

Ecclesiasticus 10:7-18

Psalm 112

Hebrews 13:1-8

LUKE 14:1, 7-14

Sermon – September 2, 2007

The last time I preached anywhere was three weeks ago today in Holy Trinity Church of the Anglican Church of Kenya in Kibera, as part of St. Barnabas' Healing Mission Trip to Kenya. It was an experience like none that I have ever had.

Kibera is the name for the poorest section of Nairobi, the capital city of the East African nation of Kenya. It was described to me as “the largest slum in Africa:” at least 700,000 people packed into 20 square miles, like putting more than the entire population of Middlesex County into half the acreage of South Brunswick.

Kibera makes Camden look like Bernardsville by comparison. The housing is mile after mile of tiny houses with mud walls and tin roofs -- except for what my host for my tour on the Friday before I preached, the Rev. Daniel Juma, Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, described as “the middle class section” of Kibera, where there are tin walls as well as tin roofs to the shacks.

The street (to use the term loosely) which we managed to drive down in the Vicar's car must have been at least partially paved or graded at some point in history, but not recently. Otherwise, where I would have expected side streets in this country were simply dirt alleyways. August is a dry month in Nairobi; what those dirt alleyways and mud walls are like in the *rainy* season I cannot imagine.

There is no running water in Kibera -- including at the church -- and no sewers. There is electricity (in some places for some people some of the time). There is no heat, except for gathering around one of the ubiquitous trash fires by the side of the street in the cool mornings; August is the coolest month of the year in Nairobi, which is south of the equator and at the altitude of Denver.

Public buildings were scarcely to be seen on the two hour tour I was given. I believe there are public schools in Kibera, but I don't recall seeing any, and forget fire stations. Let's just say the gap between downtown and that part of town is considerable. There are no hospitals in Kibera; there are some downtown -- if a person can get there. No one quoted me any statistics on unemployment, life expectancy, crime or median income such as can be obtained for even the poorest areas of the United States; I have a hunch that reliable statistics may not exist. Maybe the government doesn't bother to count the people who don't count.

There *are* churches aplenty in Kibera and in Kenya generally; it is the most spiritual country I have yet visited. Kenya is also the friendliest country I have ever visited, and this leads to my point.

After our tour, the Vicar took me to the church itself, which is a spacious, solidly-built building which could seat 400-500 people and arises like a modest island of hope just above the sea of teeming poverty and hopelessness which laps at its edges. On the church's land, in addition to squatters, are its far more modest, tin-walled, tin-roofed outbuildings in which it seeks to provide some community services: a school, a medical clinic, and dental clinic (how you do those without running water scares me a bit) and a sewing school which uses ancient foot-powered Singer Sewing machines -- an advantage, as they work when there is no electricity.

After the meet and greet around the church compound, the Vicar escorted me to his office, where he had prepared tea -- High Tea, in the English manner, with a huge mug of tea (light and sweet) and a plate piled high with jelly sandwiches *just for me, the church's guest*.

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,” this morning's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews admonishes. They get that in Kibera. They roll out the best they have for a guest. I confess I felt embarrassed to be so treated and didn't put much of a dent in the tea and sandwiches, especially since the tour had left me stunned instead of hungry, so I'm afraid I might have seemed rude by not really “tucking in” to the reception, though I did have some and expressed my thanks.

Rev. Juma and I had plenty to talk about, as the focus of the healing mission was on planting the idea of self-help support groups in places which had none, specifically Alcoholics Anonymous, Alanon and support groups for people who are HIV+, of whom there are about 1.6 million in the country. So, in contrast to the stereotypical exchanges between rich countries and poor countries, I came to offer a spiritual message and he was feeding me *physically*.

Hospitality is a matter of choice. There were a lot of things my host couldn't do (like offer me a flush toilet after my tea, instead of a key to the church's latrine), but he definitely could and did offer me warm and generous hospitality. After all, he was simply sharing generously out of what he had been given by God to be a good steward of, part of which he was committed to have go for hospitality.

It was not the only time I felt biblical teachings and biblical lifestyles come alive during the trip. Faced with preaching in such a radically different environment, I felt far more dependent on God's guidance to craft my sermon than usual -- which is the way it always *ought* to be, of course, but usually I'm not as honest about how much help I need as I was between my visit on Friday and writing my sermon for Sunday. And the world I moved in for three weeks was without most of the comfortable padding of prosperity we enjoy here and which I usually take for granted -- and which can risk lulling us into thinking we either have all we need or can get all we need *materially*, and without God's help.

Speaking for myself in terms of today's Gospel story, I've been used to getting a good seat at the banquet table my entire life, and I risk thinking I somehow earned it simply by being born where I was born. There are a lot of people in this world who have never even *seen* the kind of “banquet table” I'm used to as a normal part of life -- I'm talking about our refrigerator and kitchen table at home. Yet, looking at the number reported for their budget and offerings in the church bulletin, it is the people of Holy

Trinity Church, Kibera, who are more generous in their giving than the people of St. Barnabas, Monmouth Junction. Since biblical generosity is measured on the basis of what you have *left* after you give, not on absolute numbers, they are so far ahead of us in proportional giving we need binoculars to see them. The tea and sandwiches are just samples of an attitude of gratitude and sharing.

The larger reality is that we both, the people of St. Barnabas and of Holy Trinity, Kibera, are fellow residents on an abundant planet which has been entrusted to us all, for a time, by our planet's Creator and Owner, Almighty God. When we sinful human beings needed dramatic help to be able to have the chance to be restored to right relationship with God and with each other, God came in person in Jesus Christ to live among us and to teach us how to live, and then to die and rise again that we might be made new. And now God the Holy Spirit is among us all to "guide us into all truth" -- and to help us to see in the face of the "stranger" in the next pew or 8,000 miles away a fellow child of God, equally precious in God's eyes.

St. Barnabas has already done something extraordinary by reaching out over the last four years through this series of Mission trips: creating a Kenyan network which has a considerable and ongoing influence through the year in empowering people to be guided and to know healing by God when afflicted by alcoholism, drug addiction and/or H.I.V./A.I.D.S. We have been guided by God to open up the banquet table of serenity and new life through the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous to those drowning in despair. To actually see this in person was extraordinary, beyond even my hopes for the trip.

So, in the words of the Letter to the Hebrews, "Let mutual love continue." God only knows what wondrous things could happen as a result.

The Rev. Francis A. Hubbard

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