

An Unexpected Blessing

September 2008

"I was sick and you visited Me." --*Matt. 25:36b*

The words of Christ are unambiguous in the 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; welcome the stranger; clothe the naked; visit the sick; comfort those in prison. I contented myself with the knowledge that our work with needy children and their families covered most of these bases. I was there whenever one of our children had to be hospitalized for an injury--reading from a story book, providing a treat and a soda. They were released after a day or two and I felt that I had done my duty.

All of their semi-serious injuries were treated at the local mission hospital. I had never set foot in the main government referral hospital on Mulago Hill in Kampala. That is, until seven-year-old Maria was hit by a small truck while crossing a main road. Our associate, Agnes, called me as soon as she found out. She was there when the local hospital referred the child to Mulago and she later told me she was sure the girl was dead. Maria's thigh was broken and she had sustained a serious head injury.

When I saw Maria at Mulago the next day, her leg had been stabilized but not set. She was in a neurological ward because of potential brain damage. She was totally non-responsive and I feared she might be comatose. Her mother and I knelt beside the bed and prayed for healing. Then I spent some time at her bedside, trying to comfort her through gentle touch.

Wards in Ugandan hospitals are large by western standards, and hold many patients. Ward 3A was an overflow ward: Neuro patients on one side, and patients with other problems opposite. The hospital provides basic medical care only, and it is up to the families to provide sheets, blankets, clothes, food, and to do any personal care required. The caregivers of longer-term patients become a family unto themselves, watching over each other's children when the mom needs to go out for food or a personal break. After my second visit with Maria, I began to get to know the other children at her end of the ward.

Hospitals have never bothered me. As a child, my doctor uncle used to let me accompany him on rounds. However, I never considered myself called to a hospital "ministry." I would visit a friend or a family member and that was that. But now at Mulago, I found myself drawn into the lives of the children surrounding Maria. There was a little boy from the north in the bed on the left: breathing deeply, unconscious, a tube in his nose. "He will recover," his mother hopefully told me. A hydrocephalic baby girl with some signs of dwarfism was on the other side, fully awake and whimpering whenever her mother left her. Across the aisle were two small boys, Samson and Julius, who seemed happy and normal, except for the tubes extending from their abdomens and the plastic bags they carried whenever they walked around.

Maria's mental faculties were slowly returning. A week later, her eyes were open, although she didn't appear to be seeing anything. I noticed that the unconscious boy was missing. Another mother answered my anxious inquiry, "He died." Stunned, I looked across the room, pondering the fragility of human life. Samson was shyly grinning at me, hoping I would notice him. I went over to greet him and to give him and Julius some cookies I had brought with me.

As weeks passed, Maria regained her sight, her hearing, and began to speak a word or two. Instead of being fed through an n/g tube, she could now chew and swallow. "What do you want?" I asked her in *luganda*. "Cake," she whispered.

I brought small matchbox-sized cars for Maria and her brothers, and for the boys and the other children in the ward. Soon the little vehicles were rolling all over the room. Maria's leg didn't heal properly and she was transferred to the orthopedic ward, number 7 in the old section of the hospital, to await surgery. The first time I went to Ward 7 to visit her, I knew that I had to go back to 3A. The 3A children

were thrilled to see me. I'm sure they thought that I was as gone as my patient. The other mothers asked about Maria.

In Ward 7, I met Gloria, a fifth-grade girl from Gulu who was awaiting surgery for a broken elbow. The nurse on duty saw me speaking with her, and suggested I go and greet the others in the ward. "You will take away their pain," she said. "You will be a better pain reliever than Ibuprofen."

I visited as many patients as were conscious. There was a teenage girl, also from Gulu, a town far from Kampala. She was alone and seemed mentally impaired and non-responsive. I greeted her in her Acholi language, not spoken in the south, and she grinned with joy. There was a woman who looked older than she was, with the hollow eyes and sunken cheeks of someone in the latter stages of AIDS. She spoke *luganda* and we went through the traditional greeting ritual. She held onto my hands as if drawing life from me. I maintained an attitude of cheerfulness until I left the ward. Then the tears involuntarily began to flow.

Maria's bone repair appeared to be successful, but the trauma of the operation took away what little speech she had recovered. It had been eight weeks since the accident and I suspected that she may never function normally again. I've made some new friends in 3A, including Enoch, a five-year-old who was injured in a *boda-boda* (motorcycle taxi) accident. One eye is patched and he is covered with bandages, yet he happily giggled while I tickled the soles of his feet.

A few days later I returned to Mulago for my regular visit. As I walked toward Ward 7, I considered the challenges in caring for a mentally disabled child in the difficult slums of Kampala. I approached the entrance expecting to find the strange, fearful, non-verbal child I had last seen. Instead, a bright little girl with shining eyes and a huge grin spotted me as I entered and called out "*Muzungu Peter!*" My jaw dropped in disbelief. I sat with her on the bed as we sang together, counted to twenty in English and *luganda*, and talked about her family and the teachers at her school. Maria had miraculously returned to us.

Samson and Julius had successful operations and were discharged. All of Enoch's bandages except his eye covering have been removed and he is running around as if the accident had never happened. Gloria's elbow surgery was also successful and she will be released soon. I'm going to miss all my little friends when we return to the states in October; they will always be in my heart. God created temporary families in Ward 3A and Ward 7, and He allowed me the privilege of being a part of them. Each visit was emotionally difficult, but the joy of the children's smiles overcame the pain, for them and for me. I have been given a great gift, for which I will always be grateful.