

July 21, 2012

*How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation-
Isaiah 52:7*

You know, today's gospel begins with Jesus' friends all gathered around Jesus, telling him everything they had done and taught. I guess I feel like that, too. That here we are, and you are part of the body of Christ, and I want to tell you where I have been, and what I have done – because always when one person does something like this, it is the whole body who is responsible – ALL of you were “there” with me, because Jesus was – and while you were busy doing good for God, I was here, with you, because Christ was here, too! We are all one body in Christ!

It's been a full week and a half since I settled back into the states after spending 6 months in Botswana, and it's been really hard for me to get used to the fact that my time there is already over – I tried to live every moment of it, so I wouldn't miss anything – but now I am sad. I miss so many people who became family to me, just as you have – and so many things I was able to do. Botswana became home for me. I never imagined that I would walk in there and feel immediately so totally at home – but I did. And that never changed.

My 6 months in Botswana was truly a life changing experience. Throughout the whole time I deliberately kept making the decision to enjoy the journey regardless of some of the hard things that happened. I was determined not to let any of them take anything away from the wonderful experiences that I had. It was an amazing time. I was able to do things I had no idea that I really could do.

These are a few ways that it seems I brought the “good news” and “proclaimed peace,” as Isaiah says. And I do think my “feet” were blessed! **I** was blessed because God made all this possible!

Many disabled people in Botswana, as in many other countries, and as it used to be here, too – are kept hidden or out of the way so as not to bring shame on their families. Thee it is due to an old tribal belief that anyone born with a physical or mental deformity was evidence of his mother's unfaithfulness to tribal custom or law. The disability was her fault – This brought shame to her, and to the family, even if they loved the child.

This attitude is now slowly beginning to change here among the Batswana and they are starting to recognize their disabled children and adults as ordinary people. Before I even WENT to Botswana I had a desire to help change that negative mind set, because varieties of it exist here, too. I realized that just by being amidst the people, by living my life visibly, and by making the conscious choice to be happy and as independent as possible, that I was bringing God's good news of hope and love. I think I once told you that Dr Frost said that my "platform", that is my "work" to do WAS my disability – which I think means to live my life as gladly, and as freely in Christ as I can, so that others can come to trust him, too.

I tried to do this at St. Peter's Day Care Centre in Mogoditshane where I spent about 6 hours a day for three days a week - I taught Bible stories of Jesus to the children. In the beginning, many of these little children were very afraid of me because of course, many of them had never seen anyone without arms or legs. They were very nervous at first, but I had to reassure them that everything was okay – and that it was God who created me like this and that no one had done anything bad to me! I had to show, as well tell them that God loved me and that I could do things with them and for them just as I was! I think this was encouraging because eventually they saw me as capable as any of the other teachers they had. I was able to bring them the "good tidings of great joyous news" - that God is good and that God does not make junk!

I think this was encouraging to the staff at the Day Care, too, because except for Gladys and Andrew Mudereri, they hadn't had much experience working with someone who was physically handicapped. They held some of the same ideas that most people do, and were nervous about me being there. So the whole thing became as much a reassurance to them as it was to the children to see that I could read, write, and teach!

I believe that simply encouraging others to relax in God's love is another way in which I proclaimed the good news. My disability and the fact that it did not hold me back, and that I was sure God had created me for his own reasons AS I AM, WAS God's message to them. Gladys and Father Andrew were very cool about the whole thing - and gently encouraged the kids to come up and touch me those first few days when they were still afraid.

They also reassured the teachers that everything was going to be fine, and to let me really work with children myself. And they did – gradually they realized I was more like them than different, and we became friends.

But it was wonderful to see how the children responded to the stories – If you read my blogs you know that after I read them, and after we discussed them and drew pictures – I got them to act out the stories, with costumes and props – I even brought fish and bread the day we did the feeding of the 5,000! – and we had such an amazing time together presenting some of the Bible stories for their parents and other adults -

God also let me proclaim the good news yet again when I worked at Cheshire Foundation Center. This is a home where mentally and physically disabled children of all ages are cared for daily. The particular class that I worked with was the 6-10 year olds who were mostly physically impaired with a few who had some mental challenges as well.

There I was trying to really explore with them the truth of what it means to be made in the image of God. I wanted to change any idea that they were disabled because of their own sin – or someone else's. I did a lot of retelling Bible stories again, ones that includes stories of people with disabilities using art, painting and drawing, since physical movement was harder for them than for the little ones at the daycare. I told the children all about how God formed the world out of love – that he created us because he wanted us – and made it all for us. I wanted to help them understand that ALL humans are made in God's image including those of us with disabilities.

So this made us try to discover what that image really is, then! And it was wonderful to see them discover that the image of God couldn't be about how we look, or what we can do – but only about being able to love – since all of us - including my nephew Bobby, can do that! And God IS love.

The staff listened closely to that, too, and wanted to talk about it, since they had been brought up to think that even the children they loved and cared for were somehow “different” and that something “bad” had happened to them. I loved watching how the kids realized that God created each of them for a purpose and who loves them without any shame, and this led them to want to know Him better. They had so much fun with the drawing and coloring; Art, such as free drawing, painting, and coloring are effective story-telling methods, because art is in the blood of Africans!

Everyone is an artist – or a singer – or a dancer – or a story-teller – or an actor - or all at once! Africans tell stories about their culture's history, people, and folktales by the arts. (No wonder I felt so at home there!) So using art allowed me a natural setting for sharing the gospel with the children and provided the opportunity to really "draw out" a picture of who Jesus is and what the heart of the Lord God really looks like.

This also helped them form in their own minds what God is like. It was also helpful to their teachers to see them being able to do things for themselves and watch their little minds come alive and their imaginations run wild.

I also worked with the Anglican Diocese of Botswana Youth Task Team. This was a group of young adults my age who had the same passions about setting the world on fire with the love of God that I have. They really became my closest friends. They asked me to be part of their team, because they wanted to see how they could get more involved with the young adult disabled so they could encourage them to become members of the Anglican Diocese of Botswana Youth Task Team! This gave me a wonderful opportunity, not only to share the good news of Jesus Christ but to actually demonstrate it in a disabled body by participating fully in all of their activities. The youth put on 2 fundraiser walks and I participated in both of them - one was to raise funds for Cheshire Foundation Center and the other focused on HIV/AIDS prevention awareness.

This was neat, because even though I could not "walk" the way you do – others walked and pushed ME - so I did walk with my wheels and I was with them the whole time. It was just another way that I was able to proclaim God's good news with others, because people saw me as just another Anglican youth partaking in a cause! All of it helped to "normalize" disability and take the mystery out of it. God just quietly showed people that there is no reason for shame, and no reason to hide.

When my mom and I talked about this she said "*How beautiful on the mountains are the **wheels** of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings!*" YES!! These 2 walks were both filmed by tv crews, and there was a shot of me in each of them. Sandy and I don't have a TV in our flat, so we didn't get to see it, but others did – and that was the point. I was just very happy that people were seeing a person in a

wheelchair being fully active in ordinary society without embarrassment and WITH gladness!

During my time in Botswana I met a young woman who was the mother of 3 children, named Malebogo. She had just recently lost her arms and her legs do to a serious infection right at the end of 2011 – just before I arrived in Gabarone. She was a patient at Princess Marina Hospital which is located right in Gaborone. She has nothing now below her knees and her arms are exactly like mine. When I first met her she couldn't feed herself nor could she write. She was just so helpless and discouraged, because no one knew how to help her. Her Doctor was an Indian man named Dr. Gureja who had heard about me through an American doctor, Dr. Moffat. When he called to ask me to visit her, I told myself that that helplessness was going to change - starting right now!

This was another opportunity for me to give her hope that her life was not finished and that all she'd lost were her arms and legs – not her SELF. She is a Christian, but she was discouraged. She began to find gladness again, though, as I was able to teach her how to write, draw, feed herself, and brush her teeth and more. She had such a positive attitude about the whole experience, and still wants to push herself harder and harder. It was exciting for her as well as everyone in the hospital to see her progress!

Even later on her therapist called me and told me how much she had improved, and that she (the therapist) wanted to sit in on our next session and watch how I work with her so that she could get ideas on how to help others with similar problems. To be used by God for one of his children is a great privilege. I was so glad for this chance and felt the Lord's love and presence in the midst of all of it.

There are so many more things I'd love to talk about, but you all would be here all day if I did that, so here is one more thing before thing before I close. I had the privilege of hosting two successful art shows that featured the work of the disabled at Riverwalk here in Gaborone. The first Art show was on the twenty sixth of May and the students from the Thuoboswa Rehab Center of Ramotswe came to present their work. There were 6 people 5 boys and one girl. Some of them had cerebral palsy and others had Down syndrome but they were all excited to be there. They brought all kinds of art such as quilts, dyed clothes, African traditional leather garments, etc... The students loved having the event and were really

encouraged to see how many people bought their stuff and acknowledge the students for their abilities. One person came up to them and said "*Disability does not mean inability!*" The next Saturday we had another art show at Riverwalk this time with a woman with a deformed right hand who does jewelry and is from the Anglican Women's Fellowship who really wanted to participate. Her name was Flora. She had so much fun with showing her work to people, and once again many people responded positively. It was amazing to see how we were able to use our art to bring God's good news that the disabled can give back to society.

God was amazingly good to me, too – the whole time I was in Africa. The Batswana are gracious, gentle, wonderful people who continually brought the good news to ME, too! Worship was amazing – in every church I attended – I learned to pray more quietly and more on my own, God called me, too, to "rest awhile" – and my supervisor, Dr James Amanze, an Anglican priest some of you met here - insisted that I do it, too! He was always reminding me to stop and read Scripture and pray – to take my own time with God. And so I did – more and more. And the more I listened to God myself, the more of his love I had to share with others. And the more ways I saw it, recognized it in everything and everyone around me. I loved Botswana – and I miss it now.

I had many chances to show how good God is. I saw this when I was with Malebogo, or teaching the Bible stories with the children at St. Peters or doing Bible and art lessons with those at Cheshire, or witnessing to other people in my conversations. Everywhere I sensed God's most powerful work "playing" in me - God in me almost dancing for joy as I reached out and let him fill me with that joy!

And I see again why my heart is drawn to missions. This is really what I love doing – showing Jesus to everyone all the time in every way. I was NOT looking forward to returning to the states! It was difficult to come back because I felt like I was right in the middle of my mission, and not ready to part with it.

I shared my frustration with my grandfather a couple of nights ago and he told me this: "Isn't it better to be here to finish your degree and work getting yourself back there? Honey, I know how much you loved it but saying how much you wish you were there won't satisfy your desire...it only increases it.

So use this year to prepare yourself to go wherever God decides to take you whether it is Botswana or anywhere else!"

This was really important for me to hear and I took it also to mean that I need to clean my wheels so they will still be beautiful tomorrow – to bring good news today and to get prepared to share the good news in the future wherever I am taken!

All of you in this congregation show me what it means to share the good news by the things you do in the community and with each other – I know about the food pantry and how busy it has been this summer – and how you just keep filling it back up week by week;

And all of you come and show this little part of the world what the love of Christ looks like because of that – I've been here with mom all week, and we had 6 families come in just the first three days with need for food – and the need to tell their stories - and we have been able to give them what they needed - and that is because of you!

I love that in this church we all have our unique ways of being bearers of the good news, the bearers of peace! And all of feet are blessed! And I love that you encouraged me to go to Botswana even though you had no idea if I could really do it in my manual wheelchair or not – NO ONE discouraged me for trying!

We should all keep right on gathering around Jesus, telling each other all we have done and taught – because he loves it! And then we should also keep on listening when he tells us to “come apart” for a little while and rest – and do that, too – so that he can fill us again and again with the very good news we want to give to others! Since it is all HIS power that does it anyway, there is NOT ONE of us who can't “do and teach” it somehow!

