

“All Dried Up and No Place to Go”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

When I think about dry bones coming back to life, the first person I thought of was a woman I had gotten to know in Waterloo, and if you are from the Cedar Valley, you have to say Cedar Falls; there is a big competition there. She went to UNI and her name was Clementine Msengi. Clementine is probably the greatest example of dry bones coming back to life. Clementine was in part of the Rwanda genocide. In 1994, in Rwanda, nearly one million people, because they were from the wrong tribe, were massacred. Imagine, a million people, in that small country. She was one of the few who survived it - but she lost her entire family. But that never got her down. Clementine was one of the greatest examples of faith I have ever met, and the minute you meet her you feel it.

When she got out of Rwanda, they gathered all of them into a camp in Uganda, while they figured out what to do with these people. While she was there, even though she had struggles with pain in her life, she gathered groups of people together in the camp, where they barely had enough to eat and had no idea where they were going to go. All of them had been devastated by the most traumatic experiences known. She organized groups of people who were strong enough emotionally, to sit down with those who were not. She started a counseling area where they would just talk to each other and carry each other through this horrible time.

Then she was able to make it to the United States, and she ended up in, of all places, Waterloo, Iowa. I always feel sorry for people who are from Africa who land in Iowa, because you not only have to try to find a new place, but you have to deal with the cold. Clementine said that was one of the most shocking things when you come to this country - especially in the northern part of this country: figuring out how to handle the cold. And when all of the people who were immigrants to Waterloo came along, they were all told they needed to go work at the Tyson Meat Packing plant - that is what immigrants do.

Clementine said, “Not for me.” Somehow she figured a way to go back to school. She spoke three languages in Rwanda - but none were English. But, she wanted an education, so she went to the University of Northern Iowa. Somehow [she] talked her way in. (This woman could sell ice cubes to Eskimos.) [Laughter] She got into the University and learned English while she was getting her education. You can’t help but help her. Clementine had professors helping her, and she had other students coming in [to help her]. She was always willing to soak up everything that she heard and, for all of the help she would receive, she was so grateful.

So she got through college, in three years, not knowing the language at all when she arrived. She had the highest grades in her major - which was Public Information - and she went on and received a scholarship to provide care within her major to people struggling around the world. So, for the next couple of years, she toured the globe, responding to immigrant people who were trying to flee from frightened, devastated areas, and tried to figure out how to bring life and hope to these individuals.

When she had done that two-year stint, she decided to come back to Waterloo-Cedar Falls, and start her own non-for-profit organization called Bright Moves Network - and that is when I got to meet Clementine - because the church I was serving invited her to talk at what is like All Things Considered, and we were all blown away by her as a person, by her story.

It is amazing as Americans how little we know about what happens in other places. I had heard about Rwanda. I knew existentially about all of the problems and the nearly one million killed, but she helped me personalize the tragedy in hearing how she hid and suffered and survived; how she watched family members die. But, it wasn't her survival that made her life meaningful; it was how she thrived in spite of it.

Bright Moves Network is a group in Waterloo that gathers new immigrants into the community and matches them with mentors - people who have been here or raised in Iowa - so they can make connections, because she said the most difficult part of being an immigrant or refugee person is 1.) language - and if you have a mentor you can practice the language, and 2.) transportation - how do you get around to even find a job? Iowa struggles - especially Waterloo-Cedar Falls. Des Moines is a little better with their bus service, but how do you get places - and it looks so overwhelming - and they can help with that. How do you get involved and find educational opportunities? How do schools work? How does health care work? I can't imagine, and I have so much respect for immigrant and refugee people who are just placed and have to figure it all out.

Clementine wanted to make sure that people [coming] after her had more help and hope than she had. I encourage you to get on-line - it is easy to find. Iowa Public Television in 2005 did a wonderful story on Clementine. It was entitled "Remarkable Refugee." It is a great story.

In that story it also talked about another friend of ours. Her name is Mirsa Rudic. Mirsa has a daughter who is from Bosnia, and she has a daughter is the same age as our daughter. When they were young - I think they were in 5th grade - like most kids, they had to read "The Diary of Ann Frank."

Mirsa and her family were from Bosnia, and I think her husband was from Serbia - which made it even more difficult. They came over in 1999 and this would have been - this would have been, I think, 2001 that the two girls - our daughter and Mirsa's daughter - were laying on the floor in our living room reading "Ann Frank" and figuring out what they were going to do for a presentation.

I looked over and listened, and just sat in the back of the room like dads do, trying to stay out of the way, listening to Mirsa talk to our Hannah about how she related to Ann Frank, because she remembered hiding, she remembered being scared. What was so incredibly shaky was that she didn't have any emotion; it was like going to the grocery store. It was just like any other part of life.

These brave, courageous individuals aren't always adults. Many, many of them are children, who are the most vulnerable, and the most in need of our support. And, what amazed me was their resilience - their dry bones - whether it was in the Bosnian camps or in Ugandan camps or wherever they were, so many of the people not only survived physically but thrived spiritually. Their dry bones were brought back to life. Mirsa, I found

out later, helped volunteer at Bright Moves Network, helping other immigrants because she wanted them to have it easier than she had had it. It was amazing, the out-pouring of love and care - the determination to make it.

At UNI, one of Clementine's professors was Dr. Cryer, and he gave an example of how dedicated she is. He said, "You need to get a keyboarding class - like typing - because in this world computers are going to be the only way you can get ahead." But, there wasn't a class at UNI. The only class she could find was to sit in a room of middle-schoolers at one of the local Cedar Falls' middle schools. But, she wasn't too big, or important, or old, or anything else; it was an opportunity and she took it.

Two months later she called Dr. Cryer and told him, "I learned how to use the keyboard and I have my own website." [Laughter] You teach her to use a keyboard, and within two months she has her own website. That's Clementine.

As I said - after that she graduated in three years with the highest grade point average in her major, she started Bright Moves and made it a success. The wonderful blessings that she has done in her life have continued to flow. Hannah, and Mirsa's daughter graduated from high school; they both went to college - different places.

The first semester spring break I had vacation, Jill didn't, so I got in the car and went to Pennsylvania where Hannah was going to college. And I said, "Honey, let's take a couple of days and go to Washington D.C." Neither of us had been there. So we went to Washington [D.C.]. Do not ask Hannah about that trip, because I only had [enough] money to go to a Howard Johnson's in Maryland, and it was pretty scary. [Laughter] We lasted one night, stayed two days in Washington D.C. and I drove the rest of the way just to get home, so we wouldn't have to stay another night at Howard Johnson's.

But, while we were there, we went to a bunch of different sites, we looked at different things, and we walked and walked. One of the places we went was the Holocaust Museum. I recommend it to anybody. All of a sudden, we are walking through and in one section - it wasn't related to the Holocaust in Nazi, Germany - but it was talking about other genocides. There is a whole section there. All of a sudden Clementine is on the monitor, representing Rwanda. That woman is everywhere. [Laughter] She never stops.

I lost track of her when I came here so, as I'm getting ready for this sermon, I thought I'm going to look her up - because she really does speak to dry bones breathing again. How many Clementine Msengi's can there be in the world? Not too many. So it was easy. (Kind of like Scott Paczkowski - you can find him anywhere on the net.) [Laughter] Here she is with a PHD, teaching as a visiting professor, at Lamar University in Belmont, Texas.

Dry bones breathe new life again. She has a deep faith and a belief in God, and a belief in what God has in store for her. There is nothing that we cannot overcome as long as we do not give up; as long as we continue to believe that God's Spirit works in our hearts and in our lives.

Every one of us has a story - and most of them could curl each other's spines. We have every reason to give up. We have every reason to cry "why me?" But that doesn't serve anyone. Let your dry bones breathe. Dust the dryness off of your soul because the same

Spirit of God that gave new life to the people of Israel, is the same Spirit that would not allow a little, young woman named Clementine to give up when she watched her family murdered - but continues to give life to so many others. And, it is the same Spirit that is moving in this room and through each one - you and me.

If we work together, watch how the Spirit will work through us, to touch so many other lives. Clementine was one woman who touched so many; Mirsa was just another. All of us together could make a radical difference. Let's get to work. Amen