

# Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

A Cameroonian Pilgrimage  
Preached by the Rev. Canon Elizabeth Geitz  
Good Shepherd and St. John's Church  
Milford, Pennsylvania Year A Proper 20

*"So the last will be first, and the first will be last," Jesus tells us.  
(Matthew 20:16)*

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of our Lives. Amen.

I am honored and delighted to be your guest preacher this morning and to have the chance to share with you a glimpse of my pilgrimage to the Good Shepherd Home for Children in Cameroon. And just a glimpse of this deeply moving experience is what it will be, for the children and people of Cameroon have touched my heart and soul in more ways than I can possibly share in one morning. In describing a journey of this nature, there is always the risk of both over dramatization as well as trivialization of the profundity of the experience. I pray that my portrayal will be neither, but instead will leave you with some sense of their lives, and more filled with hope for our brothers and sisters in this part of God's creation. Father Bill, thank you, thank you for inviting me to be here with all of you.

Shortly before leaving America, I was asked what I felt would be the greatest danger to me in Africa. "Spiritual danger," was my immediate reply, taking my questioner by surprise. My husband's good friend had been greatly concerned about safety issues in Africa and expected my response to be more along those lines. Taken a bit off guard, he probed further. "You mean, you will wonder how God could let something like this happen."

"No," I replied, "I'm concerned that I will wonder how *we* could let it happen."

While this is a significant part of my spiritual dilemma upon returning, it is not all of it. Equally challenging is how much more deeply spiritual the children and adults are whom I met in Cameroon, than almost everyone here in America, including myself. Whereas we might carve out time to be with God or pray spontaneously throughout the day, their lives seem to be completely infused with the joy and love of God in a manner that eludes all but the most gifted and blessed here in the West. It was an experience unlike any other in my life to witness the deep and abiding faith of so many people at the same time, who live it and breathe it every moment of every day.

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The individual who is the embodiment of this way of living is Sister Jane Mankaa, a 48 year old Anglican Cameroon nun, who was our host. She was walking along her village streets one afternoon in 2002, as child after orphaned child came up to her with outstretched arms. That day, she vowed to do something about the look of hunger for both

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food and love that she saw in their eyes. Thus, the Good Shepherd Home for Children was born, an orphanage sponsored by the Benedictine Sisters of Bethany, also founded by Sister Jane.

Lillian Cochran, Nan Curtis and I were blessed to be able to stay at the home this summer, where fifty orphans are now sheltered, fed, clothed, and loved. As I begin to share their story with you, I am very aware that it is not *my* story to tell. It is theirs – the children and people of Cameroon. For how do you sing a song or tell a story in a strange land? With meticulous care, great humility, and a generous dose of help from the Holy Spirit. Thus, I begin relating the children's stories with tremendous respect and awe – for the hardships they have endured at such a young, vulnerable age, and for the strength and resilience of spirit they possess.

Let me tell you a bit about the children today and then speak in more detail about the life of one child - before and after he came to the Good Shepherd Home.

As my traveling companions and I completed our somewhat treacherous 8 hour drive from the airport and rounded the bend into the home; we were met by fifty cheering, singing, clapping children who followed our van into the grounds of the orphanage. When we disembarked, we were greeted and hugged and thanked in a manner I have never experienced, then treated to a song and dance show with a proclamation read by 9 year old Ambe Collins, the child my family has sponsored for four years. As the young children sang, babies crawled about and teenagers played the drums. This was a joyous day for them and an even more joyous one for us, as God's abundant grace freely rained upon us all.

As soon as the festivities were over, the older boys carried our luggage into our guest quarters; then we were given a tour of the children's dorm. They sleep in bunk beds, with 3-4 children per mattress. They rise to Morning Prayer and say and sing Evening Prayer each night before going to bed. They all have daily chores which keep the home running smoothly – from doing laundry, bathing babies, cooking meals, and sweeping the road, to caring for the many rabbits, pigs, or chickens used for food and income. Amazingly, once there the children no longer think of themselves as orphans, but as children who have 49 brothers and sisters and one mother – Sister Jane, whom they call Mama or Mother Jane.

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I would like to share with you briefly, in his own words, the story of the first child to arrive at the home five years ago, Akwa Gilbert, who is now fourteen. An excellent student who sings in the Good Shepherd choir and joyfully helps the younger children each day, his smile is infectious; his helping hands a study in motion.

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“I’m from a polygamous family,” he began. “My mother was the second wife to my father. There are fifteen children in my family; eight by my father’s first wife and seven by my mother. When my father died, the first wife took her children to stay with her family and my mother took us to (the city of) Douala. While we were there, my brother Claude and I used to sleep outside on the ground, on the streets. Our mother couldn’t take care of all of us; she was unable to feed us. It was very difficult for her.

That’s when my uncle came and took three of us to his village to live and work for his family - me, Claude, and Mary. My mother thought we would be fine, but things were not going fine. Life there was so horrible. We were no longer allowed to go to school. We had to do all the chores in the house while my uncle’s children went to school. We truly became their slaves.

My mother had taught us how to bake flour into gateaux, cake, so that’s what we did to earn money for the family, in addition to all the housework. Then my mother fell sick, and Claude and I had to leave there to go take care of her.”

“My mother died in my hands,” Gilbert continued softly, slowly, “at night, at 2:00 in the night. I was holding her. My grandmother sent us to the next village to tell my mother’s family she had died. We had to go that night to tell them. There was no place to keep the corpse cold, no morgue, so we had to go right then. We left at 4:00 in the morning. We trekked for 2 hours to get there and had to pass through the rushing water, through a river. I was very afraid. The water was full, so we had to remove all our clothes. Our grandmother had told us not to get our clothes wet, so she gave us a wrapper. We were to remove our clothes and tie them in the wrapper, so we did and they all stayed dry.

We finally got to the next village to see our aunt, my father’s sister; but nobody was there so we had to wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. She never came. Finally, we sent other people to go look for her in the next village. Then we left to come back to my grandmother’s and by that time the river had died down; the water was no longer a problem.

My mother was buried the next day. My uncle then brought Claude and me here to the Good Shepherd Home on 11 September, 2003. When we came there were no other children here, so we stayed with the sisters in the convent. I never knew life could be this good again. I used to cry all of the time, but here I have food and a bed and friends. And Mother Jane, she is like my mother, you know? God sent us a new mother to love us,” he added with a contented look on his face.

After Gilbert finished, we just sat there in silence as I tried to absorb what he had told me. I had no reference point for a nine year old holding his mother closely to him while she died, then hiking two hours and forging a rushing river in the middle of the night

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to tell her family. Words failed me, as I found myself reaching out to hug him with tears rolling down my cheeks.

Finally I began, slowly, “And now I hear you make very good grades, Gilbert, and want to be a doctor. What makes you want to be a doctor?”

“I want to help other children, like save lives . . . through God.”  
“Oh, maybe you want to be a priest then, an Anglican priest!” I said, brightening.  
“Could be, I have thought of that sometimes; yes I have. I may have to just vote which one some day,” Gilbert offered, proudly, and off he went down the dirt road to join his brothers and sisters in weekly choir rehearsal.

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In our parable today from the Gospel of Matthew, we are told the story of the Laborers in the Vineyard in which those workers who arrived at 5:00pm were paid the same wages as those who began at 9:00am. As you might guess, the workers chosen first at 9:00 in the morning were disgruntled when those chosen last were paid the same wages. They had a sense of entitlement, but Jesus said, no, no. That’s not the way it is in the Kingdom of God and then he takes it one step further, as he often does, to make his point. In God’s kingdom, he said, the ‘last will be first and the first will be last.’ Not equal, but last.

The maxim of the earthly order being turned on its head in the Kingdom of God is a familiar one throughout the New Testament. Time and again, we are told that it is the rich, the well-fed, the happy who will be last in the Kingdom of God, while the poor, the hungry and those who mourn will be first. In light of today’s reading, there is no doubt that Gilbert and the other orphans at the Good Shepherd Home *will* be and *are* first in God’s eyes.

Unfortunately, for centuries, the church used these passages to tell the Gilbert’s of the world not to worry so much about their earthly plight, that their reward would be in heaven. Scripture was often used to maintain the status quo and the Gilbert’s of the world were rendered basically invisible.

Thanks be to God that no longer has to be the case, for in our present age of technology and travel and yes, Communion, *we* have the opportunity to give them visibility. We have the opportunity to give them voice. We have the opportunity to literally help save their lives, one person, one child at a time.

My prayer this morning is that you may want to begin to discern where and how God is calling you to respond, so that the last may be first on *this* earth. So that the least of these our brothers and sisters will have the same advantages that your child and my child

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have. That you will join together and link hands, and arms, and voices with ours in an exploration of self-dedication, giving, and outreach.

Thank you again, Father Bill, and thank you - each and every one of you for coming this morning. May God richly bless you.

+Amen.

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