yes" exultantly. Victory is ours through Him who died for us. (Applause) And so we see that changes indeed radical, substantial changes, can be effected in the economic, political, and social spheres through the cooperative effort of communities that are organized, that are inspired by charismatic individuals as their leaders. You, in Battle Creek, have shown that it is possible to change the way that things have been done, the way things have been, and to do so for the better. Your forbearers were involved in the end of slavery movement and you have a great tradition of a sensitive social conscious. And you've got your "Yes we can!" (Applause) And Kellogg has been outstanding in supporting those efforts and similar efforts in other lands, especially in Africa. And so you see that God has a huge sense of humor. The founder of Kellogg's was expelled from school because he was thought to be dimwitted, only so as we gathered, because of poor eyesight, and this dimwitted one discovered or invented Corn Flakes and, as they say, the rest is history. (Laughter)

But can you ever have imagined that South Africa would become a beacon of hope? Beacon of hope? South Africa? I tell you, it was unlikely. I mean, for most people, it would be an example of some of the most awful ghastly messes and God, God sets up this unlikely place to be what? A beacon for God? God, I mean, are you serious? Do you know, God, that these people, they are not even virtuous. I mean look at how long they supported a vicious, unjust system – apartheid – and God said, "Mmm." And they're not even smart, God, you know. They say a South African got a little upset that because in the days when there was still a Soviet Union the leader of the Soviet Union and the U.S. were getting all the kudos for their space program. And so this South African said, "Oh, we are going to launch a spacecraft to the sun". To the sun? "Yeah, yeah, to the sun." And they said, "Oh, no, long before it reaches the sun it will be burned to cinders, man." And they said, "Ah, so you think we South Africans are stupid? We're going to launch it at night". (Laughter)

God sets us up and says yeah, they are to be a beacon of hope because God wants to say to Northern Ireland, to the Middle East, to Sri Lanka, to Burma, to all of the places that seem to have intractable problems, God is saying they had a nightmare called apartheid, that nightmare has ended. Your nightmare, too, your places that are riddled now by conflict, your nightmare, too, will end. (Applause)

They had a problem that people said was intractable. So nowhere in the world can we ever again say ours is an intractable problem. And so God says to all of these people, if it could happen in South Africa, it can happen any and everywhere. Thank you.

(Applause)