

*“Sabbath Stories from Southern Africa:
From the World Cup to Global Missions”*

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 15, 2010
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Luke 12: 54-56

⁵⁴ [Jesus] also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

James

Jesus said, “*You know how to look at the sky and interpret the weather.
Do you know how to interpret these present times?*”

Well, for three weeks this summer Henry and I were blessed to visit and travel across Southern Africa, and we promised that we would return and attempt to interpret what we experienced. Before we left we had some questions, and there were areas we wondered about.

Henry

If you are wondering whether our words this morning and the photos in the slide show are going to match up, well, they aren't.

We wondered if the USA soccer team was good enough to advance through the round of 16. We knew we had upper deck tickets to a game at Soccer Stadium in Johannesburg. What would that be like? How cold is the winter in South Africa?

We knew we had family in Maputo, Mozambique – my Uncle David and Aunt Theresa -- and a host family of Lynchburg College alumni to stay with in Cape Town. How would that work out?

We knew that if we were going to be so close to the tip of Africa we wanted to go to Cape of Good Hope. Would we get a chance to see the merging waters of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans? While in Cape Town would we see the prison cell on Robben Island that held Nelson Mandela?

James

For years we as a congregation have raised ample funds for mission work in other lands,
for neighbors we have never had the opportunity to meet and greet.

We wondered what our dollars and energies are being used for.

We wanted to see with our own eyes, and if possible, lend a hand.

We prayed for the chance to reach across the boundaries of oceans and cultures
in order to build and foster a relationship,

both as Christians and as representatives of this wonderful church.

We did not wonder whether we would get along or get on each other's nerves!

We've jogged and logged too many miles running through city streets for that.

What we did not know was that our relationship as father and son

would evolve and grow and deepen,

thanks to the grace of God and incredible shared experiences.

What we did not know was that we would return equally enthusiastic

about interpreting the hopes and lives of new friends

six time zones and almost 9,000 miles away.

(Start slide show, opening with a video of Soccer Stadium, then begin slide show.)

Henry

Always take ear plugs. Always. You never know when you will be stuck with ten Soccer horns sitting behind you in a stadium of 90,000. People snore. It happens. I know.

Ya know, traveling does funny things to people. You start to treasure showers with good water pressure, and stop minding the cold water. You start to associate the omnipresent vuvuzela with soccer. It's ingrained, yet oddly soothing for me. Above all though, I've begun to feel a bit more formed, more defined. I have danced to offering, seen love in others eyes at a Zambian wedding, and met the Archbishop of Cape Town.

I saw and experienced aspects of this world that opened my eyes to a potential career, and I owe all of the credit for these wonderful experiences to others. This trip allowed me to relax, and embrace humanity in ways that this church has down-pat here in Decatur.

The visit to the seminary is one story that I think defines human connectivity. In the middle of the second week of the trip, Dad and I had the privilege of attending United Seminary of Ricatla, a local seminary associated with the Methodist church. It has also received funding in the past from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) through our Global Missions partnership. Dr. Dinis Matolo is the President of the seminary. He is a wonderful pastor about my dad's age who picked us up at my aunt and uncle's house in Maputo.

The United Seminary of Ricatla is very rural, with goats tethered and students doing gardening and hauling water to get by. A large number of buildings for staff homes, dorms for young married couples, families with kids, and singles, more for classrooms, offices, library, and so forth. Dad and I were introduced to 6 students who were working on the internet in a computer lab. Most were from Mozambique but one was Anglican and another from Angola. Then we had lunch with the President, Dean, and Chaplain and the student body President. The dinner conversation was quite broad ranging. We discussed the difference between students taking classes online versus on campus.

I would have not have heard any of it if I had been wearing ear plugs.

James

Thursday, July 8th. Whoa. What a day.

Woke up at 6AM with a touch of Montezuma's Revenge -- too much rich food?

maybe an unclean veggie? Oh well -- I needed to lose the weight anyway.

My three hosts came at 9am to take me on the United Church of Christ church tour.

They are: Rev. Maria Luis-Matola; Mr. Samuel Audela; and Rev. Lotes Mazive.

They are pastors and/or General Synod staff. Lotes was the translator, Samuel the driver, and Maria asked terrific questions. They took me around Maputo to visit 5 churches in 4 hours.

The first -- **Centro Congregational Church** reminded me of the Church of the Living Hope, my home church in NYC -- white facade in a slum, sanctuary on first floor, offices on second, musician on third, and pastor's apartment on top floor.

It's unfinished, still a ways to go, but really quite inspiring. Jomalu, their church musician, was there and I bought his new CD -- cool African jazz.

Malhazine Congregational UCC church has a great story. There was a large house-sized hole in the ground in the Bairro (barrio). A gang hid in the house-sized hole in the ground and dragged people into it to rob and kill them. Malhazine Congregational church asked the government for the property (the nation owns all land). They got it and built a church right on top of the hole.

Mavalane Congregational Church had 20 or so women there singing and praying for the sick and suffering and so ready for our visit. We exchanged formal yet heartfelt greetings. When I told them about our Monday morning prayer group they clapped; when I told them about my wife Betty, who is a pastor as well, and the other women clergy in our church they shouted and danced and did a trill noise that sends a shiver of joy down my spine. Afterward we had homemade rolls and Fanta soda -- tasted like communion.

UCC Synod offices and church -- the church was founded 57 years ago -- the first of its kind. We sat for 30 min or so, sharing ideas and asking questions. I really like them all, and Maria is sharp. Afterward they asked me to pray.

Chamanculo Congregational Church in a different Bairro. Similar transforming story -- there once was a row of alcohol and drug dealing shops on the corner of a busy, main intersection.

The church asked for the land and had to fight for it, to put an end to the harm that was being done there. Eventually they "cast out" the drug/beer shops and built a vibrant church. Love it. When we arrived we were met by 10-12 women, also praying and singing. One of their elder women greeted me with such warmth I was touched. Again, when I shared that we had men and women clergy and elders, they were so happy they cheered and clapped.

On Friday morning Rev. Lucas Matolo took me to visit one more congregation. The last church we visited in Maputo was the smallest, yet held a great surprise. **Igreja de Cristo Unida**, a United Church of Christ congregation is located in a small, bustling community where the roads are sandy and the homes very modest. Children play soccer in the street and grandmothers sell products and wares on their doorsteps. The pastor of **Igreja de Cristo Unida** is the Rev. Messi Henore. Rev. Messi, as she is called, is the first woman minister in the UCC in Mozambique, and she is married to Rev. Lucas Matolo (Pastor, Mahalenge Parish UCC).

During the formal introductions and greetings at Igreja de Cristo Unida, a woman stood up and described one of their home-grown ministries. Church families are invited to pool their resources in a church-run bank, if you will, and then every six months disperse the pooled resources equally in the congregation. Imagine living hand-to-mouth yet knowing that twice a year you will have something extra to help start a business, replace tools, or provide an added community service. Furthermore, with these pooled resources the church bank also tithes to the church, buying chairs and making repairs. Just like the fishes and the loaves, when everyone shares there is always more left over.

A mighty spirit is at work in Maputo. Even and especially in the midst of poverty, grace is spoken there.

We saw incredible wild life in Swaziland at Hlane National Park and Milwane National Park, and later visited Kruger National Park in South Africa. We really appreciated the wild life because we first formed human relationships.

Henry

Cape Town, South Africa

We were up and Adam and out of the house everyday by 7:15am.
We went to downtown Cape Town, bought city tour bus tickets for the week that includes cable car fees and aquarium fees, then went up Tabletop Mountain.

We saw incredible vistas of Indian and Atlantic Oceans, Cape of Good Hope,
South African mountains, cities, wine country, and nature. Wow.
We hiked all around the top and then went back down to the city.

We dropped by to see a social action agency
supported by our mission dollars called Ons Plek.
Ons Plek ministers to runaway girls in Cape Town.
They serve 150 girls every year.

We had lunch in a cafe, then toured St George's Cathedral -- also known as People's Cathedral because it has always been integrated, even during Apartheid.

Former Archbishop Desmond Tutu was the pastor there when he won the Nobel Prize in 1984. We found out he was going to lead mass on Friday at 7:15AM. Whoa! We vowed to go back to worship at dawn on Friday!

James

Our host family very graciously got up extra early so we could make it to St. George's Cathedral for worship. When we got there the sanctuary was empty, but we found a lovely service under way in the chapel off to the side. The chapel was packed with around 40 or so people, and there was Archbishop Tutu leading the service. We slipped out to find a couple chairs and then settled down to worship God.

Now, I had met Desmond Tutu 26 years ago, back when I was a divinity student at Union Theological Seminary in NYC. In 1984, the seminary honored Tutu with the Union Medal. As an officer of the student body it was my privilege to greet and escort him.

At St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town, after Desmond Tutu led us through the liturgy of the Lord's Table, he invited us to come forward and partake. As I approached him I was initially thinking about Tutu as a man, as a hero, as a liberator of the oppressed and reconciler of broken relationships. However, when I got to within a few feet of Tutu a deeper sense of appreciation took over, and I was overwhelmed with gratitude for the love of God and the sacrifice of Christ so that all might be saved and redeemed.

After worship was over Henry and I, who had been the last to enter, were now the first to leave. Former Archbishop Tutu was at the door to greet folks as we left. I introduced myself to him, telling him how we had met at Union Seminary in 1984, and then I introduced him to Henry, telling him that Henry is a student at Lynchburg College. Tutu looked keenly at Henry and then asked me, "Does he look know like you did then?" I answered, "Yes." Suddenly Tutu put his hands in the air and erupted in a loud exclamation of joy and recognition.

We have not touched ground since. Who needs Delta when you have a spirit of joy?!

Henry

Jesus asks us whether we can interpret the times. We've returned to say that when we care for and listen to one another, more is gained than lost in translation. We are not so different. We have so much in common. We desire peace and prosperity, safe places to live, water to drink, sports to play and team to cheer for. Friends are valued, work is important, community service gives meaning, and no matter what your nationality or race or creed, penguins are cute and fun to watch.

James

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!