

August 5, 2007

Getting to the Roots, the Flu, and a Jazzed Up Goldilocks

A couple months ago a sweet young woman wrote in an email about her future life plans, "I pray that I would be set free to do what God wants me to do." Something about the phrase "set free to do what God wants" stuck with me, and suddenly in the last week I realized it describes what I feel has just happened for Adam and I.

For the last two weeks we have spent time with Lynn, the founder and U.S. director of our little organization. For the weeks leading up to the visit we basically dreaded the conversations we would have. Frankly, while this microfinance for youth idea has made a significant difference in the lives of a handful of youths, we feel it's missing the mark of the roots of problems. Until we have a better understanding of how to meet those needs, we feel like we're treating a handful of leaves on a tree that's dying branch by branch right down to its core.

But our visit with Lynn went well. She's an amazingly caring woman who believes in listening, even for long hours and in difficult conversations, which was exactly what we needed. The long and short of it is we're moving into a phase of looking again at what real needs are here, and more open now to different kinds of work, based on what we can find in the way of solutions. We'll be spending more time just talking to folks, looking at churches as ways to serve community needs (especially related to AIDS and orphans), writing more for newspapers and magazines about the situations here, and maybe a distance-learning program for me from a seminary here. We're still continuing on with the school microfinance program, but trying to find a way to incorporate it into the school day, with the cooperation of business/economics teachers. We'll see. And we're continuing with the home-based care worker lending program (for women who volunteer their time taking care of sick neighbors), and maybe opening it to more people taking care of orphans or particularly poor. So, some exciting clarification for us from Lynn, and we're eager to see what God leads us to in the next couple months.

The big news around here is the fire that swept across several miles of farmland and township, even right past the farm next door to us. We weren't in serious danger, but many lost everything. I have yet to hear an accurate count of how many households were all or partly burned down, but I would guess upwards of 60 Zulu homes, plus about five white-owned farms and businesses.

It's been interesting to watch the reactions, for better or for worse. In my mind it's a case study of how we humans react to tragedy. At first there's a big explosion of people willing to help—there were many farmers with tractors carrying water tanks and hoses fighting the flames, plus dozens and dozens of neighbors evacuating people, doing first aid, and bringing piles and piles of clothes, blankets, kitchen supplies, and other donations. But from what I hear, now just a week later the work of distributing all these donations has fallen on the shoulders of just a few people, several of whom are becoming

frantic, angry, judgmental, or exhausted. And meanwhile, poor people who have lived without blankets, kitchen supplies, and all these things for years on end are coming out of the woodwork, sometimes posing as fire victims, to get their share of the donations. But the root of their problems is even harder to put out than a fire on a windy day.

Why do we do this? It's easy to get hyped up about tsunamis, sudden invasions, earthquakes, and other big new-toppers. Meanwhile, however many thousand people die of HIV/AIDS every day, and then there are the slow wars, unjust laws, belief systems based on lies, domestic abuse, and the list goes on. All so much harder to deal with than the tragedy of the hour.

So top of my list of things to do this week, in keeping with our new approach of digging deeper into understanding the slow crisis around us, is to volunteer as a donation-deliverer and try to get into some conversations with the poor people in our ten mile radius. My goal is to write up, in some form or another, a description of one South African a week. Some will likely go toward my newspaper column or magazine articles, but I'm hoping to post some here or slap them on an email list for anybody interested in "Meeting an African" every couple weeks.

In family news, we just went through a week of the flu, which knocked out both kids and Adam. I'm enjoying every meal in the expectation that it might be the last I can digest in a while when this thing hits me. Zeke has wanted to do nothing but snuggle for about 48 hours, which is nice since I can't remember the last time I've gotten to watch him sleep all cuddled up on my lap.

Last night Phoebe felt recovered enough to sit and tell me a story. She said she couldn't think of any stories, so I suggested Goldilocks and the Three Bears. It took her about 45 minutes to tell, and included a girl named Thando (Goldilocks never did show up), one daddy bear, a wolf ("This is the really really REALLY scary part," she said) a witch, Little Red Riding Hood, several kids that have babysitters, and Snow White.