

June 29, 2007

Encouraging Voices

There's nothing I love more than waking up and listening to little Zeke singing "Halleluiah! Halleluiah!" I sang him a song with the word in it last night, and it seems to have stuck. So this morning at six a.m. while we try to stay quiet in our hotel room, Zeke's singing away. In between he makes zerburt noises, commands "Hamba hamba" ("go" in Zulu), says "Me have belly button!" and shares other important information.

We've had plenty of time to bond as a family this week, on a five day trip that included a stop in Kruger—the mega-game-park of South Africa—and a two-day visit with another well-established microfinance organization to get advice.

It's been a good time of refreshment and encouragement. We'll come home today with a couple good photos of cheetahs and "lilac breasted rollers" (rainbow and lilac colored birds), and some confidence as we begin offering larger individual loans to a few stellar business plans, and move into the next round of school loans.

The week before the trip I spent three days at a conference for people working with youth in entrepreneurship. We came to South Africa with the understanding that our little organization supporting young people starting businesses was a unique thing, and here I meet about a two hundred South Africans doing the same thing! For about the first day of the conference I asked myself "So why are we bothering?"

But as the conference went on, I heard at least a dozen people complain that hardly anyone actually works with the poorest of youth in the rural areas, fresh out of high school or younger. Over the last two weeks I have collected about five pages of notes from dozens of people I hammered with questions, and their advice mostly comes down to "keep doing what you're doing, yes you're weird for coming to do this as a foreigner, don't be afraid to experiment, and don't be discouraged by failure." So we press on.

While I was staying in the large city of Durban for the conference, I also had an unusual experience that reminded me of a higher power who has put us here. I came out a long day of conference presentations tired and discouraged. I was one of only about five non-black faces in the conference of over 300 people, and I had never felt more alone. In spite of my many attempts to start conversations, only one person actually expressed interest in me. This one person hammered me with questions. "I don't understand why you Americans come here," he said. "What do you do? Just drive around in your four-wheel drive vehicle and hand out things and feel good about yourself?" I sat talking to the man for over 30 minutes. We ended up parting as friends with respect and understanding, but it was exhausting. And it left me wondering, "Is this what everybody else thinks of me, too? A white know-it-all who's got no right to intrude?"

I went for a walk toward the Indian ocean, dragging my feet and praying, "Lord, I just want someone to recognize that we're all just human. I want you to show me you love

me, and love all these people too.” Twenty minutes later I hurried home just as the sun set. Two young men brushed past me. I had received ample warnings about the dangers of walking alone in Durban, and these two, if anyone, fit every stereotype of “unsafe.” But just as they passed, one man turned around and faced me, took the cigarette butt out of his mouth and said, “Sister, I just want you to know, we’re human beings too, and God loves us, and God loves you, and we love you too.”

They sped on, back in conversation in a mix of Zulu and street talk, and my jaw just about fell off my face. Had I heard correctly? Was that not the exact prayer I had prayed? What kind of bizarre impulse made that young man say *that*?

A block later, I reached my hostel and the men stopped again. “We just want you to know,” they said, “we were watching out for you.” In a strange half-crazy conversation, one guy went on to tell me how they live on the street, how he got a scar across his nose from a man trying to steal his shoes, and how they would most certainly not ask me for money. “We just want you to remember,” he said, “while you’re waking up in a bed and going about your day doing whatever you feel like, remember us here on the street. Ok?”

Rarely have I felt as if God was speaking to me so directly through a human’s mouth.