



The meaning of seven verses
Steve Vinton, January 27, 2008

It is a tradition in churches in villages here in Tanzania for those who have no offerings in money to often bring on Sunday offerings of food, sometimes eggs, beans, fresh produce, and they give to the Lord out of what they have in their homes. And then after all of the songs and the prayers and the sermon and the benediction, one of the elders in the church will normally stand up and auction off those items, and those in the church who do have money will "purchase" the food items that people have brought. It's a social activity that follows the church service and often those who "buy" the beans or eggs then present them to the pastor as a gift for his family or give them away to people who they know are needy or take them home for a part of their family meal.

It was in context of this reality of our lives here in these villages that Agness shared with us all what had happened recently in the village of Kimala.

Agness, together with the rest of us, had gathered here at Madisi for five days of meetings -- Godfrey, Emmanuelli, Janerose, Pauline and I, working together with the principals from our eight schools as well as our community representatives who are overseeing the building projects that we have. We talked about their successes (and their failures), we made plans for the future, we worked on budgets and timetables, we ate together, laughed together, rejoiced about life together, watched a couple of good movies together, but my favorite part of the week was listening to the stories of things that had happened in their lives and work in these last few months. Agness I noticed was listening intently to all of the stories from the other villages -- wonderful tales of students making bricks, parents contributing money, victory after victory being

snatched from the clutches of defeat, the incredible news that classrooms had been built with such speed in Malindindo and Ulolela and Mtinyaki that parents were clamoring for school to be opened now, not six months from now as we had planned! When it was her turn, Agness started out by apologizing that she was behind schedule because she had gone to start work in Kimala two months after everyone else and so she didn't have many successes to report. "The village is all steep hills and there are no trucks to help with anything and so the work of carrying all of the bricks that they had made up the side of the mountain was grueling, so no matter how hard we work the progress in our village cannot compare to the progress you are having in other areas." Having been to Kimala myself and having seen the place I knew that she was neither exaggerating nor making excuses, she was simply expressing the reality of life there. So, she said, I have no great successes to report, but I can tell you that the people in this village are united in their determination to build the school, they will not give up no matter what, and even if I cannot sing of great accomplishments like we are seeing in other villages, I still want to tell you of what happened one Sunday morning at church which has inspired me and has steeled within me the determination that I too will not give up until this school opens its doors.

"I watched the man bring the heavy stone into the church during the service and deposit it near the altar with the food offerings that people had brought," she explained.

Suddenly you could have heard a pin drop in that room. 21 people and not a sound.

She went on. After the benediction they auctioned off that stone. Thirty-two thousand

shillings! (That's about 30 dollars, more than a month's wages, probably more than the total offerings in that church for several months.) And then the pastor announced that they would carry the stone to the site to build the school and that they would take the thirty-two thousand shillings as an offering to the Lord to be used for the building of their school.

We were all silent and then suddenly the whole room burst into cheers and the clapping of hands. I was stunned. Thirty-two thousand shillings is a fortune here! And once again I was in awe.

This past Sunday morning I used what Agness had shared to teach my boys Josh and Jonathan about the meaning of seven verses in the 8th chapter of 2 Corinthians, where Paul writes:

And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace God has given the Macedonian churches. (v1) *And now boys I want you to know about the grace God has given the Christians in Kimala.*

Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. (v2) *After years with no school for their children, the combination of their joy over the possibility that they just might have a school for their kids to go to and their own personal poverty God caused an incredible welling of such unfathomable generosity.*

For I testify that they gave us much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. (v3) *For Agness testified that they gave everything they could and went beyond what they were able.*

Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. (v4) *What the people of Kimala have done they have done out of their own hearts, they have counted it a privilege to give of themselves in this service, no one has forced them, no one **could** force them, they have in the truest of senses pleaded for the privilege of participating in this work..*

And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then unto us in keeping with God's will. (v5) *The people in the church in Kimala have done beyond what anyone could have imagined or expected, and this story is a symbol of that -- giving their stones and their bricks and their money as an offering unto the Lord first and foremost and then for the building of the school.*

So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. (v6) *And so boys God still urges us today, to take all of the acts of generosity you two have shown in these last months and years and to continue on with them more and more.*

But just as you excel in everything - in faith, in speech, in knowledge in complete earnestness and in your love for us -- see that you also excel in this grace of giving. (v7) And there in verse 7 was the big lesson! The lesson that it is a grace that has to come from God -- an unmerited favor -- that He gives us to be able to give. It was a grace from God that that man in Kimala could do the incredible act of carrying that heavy stone to church as his offering. It was a grace from God that someone gave such an incredible amount of money to buy his stone. It was a grace from God that the pastor said that they should take the stone to the site of the school and that they should give all of the money for the building of the school. In our own strength we cannot give and we just fool ourselves if we think that we can. We're human and therefore we look therefore at our own needs. And that is why Paul urges us to seek a grace from God, a special unmerited favor from Him, so that we might do what is impossible and to excel in giving.

Paul told the Corinthians to look to the example of those who were much poorer than they were in Macedonia in order to see and understand this truth. I asked my boys to see the example of the people in Kimala, and indeed of so many other people they have met here in these villages in Tanzania. I asked myself to see it as well.

