

Parable of the Two Young Men on the Road to Nakuru

By Rev. Joseph G. Healey, M.M.

A Contemporary Retelling of the Emmaus Story In Africa Today

Now that same day two young men were on their way back to their home village of Bahati, 18 kilometers outside of Nakuru, Kenya. John and Charles got on the bus at the Racecourse Road section of Nairobi and found two seats together on the right hand side. They began talking about all the problems they had encountered in Nairobi since arriving there six months before. Like so many Kenyan youth from the rural areas they had left their village of Bahati after finishing Form Four and tried to find jobs in Nairobi. At first they were unsuccessful, but then John got a job washing dishes in a small restaurant near the fire station. Charles was a good handy man and got occasional work as a day laborer in an outdoor garage ("Jua Kali") in the Eastlands section of town. It was not much, but it was a start.

They joined a group of young men connected to one of the main opposition parties called "Movement for a New Kenya." Their charismatic leader regularly spoke out against the bribery and corruption in the government. John and Charles often participated in protest rallies. The political rallies were exciting and the youth volunteered a lot of their free time. The two young men enjoyed the ferment of the big city, but they didn't have enough money to go to nightspots and bars regularly. Also they realized that things were getting more dangerous in Kenya.

Then everything started to go wrong. Several times violence took place after the political rallies. One day there was a big riot in downtown Nairobi and three people were killed. The "movement's" leader was arrested and put in detention. The government declared him an "Enemy of the State." The two young men were dejected. Their hopes for a "New Kenya" were dashed.

To make matters worse, John's picture appeared in the coverage of the riot in one of the daily newspapers. When his boss heard about it, John was immediately fired. Then their small flat was broken into and they lost most of their belongings. After Charles had malaria three times, the garage did not want him back.

The two unemployed school leavers became very disillusioned about life in the big city of Nairobi. Everything was so expensive. Several of the girls they met always wanted to go to the "in" places in Nairobi with the latest pop music. John and Charles started bumming around. When their money finally ran out they decided to take a bus back to their home village.

On the bus a man in his mid-thirties sat in the next seat reading a book. Near Naivaisha the bus had a flat tire and everyone had to get out. While waiting by the road John and Charles struck up a conversation with the man and began telling him all their troubles. They explained how they put their hopes in one of the main opposition parties but now their leader was in detention. The "movement" was in disarray. The youth admitted that they had given up the traditions of their Kikuyu Ethnic Group and wanted the fast Western lifestyle of Nairobi. But everything was so expensive. They had failed in their first time in Nairobi and now were really depressed and discouraged.

The stranger said that he was a lawyer and asked them some challenging questions about how committed John and Charles are to bring about social change in Kenya. Are they ready to make real sacrifices to promote justice and peace? Why had they given up their African customs to follow the latest foreign music and clothes styles? The lawyer said that he wasn't taken in by some of the fast-talking politicians and their many promises. But he was committed to work for change from the grassroots up and to be a "voice of the voiceless."

John and Charles said they had been Catholics but then tried one of the newer Pentecostal groups in Nairobi. The man asked them what real values they have to guide their lives. Are they really interested in serving others or only in satisfying themselves? Soon they were back on the bus and the two youths continued to talk about how hard life is in Kenya for young people. When they reached Nakuru the man started to look for another bus that would take him to Eldoret. But the two youths had liked their conversation so much that they urged him to have lunch with them.

During the meal the lawyer said that he had studied African traditions very carefully. African customs, sayings and stories contain a lot of wisdom for today's world. He spoke very convincingly. The man mentioned several important African stories and novels that the two youths had studied in Form Four. He gave the example of sharing a meal together. He said fast food restaurants in Nairobi destroy the value of eating together in a relaxed family-style way and enjoying good conversation. The man explained how a meal is perhaps the most basic and ancient symbol of friendship, love and unity. Food and drink taken in common are obvious

signs that life is shared. The youths laughed when he said that only a witch eats alone.

The stranger used the African proverb "*relationship is in the eating together*" to explain how a pleasant meal can build community and trust. He talked about the human and spiritual values in sharing together. He even explained the meal symbolism in a religious context. John and Charles followed his words very intently. Then they shared their own views.

Suddenly the man called over the waiter, paid the bill and with a quick wave was out the door and gone. The two youths sat amazed. This lawyer had such wisdom and experience. How much they liked hearing him explain African and religious values. Now he was gone. Then they remembered that he was a famous and outspoken civil rights lawyer who had been living in England because of the political tensions in Kenya. He always was on the side of the poor and victimized. Also they recalled that he had written several books about the importance of African values and traditions.

This stranger had really challenged the two African youths to rethink their lives and their values. John and Charles decided to return to their home village with new hope and purpose. They agreed to make a fresh start in their lives. Later on they would return to Nairobi and help bring about real changes in Kenyan society.

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