

Saugatuck Congregational Church

Sermon

July 29, 2007

William Salmond

“Let God be your number one.”

Two years ago I mentioned that a young girl Josephine Nabukenya was coming from Uganda sponsored by the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation to testify to Congress on the urgent need for antiretroviral therapy for children who like her are infected with HIV/AIDS. Indeed she did come with her mother and a Ugandan doctor. After the presentation when Josephine spoke and read a poem she had written one Senator graciously invited her into his office on Capitol Hill. I have a photo of her with him in my office in Kampala. Josephine only reaches about one third up the large black leather chair she is sitting in. She looks so small and insignificant in that magnificent office. The Senator was Chris Dodd from Connecticut.

So here we are two years later and a couple of weeks ago Josephine wandered into my office in Kampala. It was ten in the morning and I asked her why she was not in school. “I want to discuss something with you” she said. I invited her to sit down and she told me that an American doctor had told her that Senator Chris Dodd wanted to be President of the United States. Well, that’s right, I told her he is one of the Democratic candidates. She then told me that wanted to write to him to wish him good luck. Could I please provide her with paper, a pen, envelope and go out and buy a Good Luck card for her. I was in the middle of budgets but I told her I would get to it right away! Now in Kampala it’s not so simple as dropping into CVS for a Good Luck card. I went to several stores and eventually found one which had a fat teddy bear on the front and said “Good Luck.” I bought it and brought it back to Josephine. She had finished the letter which has now been delivered with the card. Here’s what she said.

“Dear Senator Chris Dodd,

I hope that you are fine. How is work there is it going on good? I heard that you are campaigning for the presidency. I pray that you pass in. All I have is to wish you success in everything you do because when I came there you welcomed me very well. I want to tell you that in everything you do let God be your number one because no one is greater than him and everything is possible in him so make him your number one everything will be fine. All I have is to wish you success in all you do.

Thanks.

From your friend.

Josephine Nabukenya.

Now we won’t know the outcome of this good luck card until November 2008! But we can be sure that in the twists and turns of the Presidential campaign some surprises will emerge.

Let God be your number one. Josephine was very close to the Scriptures we read this morning. Jesus goes to the wilderness and asks John to baptize him in the Jordan river. The Holy Spirit then drives Jesus deeper into the wilderness to be hungry, alone, to be tempted by the devil. Turn these stones into bread if you are so hungry says the devil. Jump off the Temple top as a stunt and angels will save you. Look I’ll give you all the kingdoms of this world. The United States, China, Zimbabwe, Uganda, England, Scotland, Hungary... all of them if you bow down and worship me.

Jesus’ ministry does not begin in the comfort of a home or a meeting house, or the Temple. Jesus ministry begins in the wilderness. And it is the Holy Spirit of God who drives Jesus into this situation. As we reflect on our own lives our own stories we can recall very vividly the wilderness times. Often they are the most vivid times. Times of sickness, bereavement, unemployment, depression,

During the children's camp which we held for HIV positive children including Josephine in December of last year we had one night when the children started to share their wilderness experiences with each other. The stigma, the rejection, the going to sleep hungry times. Wilderness.

Yet the Holy Spirit tells Jesus that he can't have a ministry without the wilderness days. Even before the cross Jesus is confronting the power of Satan the power of evil. Only when Satan is overcome can Jesus confidently proclaim the breaking in of God's Kingdom in our lives. Only then does healing begin.

Now Jesus replies to Satan and he quotes Josephine. "Let God be your number one."

"You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve." The first and greatest of all the commandments. No other gods before me. Or in Revelation the word of God "I am Alpha." First letter of the Greek alphabet. I am Omega, the last letter, and everything in between. Who is and was and is to come. However harsh the wilderness and God knows how hard it can be we will put God first and foremost.

I like the way Josephine expresses this. Let God. Allow God. Give God a moment to surprise you to permeate your life. That's what we are doing now. It can become a habit a habitual way of looking at life. Allow God a moment to change your life.

This coming December when we will invite another 30 children 10-17 to camp at Jinja near the source of the River Nile Josephine will be one of the camp leaders. She will be one of those prophets in the making of whom John Danner spoke two Sundays ago. A prophet in the making. Many children now look up to her for advice, for encouragement, for support in their wilderness times. Two years ago when Josephine returned to Uganda from Capitol Hill she entered her own personal wilderness. She came down with Tuberculosis. This is the most common of the opportunistic infections associated with AIDS. She was very ill and began treatment. At the same time she had to sit her exams to get into High School. Despite her terrible weakness, she passed. Now today she is doing well and is fit.

Thank you Josephine for your word this morning and for touching the lives of so many children in Uganda. We'll try to remember your advice to the Senator and to each of us.

"Let God be your number one."

Rev. Susanna Griefen

Amen.