



Huruma's name is particularly fitting.  
Steve Vinton, January 21, 2008

Dignified and very beautiful, my friend Jerome headed off to Dar. She was living with HIV/AIDS and battling unusual forms of cancer. Her last words as we said good-bye were "thank you." Yes, I was sending her alone to the busy city of Dar es Salaam. She was armed with an official referral from the hospital here so she could get treatment at the government Cancer Hospital in Dar, as much money as I could send her with, and my prayers that God would take care of her. Jerome was one of my best friends in this village. She was always calm and serene in her very real pain. We started to get to know each other a little over a year and a half ago. I always looked forward to my visits with her and very much admired her as she cared for her family. As her legs swelled to triple the size with bubbles coming from inside her bones, leaving puddles of liquid wherever she rested, we were at a complete loss for "what to do." Once she got that referral document, Godfrey did the impossible, weaving things together, arranging transport for her all the way to Dar es Salaam, a taxi driver friend of his to pick her up, a place for her to stay in case it took as we expected "forever" for her to actually get admitted to the hospital. In this country, you need friends to "make it work" and the Lord certainly has blessed us with a large and lovely network of friends. And I rejoiced that it did indeed work. It was late at night when Allen took her to the hospital, and my friend was given a bed that very night at the hospital, good news indeed when empty beds at the hospital are a luxury, and I said a prayer of thanks that she was being taken care of. Then we learned from Allen that Jerome had been welcomed whole heartedly by those on night duty there at hospital, and I said another prayer of thanks. When we learned that while she was being treated as an out-patient, she

was given a home to stay in there in Dar by one of the nurses who it turned out "just happened" to be from Jerome's home village, I said a prayer of thanks that God was being so gracious to her. Then came word that they had decided on some kind of treatment to help her and she would be admitted back to the hospital and I again said a prayer of thanks that my friend was being taken care of.

But the treatment didn't work. She died as they tried to work on her legs.

My heart broke, my friend had died in a big city, far from her family, far from her friends, far from me, and there was nothing I could do about it. I couldn't go. I couldn't arrange a funeral. I couldn't take her body home and give her a proper burial. A poor woman dying at the government hospital hundreds of miles away with no family around would be buried in a pauper's grave. I really was sick deep in my heart.

What I, in my grief, had failed to factor into the whole equation though was what was happening in Jerome's life didn't catch God off guard one bit. I only thought that I had sent Jerome down to Dar es Salaam all alone. God was with her the whole time, and He provided for all of her needs through the kindness of His people in that city. Godfrey's friend Allen, the taxi driver, didn't just drop her off at the Cancer Hospital like he had been asked to. What we learned was that he continued to visit her nearly daily at the hospital to check up on her. When she died Allen organized all of his Christian friends to pitch in to care for her body, and to pay for all of the burial expenses, because "a good Christian woman with a heart like hers should have a proper burial". They

even organized a service officiated by a kind pastor attended by people she had never met but who had gathered together because Allen spread word that there was this good Christian woman who died far from her home village in this big city of Dar and she should have a send-off befitting of the kind of person she was. God provided for Jerome through the good hearts of His people both in her life and in her death. I was truly wrong to have thought that I had sent her off to Dar alone.

Jerome was never alone.

Not in life.

And not in death.

I grieve when any of my friends die, but it hurts more to lose a good friend like Jerome. These days though I have to confess that it simply seems that fewer and fewer people are dying. Last year at this time it seems like I was at a funeral almost every single day. Now we go weeks without any of my friends dying.

Julius is another one of my friends I've sent down to Dar. He has elephantitis along with the virus. Unlike Jerome though, Julius is getting better. After his trip to Dar es Salaam he showed me his papers which indicated that something in his liver metastasized and that this problem was growing. I can read English which Julius can't, and I know what big words like metastasized mean. However, in spite of the daunting diagnosis, Julius is getting better for the first time since I've known him. His once huge mossy looking legs are drying up and hopefully he is going to be able to put his feet into shoes one day. According to the documents they sent him off with from the hospital, he really should be in terrible pain by now and should be getting much worse. All his hospital documents say so. With Julius however, I just stand in awe and feel I'm witnessing something of a miracle. He shouldn't be getting better and he should be in tremendous pain. Julius just keeps on smiling.

And then there are the kids.

Today, little Given, age 5, showed up at my door with dad and aunt. The sores resembling burns covered a good portion his body. But burns weren't his problem. HIV/AIDS was. Sometime in 2006, he and his mom were tested and started treatment. At that time though, the expense and shame were more than most could bear. So Mom bolted with her little son Given, ran back to her family in her home village, hours from here. Mom died two weeks ago and Given showed up after 15 months of absence at his father's house 2 days ago.

Taken to the local health clinic yesterday, the doctor referred them to us and they are scheduled to travel on Monday. There is so much joy helping children like Given and his dad. This little boy is surrounded by love. Just add the ARVs, some nutritious food and some treatment, and that kid will be in kindergarten soon! I just can't stop thinking of how lucky and privileged I am that I get to be able to help these kids.

Haruni and Maggie are also children with the virus. Their mom died, and their dad has disappeared. So they stay with their grandmother. My nurse friend at Lugoda Hospital contacted me about these two little kids because they looked so bad, and when they "disappeared" for two months, which meant they weren't getting their medicines she wanted me to find out where the kids were. So I promised to follow up. I not only learned where I could find them, I also discovered That their maternal aunt is one of my students and I talked to her about taking the kids during Christmas break so that she could care for them until they got better! I had it all planned! It was pouring down rain when we arrived at their home. And there were these sweet little kids - Haruni and Maggie -- sitting by a fire warming themselves.

From an outsiders' perspective, things looked

bad. The rain was coming into the house and sure enough Maggie was covered with sores. But there was one thing in that house that all the money in the world can't buy - love and security that comes from a closely knit family. Grandma certainly wasn't excited about letting the grandchildren go for even two weeks. She couldn't imagine living without them there. She might have nothing really to take care of those kids, she couldn't get them to the hospital for their medicines, she could barely make sure they had enough to eat. But Maggie and Haruni were definitely loved, and very much wanted and needed. Haruni and Maggie need to stay with their grandma, and the solution isn't to have them go live with my student for a couple of weeks as I had planned. The solution is for those kids to stay right where they are. God wants us to take care of the widows and the orphans and that is exactly what we can do, but not by taking from that widow her grandchildren, and not by taking from those orphans the love of their grandmother - what we can provide them with is a little help for some good food, follow-up to make sure they get to the hospital for their appointments, help from our students to fix the leaky roof. I rejoice that there is so much love in that house for those two little kids.

When I was first introduced to HIV/AIDS here in Tanzania, it was through sweet little kids like Given, Haruni and Maggie. Then I met the moms and the widows and widowers. Still so sweet and delightful to spend time with. Later on, I started meeting some of those who got the virus through some pretty hard living. Lest you think that all of my friends are lovely people like Jerome and Julius, or kids like Given and Haruni and Maggie, let me tell you about my friend Batweli.

Like most of these hard-living folks, Batweli has come home to die and that is how I first met him. Like so many others, he was quite simply in a hopeless, pitiful state. I talked several times to Batweli about God and about

faith, and about healing and peace. His response was always "Bah."

He has no hope. And he looks hopeless and alone as his skin hardens and peels off. But we visit him. He does allow us to pray for him, but the last thing he wants to do is to see a pastor. So he gets me! And somehow we keep on visiting him again and again, and he is starting to look forward to seeing us. Batweli it turns out has a nephew named Novati, and I start visiting him as well, but he is really in bad shape. I had been expecting for several weeks that the day would come when Novati would die because quite frankly he was in such bad shape. A couple of weeks ago, while I was visiting him, he agreed for me to arrange for a pastor to visit him and I rejoiced when they sent word to me afterward of the good news that Novati had listened with eagerness to the pastor and that everyone said his life had been transformed. The last time I went to see Batweli, he informed me that he saw Novati and that he was out working his farm. I was totally shocked and I guess I showed it with the look on my face. In truth it would have been easier to believe had Batweli told me that Novati had died!

Clearly exasperated, Batweli said that Novati had become a Christian and well, you know.... I had to smile. The new hope in Novati's life has put him back to living and there is nothing better than farming with your friends in this part of the world. So what will happen to Batweli? I honestly don't know. But whatever God eventually does in his life, we do get the joy of being part of Batweli's life.

All of this work here is a miracle. All that we need has been provided at just the right time. As we serve these nearly 600 households, my wonderful friend Fenet who drives the old Landcruiser "Kulwa" two and three times a day to the hospital, carrying 10 and 12 people each trip, never complained but I knew in my heart that car was simply no longer adequate. And so God has sent "Huruma", a beautiful 29 passenger bus to become a part of our

transportation service this last week! And my friends are traveling in the nicest transportation vehicle in the whole district! Given the pace of things around here, there really is very little time to contemplate, but when I look out and see that bus, I have to pause and say thank you to the One who provided it - and so do my friends who travel in it. All of our vehicles here get names, and Huruma's name is particularly fitting. It means Compassion.

When Jerome said "thank you" as she headed to Dar es Salaam two months ago, her "thank you" was also intended for you all. Little Given and Haruni and Maggie don't know how to say thank you yet. And Batweli is in no mood to do so. Yet. But for all them, I say thank you so much for being a part of helping to transform the lives of so many in this part of the world.

I hope you get joy out of knowing what you are a part of.