

## 2009 Global Mission Lenten Series

### Week Three Reflection

John Lunn, India

*John 5:2-9*



Imagine this man going to the Bethesda (House of Kindness) Pool on special days for 38 years, expecting to be healed on that extraordinary day when you are the first one in. Then one day, this man called Jesus asks him, “Do you want to be made well?” Of course he does. He’s been coming to this place of healing for 38 years – waiting for the water to stir and waiting to be the first one in the pool. That’s the way it is done, that’s how healing happens. But he has never made it on his own and he doesn’t have anyone to help him. He was never been the first one in the pool. Others found their healing, but so far, he hasn’t.

What can we say about this man? He was surely devoted, determined, persistent, and maybe even stubborn. He was focused and single-minded. The pool, immediately after the stirring by the Spirit, was the place of healing. Even when Jesus offers an alternative, he doesn’t/can’t hear it or accept it. It is not what he expected. Water stirs, you step into the pool – and then you are healed. That’s the way it happens. He was absolutely sure of that, so he came to the pool any day the water was expected to stir.

God’s healing is like that. There are the usual ways in which we expect to find and experience healing. We may look to hospitals, doctors, chemotherapy, surgery and radiation therapy. When we don’t find it there, how do we respond to the words of Jesus, “Do you want to be made well?” Isn’t he also asking, “Do you want to live, to live abundantly?” Abundant life isn’t so much about quantity as it is about quality. Today healing may be something other than a pool with water that stirs.

For much of the last 30 years, I have worked in the field of palliative care, known to many in the US as the subspecialty called hospice. I’ve been working with people for whom the pool did not seem to stir, for whom the healing waters were elusive. For many of these people, the words, “Do you want to be made well,” came as a welcome friend. The words meant something more than the cure for a disease. The words actually meant healing of a person, of their family, of their communities.

My current call brings me back to India and a program that I helped start in 2002 at Christian Medical College, Vellore, South India. Over these 6 years, this program has helped thousands of patients and their families – helped them when the medical profession would have otherwise “given up” on them and said, “I’m sorry, there is nothing more that we can do for you.” These are words a patient and family should never need to hear again. There is always something more that can be done and that something is called palliative care.

Our team consists of doctors, nurses, chaplains, and a social worker who all have specialized training and experience in palliative care. Each patient and family is viewed holistically and the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual aspects are all addressed and considered.

Many of the families we have worked with are very poor, and a family member undergoing treatment has usually made their financial situation even more complicated. Some of our focus and our funding has gone into economic rehabilitation. Helping a family purchase a cow or offering seed money to start a small business are two ways we've tried to be of assistance. A cow that will shortly give birth to a calf is an added blessing.

Another focus is quality of life. Let me tell you the story of a young man who was our patient. When the team met Anish, he was a 10-year-old boy who was not enjoying his life. He was in the hospital and he had a tube in his nose, a bloated stomach, and he was unable to eat. He wanted to go home, he wanted to have the tube out, and he wanted to eat. He was dying – we couldn't change that – but we could support him at home, we could take out the tube, and he could try eating some of his favorite foods in small quantities.

With pain and symptom management, emotional and spiritual support to both Anish and his family, he was able to go home. He lived for about five months and then he died at home with his brothers and mother and father around him. Anish wasn't able to do everything that he wanted – like going to school with his brothers – but he was able to eat some of his favorite foods, play with his brothers, and spend his final months at home with his family.

Anish's story is far from unique. In palliative care, this is a regular outcome when the shift is made from quantity of life to quality of life – from life to abundant life. We have the great joy of witnessing healing – healing that most often doesn't come with a cure.

In many ways, our work in palliative care calls upon these words of Jesus, “Do you want to be made well?” Most often, people are focused on a cure when illness, disease or disability comes into their lives. The medical profession repeatedly tries to defeat death. A lot of time, energy, and resources go into that battle. People live out their days in institutions taking medicines that prolong their misery and prolong the dying process. Let us listen for the voice of Jesus and hear the call for life, for abundant life – for healing.

Let me close with a story that I recently heard. It is attributed to Mathai Zachariah, former General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in India. Life can provide us with surprises – if we show up and if we listen for the voice of Jesus.

“A man, hungry and jobless, was traveling in a train, hoping to find a job that day. He was dressed in his best clothes. When the train stopped, he got off. He stood there wondering what he should do next. The only people at the station were a group waiting with flowers. As he looked expectantly around, they came to him, gave him the flowers, and greeted him respectfully and jubilantly. He was too surprised to say anything. Before he knew it, he was whisked off and given a wonderful meal, and then escorted into a packed church, introduced as Pastor So and So, and then invited to make his speech. It

was too late for him to admit to sharing in a mistake. He got onto the podium, bowed his head and said, 'Lord, teach us to pray.' After five minutes of standing there quietly, after having said this, he came down, and all the people in the church crowded around him, and said 'That was the best speech we ever heard!' Then he was given another reception, more food, and sent on his way."