

St. John's Lutheran Church
September 21, 2008

"Bega Kwa Bega"
Philippians 1:21-30

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Saturday evening, June 28 this past summer found Debbie and me seated at dinner with 10 or so Tanzanians in the home of the pastor of the Lutheran parish in Muhanga, Tanzania. The pastor's name is Pastor Melchizedek Msuva. We were seated in darkness because there is no electricity in Muhanga, and our dinner table was lit by two kerosene lanterns. It was to be our first of two nights spent in Muhanga and as we sat at dinner Debbie and I were receiving information as to how the people in Muhanga had prepared for our visit.

We were told through a translator that there was a kerosene lantern lit in our sleeping room and that when we were ready to go to sleep we should turn it down but not turn it out. I wasn't sure what the Tanzanian kerosene lantern would be like so I asked through the translator if someone could show me how the lantern worked. There was much laughter in the room and they asked, in turn, if I had never used a kerosene lantern. And I laughed and said that at home we have a switch on the wall that we turn on to get our light. And they laughed and asked how I preach the many passages of the Bible that refer to lanterns if we do not use lanterns on a daily basis.

And I laughed and said we really don't have any problem with talking about lanterns. "In fact," I said, "we have a little song we sing that refers to the light of a lantern and it goes like this." And I proceeded to sing all four verses of "This Little Light of Mine", much to their delight. "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine... Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm gonna let it shine... Don't let Satan (poof) it out, I'm gonna let it shine... Shine all over Muhanga town, I'm gonna let it shine..." And when I got done singing it they cheered and exclaimed through the translator, "You will sing that song in church tomorrow!" And that's how it came to be that in the midst of my Sunday morning sermon, which I also didn't know that I was going to preach when I left this country, I called Debbie forward and I briefed the congregation as to what this song was all about, verse by verse, through the translator, and then Debbie and I sang the song in duet format, complete with hand motions.

And when we got to the last verse, "Shine all over Muhanga town.." the congregation began to cheer and they cheered throughout the entire verse and continued to cheer after we were done as well. And as we sang that last verse we had a deep sense of the appreciation of the Muhanga people of the partnership that there is between the people of St. John's Church in Lakeville, Minnesota, USA, and the people of Muhanga, Tanzania, Africa in helping the light of Christ to shine throughout Muhanga town.

It is also this partnership between Christians, who strive together to allow the light of Christ to shine, that the apostle Paul is writing about in our second reading this morning in his letter to the Philippians. In fact, this reading contains the Bible verse that is one of the verses that provides the theme for the partnership that exists between the congregations of the Iringa Diocese in Tanzania and the congregations of the St. Paul Area Synod in Minnesota.

In the second paragraph of the reading in the 27th verse Paul writes, "Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel..." And specifically, it is the phrase, "striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel" that provides the theme for the Iringa-St. Paul Area partnership. "Side by side" can be translated in Swahili as "shoulder to shoulder". Bega kwa Bega.

A small portion of every dollar that is given in the offering plate on Sunday morning at St. John's Church goes directly to Muhanga. Some of the money goes to assist the people of Muhanga in practical, earthly ways, such as providing scholarships for some of their students to go to secondary school, students who otherwise would not be able to go. And some of the money goes to directly assist in allowing the light of Christ to shine throughout Muhanga through such projects as the upgrade of their church building. In addition, St. John's Church has administered special projects in the same spirit, providing this spring 36 pigs to be distributed throughout Muhanga as well as in time past providing a motorbike for their pastor and bicycles for their lay evangelists.

Over the last year as St. John's Global Missions Committee has considered ways that

St. John's Church can be involved in specific projects around the world, the decision has been made to more and more focus our limited financial resources, which are available to be used for such special focus, upon the needs in Muhanga. Through the head office of the Iringa Diocese there has been instituted a planning process whereby the congregations of the diocese are encouraged to become more and more intentional about plans for their future. And to then communicate those plans to congregational partners in the St. Paul Area Synod. You will be hearing more in the future about exciting opportunities that St. John's Church has to make a difference in the name of Christ on the other side of world. Bega kwa Bega, striving side by side to let the light shine, with brothers and sisters in Christ who appreciate our relationship together in Christ more than you can know. Amen.