Lessons From Mozambique: What Does Love Look Like?

“We have been sent to places where ‘love’ must every day mean bread for the hungry, water for the thirsty and healing for the sick. It must mean family for the orphan, freedom for the captives and peace for the war-torn. We want always to make our love real in these ways, for as long as the poor are with us.” (from the Iris Global Mission Statement)

Words cannot express how thankful I am for the time I spent in Pemba, Mozambique during the summer of 2012. To say it changed my life would be an understatement; there is very little about how I view the world that was not changed that summer. I could tell you about how incredible an organization Iris Global is. I could give detailed information about their strategy to feed the masses and see that street children have homes. I could tell you about their successful extension programs, and how in roughly ten years they have presence in more than two thousand villages. But more impactful than any of these is the ideology which allowed for them to happen. While in Mozambique, I learned an ideology which I believe can universally be applied as a framework for progress.

Iris Global is a religious NGO, and there really is no way to coherently discuss my experience without framing it within this context. Christianity is a huge part of how Iris functions as an organization; it is honestly their sole motivation. Iris does a good bit of proselytizing, but they do so in such an unconventional way it can hardly be compared to any other religious mission I have ever encountered. Rather than preach first and help later, Iris focuses on development and uses religion as an explanation of their generosity. They build schools, drill wells, employ widowed women, feed thousands of children, help women find their way out of prostitution, develop businesses, grow food, and adopt orphans. Their explanation for wanting to do this is simple, “God loves those people.”

I was exposed to Iris in the fall of 2011 when a friend encouraged me to look up a woman named Heidi Baker, who I later learned is the co-founder and president of Iris. In a short video, she said, “I don’t know what love is if it doesn’t look like something.” Those words reduced me to tears. It was a simple statement, but I had never heard anyone say such a simple statement with such deep conviction. Those words reconciled my distaste for organized religion and my love of the Bible. For years, I would
read radical statements such as, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” “If I give away all I have, but have not love, I gain nothing,” and “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction,” and my heart would burn attesting to its truth. But then I would drag myself to church on Sunday or turn on the news and become disheartened. That short video gave me hope that there could be reconciliation between what I believed to be true and what I experienced in organized religion, and my time in Mozambique proved that hope to be true.

The people I met at Iris actually believed what they say they believe; they live in a way which is consistent with their religious convictions. They taught me that the problem is not religion, the problem occurs when religion is abused. They taught me that I can either hate someone because they disagree with me, or I can honor someone because human life has inherent value. They showed me I cannot say I love someone, I can’t say I care about a person, if that does not look like something concrete. Religion then, considered in these terms, is not something that can only be personal and private. Religion becomes that catalyst for improvement. Organized religion does not have to be the enemy. Of course we hope people will begin to see things the way we do; it is in our nature to desire to share what is we see as good. But agreement, even in religious thought, is not a prerequisite to love. I was taught that relationship is more important than convincing others I am right.

They taught me the value of joy. It is impossible to face the gross injustice which exists in the world without it. They showed me that if I cannot learn to see the beauty in even the simplest things and let my response to that beauty be happiness, it will not be long before I give up. They showed me that I can either be despaired when a child is malnourished, or overjoyed when that child is fed. It’s a choice: I can either look at their bellies which are bloated with worms or I can look at the happiness in their eyes when they eat their first meal of the day. There will always be good and there will always be injustice; choice determines what I look at.
They taught me that the best way to lead is first to learn and then to serve. I can either convince people that I have all the answers to all of their problems, as westerners have been doing for hundreds of years, or I can listen to their needs. I can either try to teach someone everything I know, or I can admit that they may know more than I do. I can be arrogant or I can learn. Paradoxically, they showed me that the best way to teach is to learn. When I humble myself to learn from someone else, it makes them feel loved and honored; when they feel I sincerely care for them, they are much more likely to listen to what I have to say. In practical terms, they taught me one of the best ways to do this is to learn the native language from the people whom I desire to “help.” By doing so, those people feel like they have something of worth to offer me and then I can offer them something I have of worth back. This allows me to help people in a way which does not rob them of their dignity. By using this model, first honoring and then giving, Iris has very little trouble getting natives to adopt the programs and solutions they are offering.

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned in Mozambique is that if I desire to see change, having hope is non-negotiable. One of the first days I was in Mozambique, one of handful of westerns who works full time in Pemba, told me, “Money is not the antidote to extreme poverty. Hope is the answer.” By that, he did not mean that money was not useful or even a critical part of the equation. He meant that those interested in relieving extreme poverty often reduce the problem to pure economics, and that cannot be done. It is much more complicated than that. If people do not believe that life can be lived in a better way, nothing will ever change. All of the concrete resources in the world cannot change anything if the will to do so is not there.

These lessons have followed me back home and are just as applicable in the Western context as they are in Mozambique. Love, sincerity, honor, and hope are values I will be able to apply to whatever I do, be it studying for another round of finals at Cornell or planting crops and drill wells in Mozambique.