

A Cup of Cold Water: Life and Love in the Little Things

Did you hear that? Today's Gospel says, "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." A cup of cold water. That seems pretty insignificant. Most of us have more water than we need; usually, we don't give water a second thought. However, for travelers in Jesus' day—travelers who walked long distances through hot, dry regions without access to motel faucets and ice machines, campground pumps, or convenience stores' bottled water—a cup of cold water courageously and compassionately offered to a total stranger literally made the difference between the stranger's life and death. A simple, inexpensive cup of water. Such a very little thing.

Yet, today, when it comes to malaria, it's still the little things that make the difference between life and death. It's the little things that are lifesaving for half of the world's population or 3.3 billion people who are at risk of this deadly disease. Because malaria is readily preventable, it's little things like mosquito nets or insecticide sprays that could prevent the 800,000 deaths per year due to bites from malaria-carrying mosquitoes. It's little things like anti-malarial medications that could prevent the annual fatalities of 10,000 pregnant women and their unborn children. Because malaria is easily treatable, it's little things like medication that costs only \$2 that could restore health and avert the death of a child every 45 seconds.

Indeed, little things make the difference between life and death when it comes to malaria. During interviews with dozens of people originally from Africa, I learned how little things could have saved lives among their families, friends, and communities who face malaria's daily devastation. Listen for all the little things that could have saved the child's life in the following story based on these interviews.

In Africa, a young and loving mother, we'll call her Chika, had a son; we'll name him Ayo. Ayo was a great joy and brought enormous hope to Chika's life. However, suddenly, Ayo became ill. Chika cradled her crying baby in her arms for long hours as his fever rapidly rose.

Ayo couldn't keep food or water down. Chika didn't know what to do, so she stopped feeding him. She had to walk hours to retrieve and carry back water, which was always filthy, so she stopped giving Ayo water. Chika considered brewing a tea of herbs, but she didn't know how strong to make it for her infant. What did it matter? Ayo wouldn't keep the tea down anyway.

Chika didn't know why her son was so very sick and there was no one for her to ask. Chika's own mother had died of HIV/AIDS. All the young women in her rural village had lost children to this same rapidly progressing illness; they had few suggestions about what Chika should do to help Ayo.

Even if someone could have told Chika that Ayo had malaria and needed immediate medical treatment, she had no transportation from her remote village to the tiny make-shift clinic many miles away. To access this minimal health care, Chika would have had to carry Ayo and walk for hours through the hot day and/or dark, mosquito-infested night.

If she had reached the clinic, Chika didn't have any money to pay for care or medications. Even if she could have paid for treatment, the clinic personnel always had so many critically ill people awaiting care that they might not have gotten to baby Ayo in time. If they had seen him, they may not have been able to help him because they often ran out of the effective malaria medications. If tiny Ayo needed these medications by an IV, Chika would have to carry him much farther to a hospital. If she arrived at the hospital in time, by then, Ayo may also have needed a blood transfusion to treat the potentially fatal anemia caused by malaria. Frequently, the hospital did not have blood for transfusions.

So, Chika didn't seek health care for Ayo. Chika did the very best she could and what she knew to do. She prayed. She continued to cradle Ayo lovingly during his ever-rising fever and convulsions that led to a coma. Soon, Ayo died. Only a few days earlier, he was a happy baby boy who had brought Chika great joy and hope.

If Ayo had recovered, he would have contracted malaria as many as five times every year making him a weak and sickly child. Tragically, remember, a similar story occurs every 45 seconds as another child dies from malaria—all for the lack of little things that could prevent or treat this disease. The majority of malaria deaths are among children and pregnant women. Malaria also ravages people who are already vulnerable—people who are elderly or who are suffering from HIV/AIDS. Malaria is most prevalent among our neighbors who live in severe poverty, who have no access to the little things needed to prevent and treat this deadly illness. In short, malaria destroys lives of people whose societies and the world most easily forget—the people who have always been on the fringes of society. The people with whom Christ stood and with whom God consistently calls us to stand. Malaria is not simply a health matter; it is deeply a justice crisis.

What would it be like to live amidst such injustice? How would it feel to lack the little things that could save your life or your children's lives? Lutheran World Relief shared the following story about a congregation. Please put yourselves in the congregation's situation and respond aloud to my questions.

*In 2009, a Lutheran parish on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro lost SEVEN children to an unknown, rapidly progressing, very serious disease. **What would you, as members of [congregation name], do if your congregation lost some of your children to an unknown disease? [R--Study, pray, grieve, etc.]***

What would you do if you found the disease was both readily preventable and easily treatable? [R--Outrage, demand intervention, commit to action, educate, get medications, etc.]

What would you do if you were too poor to build clinics and staff them, pay for treatment and medications, develop educational programs, make necessary environmental changes, access transportation, and on and on? [R—Ask for help, etc.] That is exactly what our neighbors in Africa are doing. They are asking for our help to provide the little things that will save their lives.

They are asking for basic education about malaria. Due to climate changes, mosquitoes and malaria have spread to new regions, such as Mount Kilimanjaro. Therefore, often, people do not recognize mosquitoes, know they carry malaria, or understand where mosquitoes breed. Even if our neighbors learn how to prevent malaria, they frequently lack funds and simple resources to do the work.

One of our malaria work presenters is a public health nurse from Ethiopia, where he says there is a 78% poverty rate. He reminds us this deep poverty results in severe malnutrition, which prevents people from resisting or recovering from malaria. Families cannot afford the little things like food, much less insecticide sprays to kill mosquitoes or nets to protect themselves. Although people in Ethiopia are willing and trying to do malaria containment work, they lack adequate tools and supplies.

Another presenter, who is a nurse from Nigeria, tells the story of losing 40 to 50 children to malaria in one eight-hour shift. The children died because someone had tampered with the medications they were given making them ineffective. When the audience asked the nurse how to avoid such deadly tampering and corruption, she recommended working through religious

groups. Our companion churches could help provide the little controls to insure the safety and efficacy of the necessary medications to treat malaria and save lives.

Twenty-four little pills of medication, \$10 mosquito nets, \$25-worth of indoor spraying, food, tools, \$100 for a village education team—the little things. The “cups of cold water” that save lives. In today’s Gospel, Christ clearly calls us to give lifesaving cups of resources courageously and compassionately to people who are strangers and who come to us these small requests.

Sharing gifts and love with strangers—people we’ve never met, in lands we’ve never seen, amidst cultures we don’t understand—may seem foolhardy. In challenging economic times, sharing our financial resources may feel too risky. Is it a reasonable role for us to take these kinds of chances to give the little things, the cups of cold water to strangers? In Romans, the Apostle Paul reminds us that we are freed by the salvation we received through Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection. Freed from sin by grace, God calls us to live in righteousness. God commands us to live out our faith in love and service.

When a lawyer once asked Jesus which of the Commandments are greatest, Jesus replied that we are to, first, love God with our heart, soul, and mind and, second, to love our neighbors as ourselves. Then, the lawyer asked, “Who is my neighbor?” and Jesus responded with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Please join me in telling this parable through which we will discover the little things we can do to save lives through Our Malaria Work.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is a story about strangers and outsiders from other lands who become neighbors. Please join me in telling this parable to discover how through our malaria work we become neighbors who share four little approaches to save lives.

*In the parable, a traveler is robbed and beaten. The text doesn't tell us what this man did while he lay suffering along the road. What would you do? [R] This is what our neighbors in Africa are doing; they are calling for help and praying. We can join them in praying for their healing and for their caregivers as well as for the people who are working to contain malaria. **Praying steadfastly is our first approach.***

*While the man who was beaten waited for help, two people passed by. A third person, the Good Samaritan, stopped. Why do you think the Good Samaritan stopped? [R] Perhaps it was as simple as that he became aware there was a problem and realized he could help. **That's our second approach—we learn about malaria and become aware we can help.***

*The Good Samaritan saw, stopped, and formed a relationship with the man who was hurt; they were no longer strangers, they became neighbors. Likewise, we accomplish our malaria work by **joining** in relationships within our congregations, throughout our synod, among Lutherans across the country, and with our companions or neighbors in Africa. We accompany our neighbors by listening to their stories and responding to their requests. They are the experts who propose what they feel is most needed and effective for their communities.*

*Once their relationship began, what did the Good Samaritan do? [R] Yes, he bandaged the wounds and took the man to the inn. Soon, the Good Samaritan realized what I suspect most of us realize. He was not called to stay with the man and most of us are probably not called to personally go to Africa to contain malaria. However, before he left, what did the Good Samaritan do? [R] I notice he did NOT say, "I'll pay up to and including X denarii, but not to exceed X denarii." He didn't set limits; he gave generously out of his abundance. **Our third approach in our malaria work is to join together in giving generously.***

After his promise of giving, the Good Samaritan went on his way and the parable ends. However, what would you do when you returned to your home after such a profound experience?

[R] *Would you tell others about the deadly hazards on the road? Would you ask them to give funds for innkeepers who care for travelers who are suffering? Perhaps the Good Samaritan, like us, had access to his leaders. As **part of our fourth approach, we tell our leaders about malaria and ask them to protect funding for foreign assistance that saves lives.***

The Parable of the Good Samaritan shows us our call to give generously the little things that make the difference between life and death from malaria for our neighbors. We lovingly accompany our companions by joining together in praying, learning, giving, and telling to prevent and treat malaria. Like the Good Samaritan, we are from far away; we may be the strangers to African lands and cultures. Moreover, like the Good Samaritan, we respond to our neighbors to save their lives. We accompany our companions in Africa in their journey from malaria's deadly despair into hope-filled lives. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, we see that giving the little things can help us welcome strangers and move into loving relationships, as they truly become our neighbors.

In today's Gospel, Jesus also says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Later, in Matthew chapter 25, Jesus explains further that whenever we care for God's children who are despairing, hungry, thirsty, poor, sick, or disregarded by society, it is as if we care for God. By welcoming people who were once strangers and are now our beloved neighbors, we also love God and keep the Commandments, just as Christ called us to do. In our malaria work, we live out our faith together in the loving services of praying, learning, giving, and telling.

God calls us to be with our neighbors fully through this loving service, just as God is with all of us in our suffering. Indeed, God is deeply and completely with all God's children who are devastated by malaria—the youngsters, women who are pregnant, people who are elderly or who have HIV/AIDS, and families experiencing poverty. God hears the cries for help of all God's children who society forgets and leaves dying from malaria along the side of life's road. **God also calls us to respond to our neighbors' cries for help with the little things that can save their lives.** Isaiah declares God will never—can never—forget God's children because they are inscribed on the palms of God's very hands. **God calls us never to forget God's "little ones."**

Therefore, what does it mean when we, as part of the ELCA, boldly proclaim, "God's work. Our hands."? As the hands that do God's work, who are inscribed on our palms? Who are the "little ones" we must never forget? To whom must we give the cup of life-saving resources? It's in the little things that we share God's love with our neighbors. It's in the little things that we love God.

(submitted by Mary Simsonson Clark)