Bouncing through Rwanda (and Uganda, Too)

A Sermon by Rev. Tim Kutzmark
March 10, 2013
Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

THE MORNING READING

Our reading this morning is entitled "Boundaries and Borders" by Rod Richards

We humans are the line-drawers. We are the border makers. We are the boundary testers. We are the census takers. We draw a line to separate this from that, so we can see clearly what each is. We create a border to define our place.

We test boundaries to find if they are real, if they are necessary, if they are just.

We congregate within those boundaries as families and tribes and cities and countries that we call *us*. And we call people on the other side *them.*

But our minds seek boundaries that our hearts know not. The lines we draw disappear when viewed with eyes of compassion. The recognition of human kinship does not end at any border. A wiser part of us knows that the other is us, and we them.

Let justice flow like water and peace like a never-ending stream. Let compassion glow like sunlight and love like an ever-shining beam. The rain, the sunshine, the breeze, the life-giving air we breathe—they know no boundaries. Neither do our empathy, our good will, our concern for one another.

God has no borders. Love has no borders. Unity has no borders.

THE SERMON

Bouncing through Rwanda (and Uganda, Too)
A Sermon by Rev. Tim Kutzmark
March 3, 2013

Looking out of the plane window, there are no borders or boundaries to be seen, marking the differences, marking where Egypt becomes Sudan, Sudan becomes Ethiopia, Ethiopia becomes Kenya, Kenya becomes Uganda, and Uganda becomes Rwanda. Flying over Africa, you can't tell which country is which, you just get a sense that something substantial is unfolding below you, that the sometimes mountainous, sometimes flat and barren, sometimes untamed land mass below holds a life and experience very different from the one known to us.

Well into Ugandan airspace, the clouds give way to reveal an extraordinary sweep of lush green mountains, with small villages and terraced farms climbing up steep slopes. Even from high in the sky, you can sense that the equator draws an unseen line here, that heat and humidity hold sway on the ground, and that the people live in close contact with the rawness of the land and its plentiful plant life. The mountainsides are covered in farmland, at times farmland that seems to hang in the air, perched almost completely perpendicular. The mountainsides are separated into plots of land, with borders of earth, rock and trees defining one farm from another, one crop from another. In this rich, dark soil, Ugandans (and Rwandans) grow plantains, cassava, sweet potatoes, yams, millet, corn, and beans, as well as coffee, cotton, tea, and tobacco.

Later I would learn that this deep reliance on subsistence farming is what keeps most of the people here from starving, and, I learned, it was this need for farmland that led to the destruction of the rainforests that were the home to the reason I was going to Uganda and Rwanda in the first place.

I hadn't come here because of the farms or the people. I came on vacation to Uganda (and then Rwanda), for one reason (or so I thought, when I landed there four weeks ago). I came to see the rare mountain gorillas in their natural habitat. Last year, while I was volunteering with a team of scientists studying a poacher-decimated pride of lions in South Africa, I was told, "You *must* go see the mountain gorillas before they are all gone, before they become extinct." There are only about 790 mountain gorillas left alive in the world. They live in three separate rainforests found in Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The mountain gorillas in the Republic of Congo are off limits due to the country's political instability and the danger of kidnapping by rebels. But Uganda and Rwanda are stable countries, and small groups of trekkers, led by skilled trackers, are allowed to make the arduous hike up into the mountains to view, in the wild, these magnificent and gentle creatures.

I knew the hike to the mountain gorillas was potentially brutal, and that I should anticipate stinging nettles, biting red ants, and machetes hacking through dense underbrush. But I hadn't really thought about what the experience would be like going from the Entebbe airport to the rainforest. That was a ten-hour drive—a ten-hour drive through villages and towns, a ten-hour drive on rocky and rough roads into the heart of rural Africa, a ten-hour drive that forced me to see not animal life, but human life.

The first thing you notice in Uganda while driving during the day are the little children and women balancing large plastic containers of water on their heads as they walk miles along dusty dirt roads. They are either going to or coming back from a stream, spring, or well. Paul, my driver and guide, tells me that less than 1% of the country has running water. There's just not a lot of easy access to water in Uganda. And so, if you are four years old, you're old enough to walk long distances and carry a heavy but life-giving load. As we drive through the countryside, as we stop in towns and villages, I see so many little children. I can't help but notice how dirty so many of them are. When you have to carry water that far, you don't waste it on washing. You drink it. You cook with it. You treasure it. In the dry season, when water is even scarcer, many of these children

will have to choose between attending school and walking an even longer distance for water. The walk to water wins.

The first thing you notice in Uganda while driving during the night is the dark. Paul, my driver and guide, tells me that only 1% of the country has electricity. As night comes to the villages and towns along the roadside, you see some electric lights burning. There's an occasional television casting shadows on the faces of its rapt audience. Some kerosene lamps light the small shops and food stands where people congregate at dusk. But mostly there are shops and homes that are just dark. There isn't electricity, and if there was, most couldn't pay the bill. Nor is there money for much kerosene. There are wood fires. But mostly there is just night. Even in the capital city of Kampala, which feels quite cosmopolitan with its McDonald's and Hilton Hotel, many of the residents live in the dark once nighttime comes.

The first thing you notice in Uganda while driving anytime is how different and dangerous the roads are. Very few roads are paved, and on the ones that are, the number and size of the potholes would cause my six-year-old Hyundai Elantra to break apart within minutes. I kid you not! The roads in Afghanistan were not so bad! Imagine this with me. Imagine driving 75 miles an hour on Route 93. Now imagine driving 75 miles an hour, but Route 93 is a two-lane highway, with one lane going in one direction and the other lane going in the other direction, with passing going on. Now, imagine Route 93 as a two-lane highway, but the erosion of asphalt on either side of those lanes is so pronounced that in some places you have the equivalent of one lane of paved road shared by two lanes of cars and trucks going 75 miles an hour in opposite directions. Add on top of that motor scooters with unhelmeted drivers weaving in and out of those fast-moving cars and trucks. Add on top of that kids and adults riding bikes on the edge of the road. Add on top of that people walking on the edge of the road. Add on top of that goats and cows being herded on the edge of the road. But add on top of that *all of that happening at night*, in the dark, with no street lights and only headlights shining on the goats and cows, motor scooters, bikes, and people walking, all vying for space on the equivalent of one lane of paved road while the cars and trucks go 75 miles an hour in opposite directions. Welcome to Uganda! Welcome to Rwanda!

The life expectancy for an adult male in Uganda is 48 years, not because of the traffic, but because of poverty, hard living conditions, absence of balanced nutrition, and lack of basic healthcare. 48 years! When Paul, my driver and guide, tells me this, I am stunned, for I am 48. In the eyes of most of the people I meet in Uganda, I am an old man. The life expectancy for an adult male in Rwanda is even less, 42 years. I've already lived six years longer than most men in that country.

By the time I arrive ten hours later at Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, the site of my first gorilla trek, my experience has been very different from the one I expected.

I went to Uganda and Rwanda seeking only gorillas (and I found them, and more about that later). But what I really found were people. What I found were people struggling to survive on next to nothing. What I found were people who had so little to take for

granted. What I found—no, *who* I found—were people of great strength and dignity, people I could come to know, people I began to care about. As Rod Richards wrote in this morning's reading: "We humans are the line-drawers. We are the border makers . . . We draw a line to separate this from that . . . We create a border to define our place . . . We congregate within those boundaries as families and tribes and cities and countries that we call *us*. And we call people on the other side *them.* But our minds seek boundaries that our hearts know not. The lines we draw disappear when viewed with eyes of compassion. The recognition of human kinship does not end at any border. A wiser part of us knows that the other is us, and we them."

That night, I fell asleep to the sound of nighttime in the rainforest, knowing that in the morning, I would walk into that rainforest to see something that most people never experience in person. But I fell asleep feeling truly troubled, deeply saddened, by the human condition that I had already seen, the human connection that I had already experienced.

Early morning and we're on the move. We begin with a steep several-hour climb. Because I'm faster than the other seven Westerners in my group, I find myself at the front of the trekkers, and am soon in conversation with Mutebi, one of the young Ugandan soldiers who accompany us in case we encounter rebels coming over the border from the Congo. For Mutebi this trek is an everyday occurrence, so he doesn't want to talk about gorillas, he wants to talk about his life. Mutebi tells me he grew up in a village several hundred miles away. He grew up poor, in a mud house with a dirt floor and no glass in the windows. He is one of 17 children (he tells me it is not uncommon for men of his tribe to have more than one wife). His favorite breakfast and dinner is steamed mashed bananas with bean sauce. Mutebi says that for most Ugandans, every meal is just a starch and sauce. He said that growing up, he knew it was Christmas because that day they ate chicken, and he was given one can of Coca-Cola to share with his 16 siblings. Mutebi did well in primary and secondary school, where he learned English, math, and science. He would stay up late into the night, studying by kerosene lamp. He got terrible headaches because he had to strain so hard in the dark to see the words on the page. Mutebi joined the army because it was a job and he thought he could save money. He smiles sadly and says, "They don't pay us very much. I can't save anything. I want to start a business, selling hardware. I don't know how that will happen." Mutebi is 21. He is married and has a 4-year-old son. He wants to leave the army soon. He has no idea how he can do that. His voice grows silent, but his eyes ask, "Can I give him some money? Just a little? After all, I'm rich enough to fly from America just to see gorillas. What about the *people* living here?" This is more complicated than I want. Yes, I can give him something. No, it won't really make much difference. I am feeling so much. I feel guilty being here. I feel excited being here. I know my being here brings money into the community. I know my being here is a reminder to Mutebi that he lives in a world that is not fair. I know my being here is a momentary thing. I know that in four weeks I'll be back in Boston turning Mutebi into a sermon. Mutebi and I look at each other and know that in the game of life, I won the luck of the draw. By chance, I was born middle class in America, and he was born poor in Uganda. I would sleep that night in a hotel. He would sleep that night on a dirt floor.

Our trekking group suddenly stops. The moment I came for, the moment of reckoning has come. Off to my left I see a shaking high in the trees; a black shape blurs by. Gorillas! To the right come sounds of muffled grunts. Gorillas! Here, after hours of climbing up the mountainside, slipping and sliding through the slick greenness of the rainforest, we are about to see the gorillas!

Gorillas in the wild live in family groups, led by a dominant male silverback, and we are about to meet our family, the Habinyanja family group, eighteen gorillas led by Makara, the silverback, and Kisho, the oldest adult female. Mutebi warns us that the group might be a bit skittish because poachers recently killed one of its adult males. But suddenly there the gorillas are, a few feet in front of us—a few feet around us—lounging, playing, climbing, eating, and dozing in a grove of bamboo trees.

Our gene pool and that of a mountain gorilla are 98% identical. Watching them move, watching them communicate with each other, watching them watch you is a mystical experience, and you have a sense that you are in the presence of something very similar to you, and yet, something much more magnificent than you. Their dense black color is intense and glorious, their fur gleams when sunlight meets it. The adults are massive and muscular, with broad chests and hulking shoulders. Mountain gorillas can weigh close to 400 pounds, yet there is a softness, a shyness, about them that is surprising and touching. By reputation they are aggressive, but in reality mountain gorillas are gentle, gentle with each other, and gentle with us—the small, almost hairless humans who have come to observe one of their closest biological relatives. Their faces are remarkable, so animated and expressive. Their shiny black muzzle, nose and mouth are moving, wrinkled and furrowed masks of profound individuality. But their eyes are what transfix me. Theirs are not the sad, dull eyes I've seen staring from gorillas locked up in the zoo. No! Theirs are eyes of earth and tree and rain and sky and freedom. Their eyes are living wells of soulfulness. Even the infants, who look like little furry gremlins with fuzzy, frizzy hair on their heads, have eyes that penetrate into the human heart. To be looked at by a gorilla in the wild is to experience being seen by some remarkable embodiment of knowing. It is as if the raw yet tender power of nature is gazing upon you, is blessing you, is becoming one with you.

I think of Rob Richards' words from this morning's reading: "Our minds seek boundaries that our hearts know not . . . [but] a wiser part knows that the other is us, and we them."

I break from the profundity of the gorilla's gaze, and look over at Mutebi, the young Ugandan soldier who brought me here. His eyes meet mine. He smiles, and I suddenly see in his face something I had not seen before—a great pride, a pride in the fact that *he* was able to guide me to this moment, *he was able to give me this moment*.

There, in the rainforest, two different people from two different worlds suddenly see each other in a different way. There, in the rainforest, two different people from two different worlds suddenly experience each other in a different way. There, in the presence of the mighty mountain gorillas, Rob Richards' words come true: "We humans are the line-

drawers. We are the border makers . . . We create a border to define our place . . . We congregate within those boundaries as families and tribes and cities and countries that we call *us*. And we call people on the other side *them.* But our minds seek boundaries that our hearts know not. The lines we draw disappear when viewed with eyes of compassion. The recognition of . . . kinship does not end at any border. A wiser part of us knows that the other is us, and we them."

May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.