

## ***On The Turning Away,***

June 22, 2008

Where all of this *really* comes from is a night back in December 2002. My brother and I were downtown in Indianapolis to see The Heartland of America Tour. The tour was a group of celebrities, scientists and scholars who were making a tour of the Midwest sharing information about what was going on with the AIDS crisis in Africa. OKAY though...let's be honest here...the *real* reason I was there is because of one celebrity in particular...those of you who know me well and have heard parts of this story know who that is...my man Bono. (Picture of Bono and Stan). I really was there to meet this rock star...this icon whose music I have been listening to for over half of my life.

So yeah, I got to meet Bono...yeah it was cool...and yeah I stood there like a statue with my mouth open. But then the program started...doctors and scientists and economists began painting a statistical picture of the AIDS pandemic in Africa. AIDS kills 6,500 Africans everyday. 2.5 million Africans died last year because of AIDS. Currently, there are 14 million AIDS orphans in Africa.

Then it was Bono's turn...Bono put the statistics in lyrical...poetic form that challenged me on that night, and still continue to challenge me. He said...and...who is our neighbor?

If 1/3 the population in Paris was dying, we wouldn't look away, we'd be outraged...we'd find a way to stop it. We'd come together as an international community and do something about it. Somehow though, we don't consider Africans to be our neighbors...so, we look away, we rationalize...we do nothing while tomorrow they die. For me this was like a one-two punch...the statistics, then being called to accountability...wham—wham. And as I was teetering back and forth about to fall...the knockout punch...

He finished his remarks by saying..."**What are you going to tell your grandchildren you did while an entire continent withered away from AIDS?**"

In that moment it is almost as if I really had been knocked out. Have you ever seen a boxing match when one of the boxers is knocked out and the referee begins the ten count. 1-2-3... It was as if there was too much information to process—6,500 Africans die every day—4—2.5 million died last year—5—there are 14 million AIDS orphans—6—who is my neighbor—7—if a third of Paris was dying every day, we wouldn't look away—8—we don't consider *Africans* to be our neighbors—9—What are you going to tell your grandchildren you did while an entire continent withered away from AIDS—10....OUT!

Well, like a prizefighter that has been knocked out...eventually you reach for the ropes and pull yourself up. You inhale some smelling salts and rejoin the world. What I remembered when I came to was..."and who is our neighbor?" Who is our neighbor? This is the central question of the story Jesus tells about the parable of the Good Samaritan. The crux of the story is that a religious scholar who thought he knew everything about everything asked Jesus what he needed to do to have eternal life...Jesus answered love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself. The look on the scholars face must have said...you mean everybody...I have to love everyone? So he said, well look, who is my neighbor?

That's when Jesus tells the story...a man has been robbed and left for dead on the road. A priest walks by and does not help, a Levite religious man walks by and does not help, but when the Samaritan...generally considered to be an outsider and even an enemy of the Jewish people walks by, he stops and helps. Jesus asks the scholar...so who was the neighbor here.

There have been thousands of interpretations of what that story really means...what I heard Jesus saying in *this* context was that who our neighbors are, aren't always the ones who look the most like us...believe the same way we do...live next door, or even in the same city...neighbor is much more inclusive term to convey anyone created by...a common strand of God runs through each of us. As such we are bound to care for all of our neighbors...period.

We often do turn away...the priest turned away...the Levite religious man turned away.

The Samaritan stopped and helped. I wonder what he saw the others didn't. What is it that he saw?

You know...they...they ARE the statistics. The children that Miriam and Joshua serve...they are part of the 6,500 hundred dying every day, part of the 2.5 million that died last year...they are the 14 million AIDS orphans. But here is the thing. For Joshua and Miriam...it began with one child. Pushed out of the orphanage where she grew up...pushed out of the orphanage where they were houseparents...pushed out only because they saw all of God's creation as their neighbors and wanted to care for them as such.

But...when you are looking into the face of 14 million orphans, where do you start...how could they...how can we possibly make a difference? A friend of mine gave me this analogy...he said, Stan imagine you have a Dixie cup full of water...imagine taking that Dixie cup full of water and pouring it in the ocean...even if you poured all day, you'd never see a difference. But take that same Dixie cup full of water and pour it into a bathtub...albeit slowly, eventually you will see the tub fill.

For Joshua and Miriam, that is where it started—with one child. After being turned away from the place they had made home for so many children for so long, they brought one HIV+ orphan into their *own* home...from there another child, then another...then a dream...what if we built an orphanage to serve children infected and affected by HIV/AIDS

On your tables you'll find a Dixie cup full of water. During the song, I invite you to come forward and pour your cup into the bowl right here...but before you do...I'd like for you to pray over the water so that when you pour your water into the bowl, you are pouring your prayer into the bowl.

You know, I think it is often the case that we ask ourselves what can I possibly do to make a difference. So many problems seem so very big...and this is what causes so much turning away. It's not that we don't care, it's just that...well, when we look at these kinds of problems they seem so overwhelming.

I truly believe it does require us to ask what is it that we see when we look at the world...When we look at any problem...any issue and see it as statistics...perhaps the problem is overwhelming, but when we look at these problems and see...not statistics, but people, and not just people, but individuals...that is something with which we can identify. That is when, like the Good Samaritan, we stop and help...one person to another...making a difference.

And that is the story of our 10% recipient this morning. From one child and a dream was built a home for children nobody else wanted...and the thing that is most gratifying in this story is that so many individuals are deeply connected to Neema Children's Homes...school children, teachers...and...us. Love and caring has built Neema Children's Home. With no corporate sponsor...just caring individuals giving a dollar at a time, a prayer at a time...Neema Children's Home was built...