



I will miss him.

Susan Vinton, April 21, 2007

I remember the first time that I met Mama Stella. It was back "in the beginning" last year when I was still a bit shy about talking about HIV and AIDS. She came to my home complaining about her weakness and the pain in her joints. I told her rather hesitantly about getting tested and that I would help her and I was so encouraged that she readily agreed, and so she went, and she was HIV+, and so we quickly got her started with treatment at Lugoda. She told me that her husband was dead, so I didn't worry about following up on him like I did the husbands of my other friends.

And then there was the day that I was in the village of Malanga and went to visit her. An older man followed me into her house. And after a little awkwardness, I found out that this was her husband! Yup, I was smack in the middle of a family problem. Whoops! Her husband didn't know that she was getting HIV treatment and I didn't know she even had a husband! I chuckled about that for a while!

As you can well imagine, not every wife is exactly excited when a new and younger wife shows up. In this case, the new wife, Rebeka, was already widowed and had lost all of her children. Given that her first husband had died and that her 3 babies had died, it didn't take too much to figure out that HIV probably entered the house through that side of the family. Polygamy certainly doesn't help to slow the spread of AIDS. Mama Stella had already surmised that a long time ago and was pretty angry so she had been keeping her HIV treatment a secret. I had let the cat out of the bag by showing up at her home. So I quickly excused myself from the situation, leaving them with my suggestion that they "talk."

No one died during that conversation thankfully, and Baba Stella and Rebeka showed up the next day at my house ready to move on to Lugoda's HIV testing and treatment. The situation remained awkward to say the least, but then when Mama Stella decided, in her words, "to get saved" and started a new life as a Christian, things got increasingly awkward. On subsequent visits to visit the clan, Baba Stella would laugh when I spoke to him about Christ. Mama Stella on the other hand, was giving God all the credit for her miraculous turn around. But after a while even Rebeka started considering that maybe there might be a God.

Life in Malanga continued on. And then I got word this last week that Baba Stella's eyes were in really bad shape, so I sent him to Lugoda on Tuesday wondering what it could be. He had been on the ARVs for a month and seemed to be doing just great. Apparently it was a reaction called "Stevens-Johnson syndrome" which attacks the organs (eyes, skin and everything else) and kills the person. He had blown up with liquid and looked as though he were burnt all over his body inside and out. His lungs were filled with liquid and he was literally drowning. I was called on Saturday morning to "please come." Given I was the only one around, I packed a blanket, Tylenol, sugar and anything else I could think of and went.

In the village, when there is someone nearing death the house is filled with people waiting. And there he was, coughing up liquid, burnt all over his body, surrounded by his family and friends. I asked Mama Stella to please call Pastor Mlisayo as I thought for sure Baba Stella was leaving us any moment. As I sat between

Rebeka and Mama Stella, they told me not to worry that he had become a Christian on Tuesday and that he had peace with God. And that peace was real for all to see. He even laughed (although the inside of his mouth had lost its skin) when he recounted his last trip to Lugoda. I asked if he were in pain, to which he kept saying "I have no pain." That seemed unbelievable. After an hour, I went back home planning to return the next day. And we did. And we prayed.

Today we went to the funeral. It was the first of a three-day gathering. Rather than mourning, there really was a sense of excitement. His wives and his sister told me that a group of people had come to him two nights previously and asked him if he was ready for his "number" – a slang way of referring to his ticket to go to heaven. He response was: "I am ready to go." Even though he looked to be in terrible pain, he

told his friends and family he needed nothing, and here was the man who had mocked me every time I talked to him about God who was now telling everyone who came to "just pray." And they did. A couple of hours after visiting him yesterday, he fell asleep and never woke up. Mama Stella and Rebeka say over and over to everyone, "He has gone ahead of us and will meet us when we are called." What has to be amazing is that these two ladies have no anger. Instead they have faith. These two wives are now sisters in Christ. How God can transform understandable and justifiable anger and even hate into a love that binds these two widows of the same husband together is a faith that's not normal, a faith that can only be from Him, a faith that I doubt most people ever experience.

Baba Stella leaves two wives and seven living children. He will be missed. I will miss him.