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## Chapter 10

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### IN FRONT OF KATARAGAMA UNDER THE SACRED BO TREE: WHAT JESUS TEACHES US ABOUT MISSION

RUDI MAIER

This is a mission story that paints a picture of holistic missions. It illustrates what the results of establishing relationships between individuals and communities can lead to. It relates the story of the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman and connects it to the author's own mission experience in Sri Lanka.

He was what we would call a *mutelali* in Sri Lanka—a local shopkeeper. And Piasena was also a small vegetable farmer and deacon at the local Buddhist temple just across from the Adventist school.

He was well acquainted with our school—Lakpahana Adventist Seminary—and with the Adventist faith. He used to be an Adventist, you see, and had worked at the school. But several years before, he had left. He loved flowers, and the garden around his house testified of this. He grew the best selection of flowers in the whole village.

### **Love in Action Wins Friends**

I had heard about Piasena's past and the reasons he had left the church. But our conversation most of the time did not center around his past. We talked, rather, about his beautiful garden and his skills.

He knew I was the new pastor at the school. Having been an Adventist himself, he also knew Adventist practices, and soon he provided our home with a beautiful bouquet of flowers every Friday afternoon. "For Sabbath," he told me. I suggested to him that I would use them Friday night at the house and Sabbath morning for church—since we were not able to buy such nice flowers for the sanctuary. In the afternoon, I explained, we'd take them back to the house. The next Friday we received two bouquets—one for the church and one for our home.

Soon Piasena came to church himself, first to check on the flowers. Then he began to stay behind to listen to the sermon, and after a while he became a regular worshiper again.

As we got ready to enter the pulpit one Sabbath (after we'd been at the school for nearly two years), Piasena slipped a note to my translator. It was a note from the local Buddhist monk. He knew that Piasena attended church services on Sabbath mornings regularly, since Piasena lived next to the temple. I had made every effort to become friends with the monk, knowing that over the years he had often made life miserable for the school. (Two years before we arrived, he had instigated the villagers around the school to forcefully place a statue of Buddha on the school property overnight and then claim that portion of land as a Buddhist temple.)

This time the situation was different. The note carried a request from the monk. For the upcoming temple celebration, *Poya* day (which happened also to be a *Vesak*, the most important of all the full moon days, because of three momentous events connected to the life of the Buddha), the people wanted the Seventh-day Adventist pastor from Lakpahana—me—to preach the regular evening sermon.

And so it was on that night in the Buddhist temple, before the shrine dedicated to the local god Kataragama, under the bo tree—the sacred tree of the Buddhists—I, the pastor of the local Seventh-day Adventist church, preached my first officially sanctioned sermon to the people of Mailapitiya.

I say my first "official" sermon, because for months I had lived among the village people and visited them in their homes. At funerals we sat together. We

dug trenches together for the local water supply system. My ministry over the years did not center around the pulpit in a church, but around people—in most cases people who did not know what Adventism or Christianity were about. They associated Christianity with colonial powers; and in their minds, Adventists had something to do with America. They called our school the American mission, because of the constant presence there of American missionaries.

Most of the people from the village would never have come to my church, even if I had invited them. They were too many for our small seminary chapel to hold, anyway. But what an audience I had that night—not only those present at the temple, but also those listening to the sermon over the public address system in the village, including my own congregation at the school!

### **The Example of Jesus**

In John 4 we find the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman. He was returning from Judea to Galilee, and to do that He had to cross Samaria. For a Jew, Samaria was hostile territory, to be used only in cases of necessity, taking care to avoid, by all means, any communication with the locals.

It was midday in the desert. Tired and thirsty, Jesus sat down at the edge of the well of Shechem, which tradition associated with the patriarch Jacob. When a Samaritan woman from the nearby town came out to draw water, Jesus simply asked her for a drink. This surprised the woman, and for three important reasons:

- The Jew addressed her, contrary to the culture and custom of the times. Jews despised Samaritans and did not communicate with them.
- She was a woman (and women at the time were generally ignored by men in public places).
- The Jew asked her a favor. In so doing, He was socializing with her and humbling Himself before her, as it were. After all, receiving a service from a Samaritan woman had to be humiliating for a Jew.

For Jesus, however, there was nothing abnormal or artificial in what He had done. It was simply His way. He made no exceptions; He discriminated against no one. His manner, in fact, was so natural that it captured the admiration and interest of this woman of the desert. She opened up to Him, a conversation ensued, and her affection was won.

This midday outreach had been made possible by the attitude of Jesus. In His presence, the woman sensed her value and dignity. He had broken down

prejudice. He had given her the security of His true concern. She witnessed in Him what should be the fundamental Christian testimony—the testimony of divine love that transcends all discrimination and division.

Jesus' testimony at the well was not *planned* and *artificial*. He was simply Himself, acting naturally. It was authentic witnessing. The testimony of genuine love in mission cannot be improvised or "fabricated." It has to be the result of a love that's incorporated into one's natural way of being (Galilea 1983:1ff).

### **Our Greatest Need**

The greatest need in the church is not that of accomplishing the most precise interpretation of biblical teachings. Rather, it is that of full application and implementation of the gospel in our own lives and ministry. I believe in scholarship, of course, and the church has produced excellent treatises and publications of which I am proud. Many of them have been part of my library for years. But what we need today more than anything else is the caring spirit of Christ in our lives. "The Caring Church" should be not only a slogan but a manifested reality in our daily lives.

I have never felt at ease standing in a pulpit to preach, and I have to admit that I have not done very much of it in my ministry. But I love evangelism the way Jesus did it: meeting the people, with their needs, wherever they are. Jesus loved to mingle. He loved to meet people one on one. And He loved to provide for their needs.

### **The Sad Condition**

Being invited to preach in a Buddhist temple does not come overnight, especially if the community is hostile to anything Christian. When we arrived on the scene in Sri Lanka, we found a situation that I have since seen in various shapes and forms around the world. Our Adventist institutions are not always appreciated by the people around us.

I won't go into all the reasons I have heard for this (and some of them are valid). But there is one for which we have no excuse: Our institutions and churches are too often havens of rest for the saints who bathe in the river of life themselves, instead of opening the gates so that the water of life can nurture and strengthen those who live in the desert of this world (which in many cases is right around us).

Mission is a work for those who have not only tasted of the water of life, but who are overflowing with it.

### **On Their Own Ground**

I remember the first meeting we had with the local Buddhist monk, in which I told him that I wanted to become a part of the village community, and work together with him to solve the problems of the people. How surprised he was that a Christian—an Adventist, a member of the Lakpahana Seminary staff—would be willing to “help.” (Keep in mind that *Lakpahana* actually means “The Light of Sri Lanka.”)

I remember the time we met the leaders of the village—not at the school, but on their own ground—and told them that we wanted to work together with them. There was a lot of suspicion. I remember one who wanted to know if this was a new Christian plot to convert them. No, it was not a new one. It was an old one, which we can learn from Christ’s own example. I can still hear the response that one of the villager presented to his questioning neighbor: “Maybe if they truly care for us, a dose of Christianity would be good for our village.” A dose of common concern, and Christian commitment would be good for our own church and our own lives.

But mission that is concerned with “seeking those who are lost,” and mission that is willing to search where the people are, will not be easy. The people in my newfound community did not ask me for Bible studies. How I wished they would have asked! I was the local expert in that field. I had the studies all prepared and ready to go.

But they told me about the needs of their children who died of diarrhea and the need for safe water. They pointed to their infectious wounds that depleted not only their physical energies, but their financial resources as well. And soon I found out that there were family feuds that not only kept families apart but hindered the progress of the village as a whole. There I had to walk from “Judea to Galilee” in the midst of the monsoon rains. I rubbed shoulders with the “Samaritans” of my newfound community, dug wells, and broke stones. It was hard work. My hands formed blisters; my mouth got dry. It was unbearably hot. I soon found out that my fellow workers in the village knew better than I how to survive.

Yes, to fulfill the mission of Christ means sacrifice. But the reward is one you cannot measure in human terms. I sat with dozens of villagers observing

the mourning period, and they'd ask, "Pastor, tell us what will happen to our friend and neighbor." And they weren't satisfied when I'd try to tell them what I'd learned about their Buddhist religion in regard to death, thinking to enter into a religious non-confrontational "dialogue" with them.

"No," they'd reply. "Tell us, what do *you* believe?"

What a joy it was to share the Christian hope with those people. We are often so busy trying to finish God's work that we have no time to live out His life.

### **In Front of Kataragama**

My preaching in front of Kataragama under the sacred bo tree came as a result of following the method of Jesus—mingling with the people and discovering their greatest needs. After the cistern and pipes had been installed and the pump was in place to provide for their daily water needs, then they were willing to listen.

As the headman and I walked through the village one day shortly before my family left the island, we were remembering the work we'd done together and what we'd accomplished. We were proud of those straight water pipes dispensing clean and healthy water, of the toilets that were clean and well protected, of the fun we had together and the time we shared sorrow and pain.

Then he turned to me with an earnestness and respect that only a headman can express, speaking words that still burn in my mind: "Pastor, for more than 30 years we have been afraid of sending our children to your school, because we were afraid of Christianity, and we did not want our children to become Christians. But now we have seen what Christianity is all about, and we like it."

### **No Other Hands**

As John 4 shows, Jesus walked in the heat of the day, when most of the great rabbis would be resting in the shade of their synagogues and homes. It may have been high noon, but He knew there was a sinner to meet who needed the living water. He did not call her to an audience with Himself in Jerusalem or in a nearby synagogue. He met her where she was.

Jesus wants us to follow that same method, not only in Sri Lanka, but in South Dakota. Not only in Mailapitiya, but in Moscow. Not only meeting the most promising, but also the one in greatest need. Not only those who have the greatest potential to understand our message and follow Jesus right away,

but also those who are confused and ill-informed. He wants to reveal Himself to them through our own lives.

The Lord has no other hands but ours in this world. He has no feet but ours. He asks us to use them for His cause.

As Christ is the divine channel for the revelation of the Father, so we are the channel for the revelation of Christ. While our Saviour is the great source of illumination, forget not, O Christian, that He is revealed through humanity. Every individual disciple is Heaven's appointed channel for the revelation of God to man. (Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, May 18, 1904)

Said Ellen White in the reference just cited: "Angels of glory wait to communicate through you heaven's light and power to souls that are ready to perish."

My prayer today is that we will truly represent Jesus to the world.