

Dear Lord, help us love with simplicity, live with compassion and BE, as well as recognize, your miracles in our midst. Amen.

Miracles in our Midst (or “God is in the Potholes”)

Good evening/morning! I bring you greetings and gratitude from Martha’s Vineyard and East Africa... More to the point, I should say, “Bwana asifiwe!” That is how every sermon – and every gathering under every acacia or baobab or fig tree – begins in Kenya. It means “Praise God” in Kiswahili. The congregation’s response is always an enthusiastic “Amen!” So I’m going to ask you to help me feel even more at home... Let’s try it together: I will praise God for us, and you can respond, “Amen!”

Bwana Asifiwe! (Amen!). [Wow – Even our friends in Kenya could hear that!]

And “Asante sana!” In Kiswahili, that means, “Thank you very much!” But I am not here to teach you an African language, but I am here to share the story of Maseno, where I have worked as an Episcopal nurse-missionary to the Anglican Church of Kenya for two years, and where I plan to return in September. Located in a very poor, very rural area of the western part of that country, the mission hospital serves patients with everything from AIDS and anthrax to TB and tungiasis. Dr. Gerry Hardison, another TEC missionary, and I work there seven days a week, ten hours a day, alongside Kenyan clinicians. Gerry and his wife Nan, from the Diocese of San Diego, began about eight years ago to revive the once-defunct hospital, nursing school and theological college in Maseno.

We now also have an HIV/AIDS clinic and an Orphan Feeding Program that feeds about 19,000 kids every Saturday. Please take some time, if you can, to watch the six-minute slide show in the narthex. You’ll find a prayer card there with my blog address on it, for more than you ever wanted to know about Maseno, and I’ll be happy to answer any questions anytime after the service. The CD’s on the table are also for sale. The hymns, in both English and Swahili, are sung by the Maseno Theological College Choir. Proceeds will provide much-needed tuition assistance for our seminary students there, who are Kenya’s best hope for the future and role models for the orphans.

Right now, though, I want to thank personally every single one of you at St. Francis Episcopal Church. Thank you for inviting me, thank you for sustaining me, and thank you for supporting the needs of people around the world, from Holden to Haiti, from El Salvador to Kenya. You are an inspiration, and as Archbishop Desmond Tutu says, “We are all missionaries, or we are nothing.”

I don’t know how many of you know this, but the efforts and emails and prayers of your fellow-parishioners, Dianne & Tom Wilson, have fed my body and soul in Kenya. I don’t know how many of you know, but your rector Rich’s blog and on-line sermons have nourished my spirit when times were challenging half a world away. I don’t know how many of you know, but – thanks to your generosity – the lives of 50 orphans have been saved – 50 toddlers who had malaria and who would have died without the transfusions, IV fluids and medications they needed, but could not have afforded without your help. Saving one child’s life (three days in the hospital) costs about \$25. Those kids lived because of your Missions Committee’s donation. Thanks also to your generosity, we now have fabric screens on rolling metal frames between the beds on the wards at Maseno Mission Hospital. Our patients have some semblance of privacy and dignity – many of them, for the first time in their lives. It is hard to explain how much that means to them.

I’m such a “true believer” in mission outreach, I feel like I should introduce myself the 12-step way by saying, “My name is Dianne, and I’m... a missionary!” I’ve been back in the U.S. for a over a month now, but I still feel a little like Dorothy in the Land of Oz. I left a village with erratic electricity and no running water and returned to a life of overwhelming grocery aisles and daily hot showers It is humbling to serve in Kenya, and it

is humbling to be here with you this second Sunday of Pentecost... The church calls it “ordinary time,” but I confess I have always thought that term was an anomaly: God’s time has never seemed ordinary to me. It felt extraordinary, for example, to me, a nurse, to discover that three of today’s readings – from the Old Testament to the Psalm to the Gospel of Luke – are stories of healing, with countless references to widows and orphans.

I wish I could tell you that we see miracles of physical healing in Kenya, but we do not. We do our best, of course, with the limited resources available in Maseno, and we do see miracles every day – but they are miracles of the human spirit. I see Christ’s compassion at work among “all sorts and conditions of men” (and women). Our Gospel reading is about that kind of compassion. The story of the widow of Nain is perhaps the only recorded “healing miracle” that was unsolicited. No one lowered a pallet through a roof to attract the attention of Jesus, and no one begged Him to raise the widow’s only son from the dead. Jesus and his companions were simply passing by, en route to the city of Nain, when he noticed a funeral cortege outside the gates. We read, “When the Lord saw her, he had **compassion** for her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’ Then he came forward and touched the bier...and the dead man sat up and began to speak. And Jesus gave him to his mother.” [Gospel and O.T. parallels abound!]

No one asked Him, but Jesus saw the woman’s pain and quietly acted... Just as, perhaps, no one asks you, but you quietly care for your families and friends, and still look out for your neighbors, near and far. As Christians, we know that no one should *have* to ask, of course, just as we know that we don’t have to be doctors or nurses to heal, and that we don’t have to go to Africa or El Salvador or Haiti to help. We simply need to live our daily lives with the same compassion Christ did, and we need to recognize, remember and pray for the lives of our brothers and sisters around the world.

Compassion literally means “with great love.” Mother Teresa said, “We can do no large things. We can do only small things with great love.” Author Willa Cather wrote, “Where there is great love there are always miracles.” And Archbishop Tutu joyfully announced to us all, “Gaawd luuvs YEW!” He reminded us that we are loved so much we were created in God’s own image and taught by Christ’s own example. Tutu – a man who saw a great deal of grief, remember – writes in his latest book, *Made for Goodness*, “Anyone can choose to activate compassion.” Just as you have chosen to activate compassion, so have our neighbors in Maseno. They care for one another in the hospital, in HIV/AIDS outreach visits, and in the orphan feeding program, just as they cared for me last year. I will never forget the warm, brown loving arms around me after my mother died in Connecticut before I could reach her bedside from Kenya. Mission is a mutual ministry, for sure.

Like many of you, I felt called to mission by El Salvador’s Bishop Martin Barahona. On a DioMass mission trip in 2007, he invited, “Come walk with us, *mano en mano*/hand in hand.” We built a road out of potholes, together with our Salvadoran neighbors. When the *campesinos* in the countryside pleaded, “Tell our stories,” we came home and tried. I later led a post-Katrina mission trip to Biloxi, and was ultimately encouraged by Nan and Gerry Hardison, our missionaries in Kenya, who invited me to “Come and see.” It has been a sometimes-painful blessing to see what we have seen; I wrote about some of those blessings in my blog. I’d love to hear your mission stories, too!

One of my stories is from a friend in Tanzania. An East African priest who once studied in the U.S. recently commented, “People in the west want to know who God is. We here in Africa want to know what God *does*. We don’t have time for your kinds of questions. We need a God who will provide us with crops and rain; otherwise, we will starve. We need to say ‘Thank you’ for our lives whenever we wake up in the morning because so many of us *don’t* wake up in the morning.” The prayers of the people in the Anglican Church of Kenya reflect the basic tenets of an immediate sort of faith: “Protect us from carjackers, reckless drivers, and those who lurk about the house to harvest what they’ve not planted.”

Faith in the face of such tribulation is remarkable to behold. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard bereaved family members sincerely say upon the death of a loved one: “It is God’s will.” It was a revelation, and – I confess – not yet a great personal comfort to me. Only once did I hear a voice of dismay and see a Job-

like fist raised to God. It was a truly “terrible, awful, no-good, very bad day” at MMH. An elderly patient had been admitted to the hospital with multiple injuries after heavy rains had brought her iron-sheet roof down upon her mud-and-wattle house and flattened it. Her two grandchildren perished in the process. That tragedy of the sudden rains followed a season of severe drought that had impoverished her village. The same day at our hospital, two babies died of malaria (and dehydration) because they were brought, by wheelbarrow, to us too late.

Mkoko, the nurse on duty with me wept and said, “We are the people God forgot.” I hugged and tried to comfort her with the words I’d learned from her Kenyan brothers and sisters: “God doesn’t forget, and we can’t, either. That’s why we are nurses, and that’s why we are here.” Months later, when her own son was killed in a piki-piki (motorcycle) accident, I hugged Mkoko again. To my amazement, in the midst of her grief, she said, “Sawa./Okay, Sister Dianne. God didn’t forget. You are still here, and you are still hugging me.” As you already know, mission and ministry are more about compassionate *being* than about any kind of *doing*.

But Mkoko’s earlier words still haunt me. My home church, St. Andrew’s in Edgartown, recently offered a psalm-writing workshop with Ray McGinnis, who has published a book called *Writing the Sacred*. Remember David’s very frequent, and very human, railing at God...? Well, Ray McGinnis asked us to try to write our own psalms. In that vein, and for my friend Mkoko in Kenya, I wrote “A Maseno Mama’s Lament”:

“Our children are starving, our cattle are bones.
We are the people God forgot.

Brought to our knees and too weak to crawl,
We are the people God forgot.

Now come the rains, great mud in the streets,
We are the people God forgot.

We beg for His mercy: “Answer our cry.”
We are the people God forgot.

We now drink from His puddles, slaking our thirst.
Our God-of-the-potholes did not forget.”

Christ’s compassion is the same in El Salvador, in Haiti, in Kenya and in our own back yards. Whether we nurse machete wounds, feed hungry children, clear land for a church, pave a washed-out road, or hug one another in the face of despair, we are doing His will. We are walking together, *mano en mano*, witnessing to one another that God has not forgotten. He is there, even in the potholes of our hearts. That’s what compassion is all about, that’s what mission is all about, that’s what miracles are all about – and that’s what *you* are all about here at St. Francis. Asante sana/Thank you very much!

Now let us pray for the strength to see Him is in those potholes. Let us choose to activate His compassion. Let us be, as well as celebrate, the miracles in our midst.

Praise God/ Bwana asifiwe! (Amen!)