

Lexington Presbyterian Church

Servant Song

Matthew 25:35-40

A Sermon by Deborah H. Klein

.....For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (NRSV)

When I look out upon our church family I see so many who give generously of their time and abilities to help others. Doing "for the least of these" is common practice among us, whether we recognize it or not. As I reflect on my work with the Congolese refugee family that came to Lexington over two years ago, this text from Matthew resonates in new ways. This morning I'd like to share with you some of that story, and how those of us who worked with them came to see and love them as family.

Lexington received this family in March 2016 as a result of community wide, inter-faith group which had been formed to pave the way for sponsoring a refugee family. The group was blessed with Jerry Nay's gift for organizing and delegating, and we soon were in touch with Church World Service to sponsor a family with legal refugee status. Our responsibilities for the family included..... finding them a place to live, a job, enrolling the parents in ESL classes, assisting with the journey toward green cards, connecting them to medical care, enrolling the children in school, guiding them through social services, and walking with them as they adapted to a new country, language and culture.

This was a monumental task. But, countless people in our community stepped up to do one thing, then another, then another. What I witnessed over these past two years was the amazing harvest of people working as a team to come alongside this family of nine - the Kilozos. In the process our hearts were cracked wide open to the steep uphill battle any refugee family faces. We discovered ways that our "helping" hurt, and we found ways to truly help. But we also fell in love with them - with their courage, their gentle, joyful spirits, and their deep love for one another.

There were many ways to help, but on the volunteer form I checked the box - will help with English skills. After a few months when it was apparent that Fahizi and his wife, Jeanne, needed help with their ESL homework, I was contacted. I'd never done anything like this before but I'd been trained as a teacher, I'd helped my kids with many

hours of homework, I remembered a little bit of French, one of the languages Fahizi spoke, and our daughter Elizabeth, who is an ESL teacher, promised to be my backup. So, I agreed to go to their home once a week for 2 hours to help with their homework.

Each Friday I was welcomed into their apartment by Fahizi and Jeanne. We would sit down at their table and he would pull out his notebook.ⁱ Most often, there were brief stories to read, followed by exercises to review new vocabulary. Fahizi had a good ability in reading English, but when he had finished the story, I would always ask if there were any words he didn't understand. At the beginning there were many, many words to explain. Sometimes I would draw a picture, but most often I used my cell phone to search for the English word in French. He would read that, write it down over the strange English word, and we would go on to the next. Sometimes there were words that he had never encountered in French, so we would do a search in Swahili. Then he would write the definition in Swahili on his story. Ever so slowly we would work our way through a story. He would smile and laugh as the meaning of strange English words began to make sense. I corrected his English attempts and he corrected my French attempts. Often through the lesson he would turn to his wife and tell the story or some of the words to her in Swahili or their tribal language, Bembe. Then they would laugh together, and we would return to work. So what I first learned was that English would be Fahizi's fourth language, and that I was dealing with a bright, educated man.

As his English progressed we could carry on simple conversations. I learned that he was 12 and his brother 10 when war forced them to flee their village in Congo. His mother and father had been killed and these two brothers escaped together. By walking and riding on a boat they found their way to the United Nations refugee camp in Tanzania. Fahizi had spent 19 years in the Tanzanian refugee camp by the time he brought his family to the US. He and Jeanne finished their secondary education in the refugee camp. They met, fell in love, and were married in the camp and six of their children were born there. The refugee camp, administered by the UN where the Kilozos lived was home to over 250,000 refugees from Congo and Burundi – all driven from their homes by the violence of war. That day we went online and he showed me pictures of the refugee camp, the kind of houses they lived in, the schools, the hospital, the churches, the soccer fields, the crowds of people, and he smiled at his former home. I asked him what he missed most about Africa – he put his head down and looked confused. I said, "Everything?" He said, "Yes, everything. The sky, the people, the food, the weather, the trees, the singing... yes, everything," he said.

"What food do you miss the most?" I asked. Goat meat was the immediate answer. Goat meat, as I wrinkled my nose? Yes, goat meat. Touched by his profound homesickness, I went straight home and began my quest for goat meat. An online search turned up an African market in Charlottesville. I called – they had goat meat. So, with a friend, I took a trip over the mountain, and entered a small, densely packed African market, near Trader Joe's, operated by a man from Ghana. I introduced myself and said I was shopping for a family from the Congo – what would they like to eat? The shop

owner went to work filling up my basket....with cassava leaves, cassava flour, ground peanuts, ground shrimp for flavoring, a spicy oil, and frozen goat meat, without the skin, as opposed to goat meat with the skin which coastal Africans prefer. We ended up with a full shopping bag and I couldn't wait to take it to Fahizi and Jeanne the next day as a gift.

As I unpacked the bag for them, Fahizi and Jeanne were pleased and the children began chanting, "African food." When I explained that the goat meat was frozen and pointed to their freezer, Jeanne said, "No....I cook today."

The next week Fahizi wanted me to take him to the market, so he could buy African food for his family. So soon, Bill and I drove him to Charlottesville and he went to work gathering food. When Fahizi had collected what he thought was the right amount, he called his wife to tell her - her response was more goat meat, and more cassava flour. What a smart husband, right? We needed bungee cords to keep the two coolers closed for the ride home.

I contacted a friend in Brownsburg to see if she knew anyone who raised goats. "My son raises them, but we sell them all in Harrisonburg. You could buy one and have someone local butcher it." I talked to Donald's and they would butcher it, but their cost combined with the cost of the animal was just too much. Fahizi had a solution - "I can butcher it," he said, smiling. "But where?" I said? He pointed out the front door of his apartment. "But you might get kicked out this apartment if you slaughtered a goat in the front yard - your neighbors might not understand!" I said. We had a good laugh together, and it was decided that I would continue to bring them goat meat from Charlottesville whenever I could. When members of our church who do raise goats heard about this, they donated an entire frozen hind quarter to the family. I asked for a recipe for roasting it, which became the English lesson the day I delivered it.

This past January, we learned that Fahizi was making plans to move the family to Bolling Green, Kentucky, where there was a large Congolese population, including some of his sisters and brothers who had landed there from the Tanzanian refugee camp. As we anticipated missing this wonderful family, we knew that this move would make their hearts sing. So we set about helping to ease the transition. Fahizi left in February to find a new job, and was to come back at the end of the school year to move the family. This meant Jeanne would be a single mom to seven children from February until the end of May. Soon after Fahizi departed, the flu hit Lexington, and over several weeks all of the children got sick. Those with medical skills made many trips to the doctor, and guided Jeanne through caring for fevers and dehydration. And many brought food and prepared meals during that time.

With Fahizi in Kentucky, my weekly visits became taking Jeanne and Emanuel, their youngest child, to Walmart, the post office, Peebles, or Good Will. Jeanne had a growing understanding of English but didn't yet have much confidence in speaking, so our rides were fairly quiet, but good. She is a wise shopper and feeds her family much

the way they ate in the camp. At least once a month she bought two twenty pound bags of rice, 2 dozen packages of corn meal, 10 pounds of dried beans, and bags of frozen whole fish. She was experimenting with new foods, and I observed her family had developed a taste for tangerines, oranges, yogurt, popsicles, canned peaches, and cheese curls.

Recently, as we were leaving Walmart there were two young men at the stop light with a sign saying, "Down on Luck." Jeanne pointed to them and asked, "What doing?" I said, "They are begging, they need money, maybe homeless." She looked at me and looked at them, and I reached in my pocket for the small amount of change I had from a purchase. Jeanne immediately reached for her purse and got out a dollar. I handed her my change, which she put with her dollar, she opened the window and handed it to the young man. He said, "God Bless you." On the ride home I savored the fact that I had just experienced the widow's mite. My gift was inconsequential to what I could have given - hers was large compared to her husband's minimum wage job that was supporting a family of nine. My car was ablaze with the light of this Congolese woman who gave with a generous heart to two American men who were "down on their luck" - a widow's mite indeed.

I could go on all day with stories of these dear people. But most of all, I want you to know that we, who gave of our time to the Kilozo family, gained far more than we ever expected. In loving these people we became one handshake, one hug away from a refugee camp in war torn African. In loving them we attempted to obey God's command to welcome the stranger, to feed the hungry, to care for the sick. In working together with a team that had very different skills, we experienced the beloved community where every need was met. There was someone to help teach Fahizi how to write checks, do online banking, and to file his income tax. There was someone to help navigate the department of social services so that the family could receive their assistance, and someone to guide them through the process of getting green cards for all members of the family. There was someone that helped connect the family with the medical care and shots for all the children. There were many who helped with the seven children, from babysitting, to carpooling, to homework, to introducing them to dance, soccer, basketball, and picking up sick children from school. One volunteer said when the school called her, she asked, "Is this about my children, or my Kilozo children?" There were armloads of blankets delivered to them in January on the day it was discovered they did not have enough to sleep warm at night. There were a number of fluent French speakers with whom Fahizi could ask all manner of questions and truly understand what was going on, and the family found a loving church home at Randolph Street Methodist. And, in their leaving, there were sufficient funds to rent a small truck to transport the family's belongings, and a Lexington church who provided their van to drive the family of nine to their new home in Bolling Green, Kentucky.

Psalm 133:1 proclaims, "How very good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity." This we learned in helping this vulnerable family. We

found kinfolk we never knew we had, we learned lessons that our privilege had kept from us, and, we sensed God's presence with us in this hard but holy work. Our working group will miss them (Fahizi, Jeanne, Marie, Cyprian, Neema, Masoka, Hasha, Matendo and Emanuel),ⁱⁱ but with gratitude we send them on their way. May God bless and keep them.

Amen.

ⁱ During the summer or on school holidays all of the children would be at home during the time of tutoring. They played quietly, watched a movie, played games on the computer, or helped their mother with chores in the kitchen or around the apartment. The youngest ones often were in Fahizi's lap. Other times only three children were at home, but either way it was obvious that this was a happy, peaceful and loving home.

ⁱⁱ I had intended during this closing of the sermon to say all of their names, but found tears so close that "them" had to suffice. What a window into Fahizi and Jeanne's hearts that their seventh child, born in America, was named Emanuel – which means God is with us.

Blessing in Word (from Saint Teresa of Avila)

*Christ has no body now but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world.
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.
Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes.
You are his body.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

Go now, to sing your servant song.

Amen.