



Attending their children's graduation
Susan Vinton, October 13, 2007

“Jesus is Lord,” were the last words that Njao spoke to me. He died a few hours later. A new Christian and a young man, he resisted for so long the idea that a loving God would love him, much less help him. He was originally from the village of Malanga, and after a few years of leading a “life of freedom” as he called it, he had come back to die after enjoying a few years of freedom. A freedom that cost him his life. Three months ago when he came to my house, he looked bad, but not bad enough to die, so I had hope. But he didn’t bounce back. I was able to share my own hope, but just to make sure, ever faithful Misau, came and shared his faith with Njao too. Njao was transformed. What peace, this tortured and pain-filled man received. Hard thing for those around him to understand. His body had wasted, but his soul was alive.

Sunday I went on a trip to the village of Kilima Tembo. There was new hope in the eyes of many of my friends, but especially Bahati. “I’m back to picking tea! Can’t just do nothing and wait around to die!” But he looked like he was rejoicing about more than just being back to work. “I also got married. I met her while picking tea. I told her about my virus. So she went and got tested and she had it too. So we went and got married ” This news took me by surprise. I guess the Lugoda hospital is also into marriage counseling these days! And truly, this dear man needed a wife. He looks great! Bahati and his new wife are both strong Christians and are a light in their un-churched area. In fact, the nearest church of any kind is a long walk and takes a strong and healthy person to get there. I hope to talk to my wonderful pastor friend and see what his church might do to reach out. I am finding more and more places where people have no

access to any church within their reach. That is truly tragic but a challenge as well.

Kilima Tembo is as rough a village as Malanga and Mwefu. Amongst the small crowd surrounding me were three prostitutes. Two were particularly rough and sassy, but one, just maybe, will come and visit and talk. Our eyes met for a glimpse, and just maybe it is the beginning of a friendship. It’s hard to say that prostitutes in villages actually “choose” this profession; they’re forced into it more often than not by the simple economics of trying somehow to survive. What a humbling experience to serve these dear people. What a delight to be treated as one of their own. I was even greeted by Evans with a special HeHe handshake usually reserved for special friends and family. I was told that I was family now, so please sit down and eat. In his pain (he is getting ready to start ARV’s this week), he is full of joy. Now at least he has hope. Yup, these people are my friends and they are my family.

And yet, no matter how much there is around me to cheer my soul, there are still the continual reminders that AIDS is killing people. Little Tundu died this Monday morning. She most likely contracted the HIV virus at birth. Her good mother took her continually to the hospital every time she got sick, spending most of everything she had to try to help her daughter who always seemed to be sick, doing what any mother would do for her baby. It was Rachel and Sarah who talked to her about the HIV virus and what to do. It turned out that Tundu was indeed HIV positive, but her 8 month old, 10 pound body just wasn’t responding to the initial “exposed child” treatment and she died. We all went to the funeral. Although sad to lose so many little

ones, I still am thankful that we are able to serve this family.

Today, I attended as the Guest of Honor at one of my wonderful village's primary school graduations. This is the biggest event in the life of a child in most of these villages. What an honor to be invited! Those who invited me said that they had never had a woman "Guest of Honor" and the time was at hand. I had a great day. I saw so many of my new students that have been taking our Intensive English program and I got to meet their families. I told the primary school teachers about the headmaster at a secondary school in another village who was sending his wife to study at our

school – and playfully asked them all when they were sending their wives to be my students. We had good food together, we had wonderful conversation, we enjoyed being together. However, the true joy was seeing that my friends with HIV/AIDS were attending their children's graduation. And they looked great. And so very happy.

They say money can't buy happiness. Well maybe they're wrong. I think of all of those of you who have sent money to buy bus tickets so these friends of mine can get to the hospital to get ARVs. You've bought more than bus tickets. You bought some happiness. I saw it on their faces today.