

Christmas Eve, 2007

Long before the long lines and exhausting times of this season, before winter hit our land, during Lent of this year, we at St. A's promised and passionately pledged. We said that we would support 50 children orphaned by HIV/AIDS in far away Nagulo, Tanzania through the Carpenter's Kids program. We decidedly declared that we would provide an additional meal each day for these children, when they previously only had one, and we agreed to supply uniforms and school supplies for our fifty children so that they could attend public schools. And St. A's committed to doing this for five years. That we collectively agreed to change the lives of these children was my own personal Easter, proof that our faith in God is more about caring for those in need and hoping when most hope is gone than simple creeds.

In early November, I excitedly exchanged e-mails with Kelly Alexander, the able-bodied, eager program assistant, in Tanzania. She was writing after dutifully delivering our supplies for the first time in Nagulo, and on this Christmas Eve, I feel that it is especially appropriate to share with you what she writes. Ms. Alexander says, "Visiting Nagulo parish was indeed an extraordinary display of hospitality. When we arrived outside the church there was a large group of women singing and playing the drums. Once their song finished 50+ children began another song clapping all in unison. We were then ushered to the priest's home where we were offered doughnuts and tea--with milk! Which never happens, milk is quite expensive in these parts.

The organization of the day's events went smoothly [she says]... After each child received his/her uniform, school supplies and shoes, there was a time for people to stand up and say Thank you---to You! Many people stood up and shared their gratitude with us. People never thought that someone from the USA would be in their small village helping give their vulnerable children an education. It was a blessed day."

Ms. Alexander goes on to comment that she herself was also given another rarity in those harsh hinterlands, a thanksgiving for the love and money that St. A's has given. Ms. Alexander, a good American, on our behalf was given a ba-gawking, pecking, fine-feathered live, not in cellophane chicken. Ms. Alexander did not write about forging a relationship with her new pet friend, but I do believe that Sunday dinner for her was on us that week. Attached to the e-mail were photos of the event in Nagulo, which, thankfully, did not include said chicken. Instead, there were children singing and twistily twirling in their new outfits. There was a woman with a Hardrock Café t-shirt that read "Berlin", some toss-out from a far, far away land. And the uniforms were a sight. They practically swallowed the kids, because they have to last through a year's worth of growth. But still, the children had Christmas morning smiles. And then, at the end of this string of photos, there was also a picture of Nagulo's priest and Vestry, which humbles me. The priest is stoic and serious while the Vestry members smile with delight. This leader and his group, attempting to lead a village, trying to help them find God, even in the midst of serious hunger, limited education, and poverty absolutely brings me to tears.

From Isaiah, we hear it foretold: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; .. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken... For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his

shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace.”

Perhaps it is odd on this most joyful, amusing, and new-gadget and family-centered night of the year that I speak about these most vulnerable people in Africa. But while our support of these children was my Easter, the relationship that we have begun and their brighter future is also my Christmas, and I hope part of yours. For in both our new relationship with this village in Africa and in the miracle of Christmas, we see the love of God adorning itself with human hands and hearts and voices (and uniforms). And as the prophet Isaiah says, we see the authority of God growing continually.

And tonight of all nights, we need that. We need to remember that God came down from heaven to show us that we are never alone, that we are not meant for hunger and pain, and that we are loved beyond our wildest imaginations. And on this most holy night, we need to remember that part of receiving that salvific love is to go back into the night of our world and make sure that others are safe. Tonight, we experience God being born with human hands so that we, in return, might become the hands of God. We honor God coming into the body of Jesus so that we might all become the body of Christ. And we experience God coming into our own hearts as we seek for our world to become more like the heart of God. Because God came into our world in flesh, we are called to see Jesus and God in all people, and all flesh, and to serve them and one another as we would serve God, until the two are indistinguishable.

Over the course of the time since we have been contributing to our companion parish in Tanzania, I have heard some grumblings from well-intentioned, well-meaning parishioners. Some have wondered why we should care about children so very far away when there are children here who also need help. And that is a difficult question. It is always a difficult decision to choose between two good things, perhaps more difficult than choosing between a good and a bad thing. But to them, to you, and even to me, I say that any time we help out another human being, any time that we truly care for and put the marginalized peoples of our world back into community with one another, anytime we give someone another chance, anytime we forgive when someone wrongs us, anytime we ask for forgiveness when we have wronged others, we have brought forth God into our world just as much as Mary has. And it does not matter whether that person is here or on the moon or in a stable in Bethlehem. Part of the lesson of tonight is that a person in Nagulo, Tanzania is just as important as the person next door. We, including Jesus, are all children of God.

In about 36 hours, 31 people, representing our parish, will travel down to Mississippi to be the hearts and hands of God and the hearts and hands of all of us. They will do what others down there have been unable to do for two years, build homes and hope. And to them, and to their leader, The Wests, I say thank you. You make us and them more Godly. You bring God into our world, which is the spirit of Christmas.

Ms. Alexander writes from Tanzania, “People never thought that someone from the USA would be in their small village helping give their vulnerable children an education. It was a blessed day.” And like those children, we have been surprised by an unconditionally loving God with

human hands and heart reaching out to us, God's vulnerable children, and giving us hope for our world. The people of Nagulo greeted our surprising supplies with women singing and playing drums, with children singing out, by giving gifts, including that chicken, and by communally sharing doughnuts and tea with milk. May we likewise with everything that we have and everything that we are greet the Prince of Peace, our Mighty God, and our Everlasting Father into our world. Play the horn, pray your hearts out with hope for our lives and our world, give back. Eat a doughnut. Share that doughnut. Merry Christmas.