

Memories of a Gentle Land

(Things I Learned in Zambia)

Galatians 5: 22-26 & Matthew 28: 16-20
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I want to tell you today about a four year period in my life that stands out of all proportion to any other 4 year period that I can remember. I don't know about you, but when I look back over my life, mostly it's a bit of a blur. And I wonder how did the years go by so quickly and what did I do? Did I accomplish anything that was worthwhile? Yet one period does stand out. It was the four years I served in another land and in another Church. I want to take you back with me to 1970 when my wife, Wendy, and I left for Africa with our little son Mark who at the time was a year and a half. We travelled to Zambia, a land locked country in southern central Africa. In 1970 Zambia was a very young country, just six years old. It had just gained its independence from Britain in 1964 – peacefully, without any kind of violence or struggle. I think this is a main reason why Zambia has always been a very peaceful nation.

Now, 1970 was a time when there were no computers, no internet, no email, & no cell phones. There was one telephone on our mission station in the school office. But it rarely worked. Even calling to Lusaka the capital city, 35 miles away was problematic. Sometimes the line was clear and at others it did not work at all. And you never knew when. To call overseas, say to Canada, one had to go into the Phone Company Headquarters in the capital city and book a call – about two weeks in advance. And it was very costly. I never once did it. Communication to home was by letter – written by hand – a lost art today. Every once in a while on my short wave radio I could pick up Canada crackling over the airwaves. It depended on the atmosphere.

In 1964, at the time of independence the government had asked the Churches to continue operating their schools, and so it was that my job was to be a teacher and a chaplain in a Secondary School for boys. Our school was operated by the United Church of Zambia under whose authority and direction I served during my time there.

Our students were all Zambians, as were a few members of the staff. However, there were very few educated Zambians in 1970, so most of the staff were expatriates. Actually, at the time of its independence in 1964 there were fewer than one hundred university graduates in all of Zambia, and fewer than one thousand high school graduates. If you can try imagining the problem of running a modern nation in all its complexity, with so few educated people, you will understand the awesome task that faced the Zambian leaders. They had to rely on outside help. The teachers in our school came from all over the globe — from Britain, the United States, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and India, as well as Canada. One of the things I liked best about the school was its international flavour.

The day began at 7:00 a.m. in the school chapel. Then from 7:20 in the morning till 1:30 in the afternoon classes were held. At 1:30 we broke for lunch, following which the entire school turned out for community work. The students did all the sweeping, cleaning, and washing; for the school as well as attending the school gardens. We grew as much of our food as we could, so working the fields was a duty shared by all. One picture of community work, that sticks in my mind, is of cutting grass. I don't mean cutting grass with a power mower. During the rainy season the grass would grow eight feet tall. It was called elephant grass. Our task was to cut it down with slashers, that looked a bit like a dull broadsword. The fun was in watching out for snakes as we did it. The dinner hour was around five o'clock in the afternoon. From seven to nine thirty in the evening the students all returned to their classrooms to do homework. As teachers we were on duty throughout this entire period of time.

In the dining hall, the main fare offered the students was nshima. Nshima is a thick kind of porridge made from cornmeal. In texture it is somewhere between porridge and mashed potatoes, only drier. Most westerners did not appreciate it, but Africans absolutely love it. By way of protein, beans were served or kapenta. Kapenta is a small dried, salted, fish, about the size of a sardine. It has a taste and texture somewhere between leather and sandpaper. I could never get one down. Whenever we could afford it small amounts of chicken were added to the menu, and when I say that, I don't mean a Swiss Chalet quarter chicken dinner. I mean a few bits of stringy rubbery bird that had been boiled in a pot. It was all we could afford. It was typical of the diet of the country, and our students enjoyed it.

In all of this there was very little sense on the part of our students of being disadvantaged. It was rather the reverse. You see, in 1970 in Zambia only one third of all the students in the country got into a secondary school. Most children who enter elementary school never went beyond it. At the end of grade 7 there were a set of difficult examinations. Only the top one third in the entire country were allowed to proceed. It did not matter at the elementary level whether or not you passed these examinations. It did not matter if you were

in the top third of your class. What counted was being in the top one third of the entire nation. It was from this top one third that our students came. They were sent by the government, and they came from all parts of the country. They joined us for Forms 1, 2, and 3 and at the end of Form 3 there was another set of difficult examinations. Once again, only the top one third were permitted to proceed into senior secondary school, and only one in ten of those would qualify to go to university.

As you can imagine, the pressure on a student was intense. In my four years in Zambia I never saw, never heard, of a student dropout. In fact one of our biggest problems was trying to prevent them from studying too hard. That is a different kind of problem than the teachers and parents have in this country. I remember that during examination time the lights would remain on in the study hall as late as three in the morning before the last students left to go to bed. The lights would be back on again by four in the morning as those who had gone to bed early arrived to begin their day's study.

In 1971 our little girl was born when we were in Zambia. We named her Kimberly Ann. Today she is your senior minister.

I have so many memories of those years, but four stand out. The first is of a land of great beauty. For six months of the year the sun shone every day, and the sky was a clear blue. During the time of the rains the flowers would bloom in the most incredible profusion. I recall standing on the edge of Lake Tanganyika looking down into crystal clear water watching the fish swimming around. The water was clear and unpolluted. I could have drunk from it. The air was fresh and clean. It was a pleasure breathing it. The land was rich and fertile.

My second memory is of great poverty. Every year here in Brockville during spring clean up week anything you put out will be picked up by the garbage collectors. On that week throughout the streets are littered with old furniture being thrown out. In Zambia such a scene would have been totally impossible. The day our goods arrived by train, before I had unpacked, I had requests for the wooden packing cases in which they were shipped. Never have I been part of a society where people worked harder, and received less, than when I was in Zambia.

My third memory is of singing. Zambians sang with an enthusiasm and a richness that stirs the soul. In our little chapel each morning the students would fairly lift the rafters as they naturally broke into four part harmony. They could not read a note music, and yet they sang in harmony continuously. It was just amazing. I have never heard singing like it in this country. And they knew all the hymns by heart. Churches never had hymn books (well maybe one) so they memorized the hymns – all of them.

The fourth memory I have is of the phenomenal growth of and the enthusiasm for the Christian faith. The last twenty-five years in Africa have witnessed a growth in Christianity unparalleled in any time. It is a growth that has been well documented in many studies. I only knew what I saw in my little corner of that vast continent. I saw congregations that were full of people and full of singing. I was at Christian rallies at Secondary Schools and Teacher Training Colleges where the entire student population would turn to be part of it. I stood with the crowd in small rural villages listening to the elders preach. The services would go on for three or four hours and no one complained – “you gotta be out in hour!!” – never heard that!

I have often pondered about why the church in Zambia was so full of the Holy Spirit — so full of enthusiasm, vitality, and life, and why we in the West are, by contrast, so lifeless, and our Churches so empty. I think there are a number of answers. Perhaps we in the west have it too easy. Many Canadians have sold their souls to the god of affluence and materialism. It always seemed to me that Zambians cultivated a natural sense of spirituality. Africans tend to see all of life in religious terms. Secularism doesn't make any sense to them. There is a reverence for all of life which just imbues Africa. In Christianity this translates into a strong, deep, abiding, faith in Jesus Christ. Zambian Christians are deeply committed to following him, and continually seek the Spirit of Christ in all they do. They take the time for their scriptures, for daily prayer, and meditation. As a result they possessed a maturity of understanding, judgement, and faithfulness that I have rarely met in this land.

Earlier we read from Galatians about the fruit of the Spirit of Jesus. Paul says that the fruit — the outcome of being touched by the Spirit — is love, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, self control. The qualities that should mark a Christian life come from seeking the Spirit of love in Jesus. It begins with a commitment to him, in an act of faith and love. This is done through prayer, and if you have not done so before, now is a good time to do it. Yes, and if you have committed your heart to Christ, today is a good time to recommit yourself to him. Faith in Christ continues, for a life time, through the guidance of Holy Spirit in everything we do. So, take the time to pray, and meditate, and read your bible. Draw closer to Jesus, and your life will be enriched immeasurably. I saw a Church alive with the Spirit in Zambia. I believe that the church in Canada can also come alive with the same Spirit. It begins with each of us.

Amen