



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Water, Water Everywhere”

Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:5-29,39-42

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

“Water water everywhere...” What is the rest of that? If my memory serves me correctly that comes from a scene in the Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in which, stranded in the middle of the ocean, a ship has run out of fresh water, and the crew is beginning to die of thirst. Yet they are surrounded by water... salt sea water. Thirst is not something we in this part of the world have to worry too much about, especially at this time of year, when the spring rains seem to make everything so very soggy.

Unlike the poor fellow in the cartoon I saw who had been crawling across miles and miles of desert on his hands and knees so that you could see a track across the sand behind him. And finally as he comes to an oasis where there is a person sitting by the well in a lounge chair, protected from the heat of the sun by an umbrella. And he turns to the parched man and says, "would you like a peanut butter sandwich?"

Do we have any idea what it is like to be totally without water? Have we ever really been thirsty? Yesterday was world water day, designated by the United Nations to try to focus attention on the importance of water in the world. Did you know that today nearly a billion people on this planet will walk with a bucket or a bottle to a river or lake to dip in order to get their water for the day. Did you know that today 2.5 billion people, that is nearly half the world's population will use what the UN is calling "unimproved sanitation?" That means they have no bathroom to go to. That means water is not used in sanitation for them. Did you know that in Canada we have one seventh of the world's fresh water supply? Let me do that math for you on that. We have .5% of the population, and we have 14% of the water. That is pretty incredible abundance- pretty incredible responsibility to be stewards of such a basic element of human survival.

Few among us know the desperation of being without water- the irrational, frantic, desperate feeling. The obsession, willing to do anything just for a little water. That is how it was for the people in the wilderness with Moses. As the story goes, they had made what is a fatal miscalculation for people in the desert. They were desperate- frantic. One could imagine the cry of the children, pulling at their clothes, the bawling of the animals, the raspy voices, the older people with less reserve being some of the first to really suffer. And they lash out at Moses. "Have you led us out here just to die. Slavery was better than this." Moses turns to God for direction, and out of the rock gushes forth relief. Imagine the relief- the relief of the people, and of the leader.

And water takes on double and triple meanings in the Gospel of John. The Samaritan... woman. Two reasons why a first century Jewish rabbi in good standing should have nothing to do with her. She is a Samaritan- one of those long-cut-off cousins that we don't associate with. And she was a woman- in Jesus' day, someone else's property. But Jesus asks her for a drink. In typical fashion from John's gospel, they talk about water that quenches the body's thirst, and that quenches other kinds of thirsts as well- thirst for life, for dignity, for community, for peace. And it is revealed that she has long thirsted for life, and love, "You have five husbands and the man

you live with is not your husband." Clearly, you are thirstier than I- thirstier and more desperate for love than a desert dweller is for water. As they stand there beside the ancient well of Jacob, the place where their people have come for centuries to gather, and draw water to quench the most basic of human needs, Jesus names her life- names her thirst- points to the core of her existence. And even in doing that, even in having the burden of her life exposed, it is at least in part lifted. Even having her thirst acknowledged, it is in part satisfied.

And in the story, as he speaks and names her life, you can almost sense her going, ahhh, like she has just taken a sip of water having been thirsty for years. And what does she do? She goes tearing down the hill to the village where she has come from, and tells anyone who will listen that there is a rabbi up at the well who is drawing living water from a well that has the power to quench all manner of basic human thirsts.

And what are these thirsts, these basic human thirsts that she has experienced quenched by living water? These are thirsts for love, for intimacy, for community, for life to have a purpose and a meaning, not just exist but to live, the thirst for human dignity and worth- these are our most basic human thirsts.

I said earlier that we know little of thirst in this part of the world, but really we are much like the mariner's crew, surrounded by water that does not satisfy- cannot quench the real thirsts within. Surrounded by things that claim to give us control and security, happiness and meaning, yet we are still thirsty for community, meaning and purpose, love.

I have been noticing some billboards that have gone up in recent months that are really quite striking. You may have seen them. They are really quite simple. They show two playing cards, a king and a queen. The queen has a tear running down her face, and the king has his head in his hands. The caption is: "When gambling isn't fun anymore..." It is an amazing snapshot of a social condition that is all too common in our society- gambling gone amuck, as it is wont to do. And it destroys lives. It is pervasive in our society: from supposedly harmless games our kids play online, to video lottery terminals, to lotteries, to casinos. And it offers the hope of a big win, but actually delivers loss. It offers the hope of thirst for security quenched forever, but delivers nothing of the kind. Gambling plays on our thirst for security, for comfort, for no more worries. And it's not the only thing that plays on our thirsts. Listen to the way advertising plays on our many thirsts, offering community in a bottle of Budweiser, youth in a bottle of Oil of Olay. We know what it means to be thirsty for these things.

Jesus said, everyone who drinks of this water, that is- the stuff upon which his life is based, will never be thirsty again. His kind of water- the water of the gospel- will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. However, the irony of Jesus's path is that any thirst for control, security, happiness, meaning, is quenched as we release control through trusting, risking, servanthood, vulnerability. This lenten journey that we are on is about relinquishment, giving over to God, letting go. And Jesus is the model, and the cross is the destination. Our thirst for control is quenched as we let go. Our thirst for security is quenched as we risk and are vulnerable in community; our thirst for happiness and meaning is quenched as we acknowledge our spiritual emptiness and struggle. It sounds foolish and it is profoundly countercultural in a world that offers water that does not quench our thirsts, but such is the way of God, such is the way of the gospel, such is the way of the cross, and it is the pathway to the wellspring of living water, gushing up within us unto a life abundant.

Let us pray: Holy God, we are here with our thirsts. You know our lives, the things we love, the things we are afraid of, the things we long for and thirst for. You know the ways we seek to quench our thirst, and the times we have tried to satisfy these thirsts with quick fixes that have not satisfied. God we want to be grounded in you. We want to draw from your well of living water and feel the deep satisfaction of your life flowing through us. We long to be a part of your gospel lived out in a world of justice and of peace.

Hear then our prayer. Come to our thirsty souls. Give us the courage to resist the allure of quick fixes to deep thirsts. Receive this offering of our desire that our lives, our relationships, our wellbeing might come from you, O God, our source. Amen.