

“Essential”

Water is one of those things which are essential to life, all life. Air, water, food. Deprive any living thing of any one of these elements long enough and death is certain.

Water is the basis of both the lesson from Exodus and our lesson from John's gospel. A bit of biblical trivia - a tidbit of perhaps useless information. John's portrayal of this conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is the longest conversation included in the Gospels. The answer to my first question of my most recent email.

This was a conversation which never should have happened according to the customs, traditions and rules of the time, yet it's very clear that this conversation is no accident. Jesus intended that it happen.

The lesson begins, “Jesus had to go thru Samaria.” He was leaving Jerusalem headed for Galilee - and in fact there were two major routes from Jerusalem to Galilee, and most Jewish travelers used the eastern route which did not, I repeat, did not go through Samaria. Jesus could have taken the eastern route and skipped Samaria all together.

So why does the text say, “Jesus had to go thru Samaria?” I suspect the Holy Spirit was at work in Jesus' heart. I suspect he experienced a divine compulsion to travel thru Samaria as he left Jerusalem for Galilee.

He sent the disciples into the Samaritan city to buy food, which would have necessitated speaking with Samaritans. He rested at Jacob's Well in Sychar Samaria so that he might be able to, gasp, gasp- speak with Samaritans. Since it was the women's job to draw water, it comes as no surprise that a woman walked up to the well, Jesus crossed two boundaries at once; the boundary between significant men and insignificant women, and the boundary between Jews and Samaritans.

“Give me some water to drink.” He didn’t ask. He never even said, “please.” You’d think his parents would have taught him better manners.

The woman, the nameless woman plunked the big issue onto the middle of the conversational table. “Why are you asking me for water? You’re breaking the rules. Men don’t speak to women; Jews don’t speak to Samaritans.” Two huge divides. In a single sentence, Jesus jumped the boundaries of his time and world.

Then as is typical of John, they entered a conversation in which Jesus spoke in a way an manner, in which everything is off center, nothing seems direct, and which is just a little insulting. “If you recognized God’s gift, and if you knew who it was who asked you for water; i.e., if your eyes were open, you could ask and could receive living water.”

She responded directly, perhaps missing his cues, or perhaps out of concern for the very real issue of thirst on a hot day.

“Sir - you have no bucket, and the well is deep.” No bucket, no rope, how are you going to get the water that you want? Living water — ordinary water. By the way what is “living water” anyway. This water was good enough for Jacob and good enough for us.”

You know how the story proceeded - there was a theological and a personal conversation which revealed that not only is this a Samaritan woman, but she didn’t even qualify as a moral Samaritan woman. Furthermore, Jesus asserted that all the old ways and places of worship make no difference in righteousness. People will be worshipping in a whole new way - in spirit and in truth, because God is spirit. That conversation ended with Jesus’ assertion that indeed he is the Messiah, the Christ.

The disciples then returned presumably with lunch - the woman left her jug and went back into the city, announcing the suggestion that indeed this man might be the Christ! Hungry, tired, thirsty or not - Jesus declined lunch, then announced that doing God’s will was the very best lunch anyone could ever have.

“Try it – you’ll like it.” he said to the disciples.

They ended up not only talking with Samaritan folk, but accepting and relying on their hospitality for another two days. So much for the great divisions between them - they stayed in Samaritan homes, ate the Samaritan’s food. I suspect the talking, the feasting, and the rejoicing went on into the late nights then began again in the early mornings.

Of course the woman was pushed off stage. Her neighbors told her - “we believe now because of what Jesus told us, not so much because of what you said.” After a couple days, Jesus *et al*, headed out for Galilee.

The gospel writer left his trademark in the closing lines of the story. Many Samaritans *believed* in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony ... Many more *believed* because of his word. *Believing* in Jesus was the whole point of writing the writer of this fourth gospel. He said so in Ch 20, verses 30 and 31. Check it out.

We never did learn the name of the woman and can only hope that she retrieved her jug from the well, since water is still essential to life, and it was impossible for a woman to take water home without her water jug.

Our question as always is this: “What do we take from this story for the faithful living of our lives today?”

It takes nothing, it is a no-brainer to believe that water is essential to life - that is established fact. But . . .

I believe that setting aside divisions between us is essential to life and especially essential to faithful living as gospel people in our times. Additionally, I believe that healing divisions between and among us is a mark, a sign, of faithful living and faithful discipleship in Christ. I believe that giving up division, that giving up a prejudice is not only a superb lenten practice - giving up a prejudice for a life-time is a great blessing to the believer, to the community, and to the world.

There has long been a deep and painful division between lesbian people of faith and the Church. Over the most recent centuries, the

Church has too often said in policy, in practice, and in preaching, “lesbigay folk are not welcome; in fact they deserve our exclusion and denigration.” Over the last 30-40 years, the Church has in many communions begun to repent of that position, and practice a new way of being. A way the United Church of Christ describes as “extravagant welcome for all.” A way for the congregations of the UCC, each in its own time, to become and to declare themselves “Open and Affirming”

Recognizing that First Church has in practice become an open and affirming congregation of faithful disciples, our deacons are inviting us now to take that next step, the step of creating a statement of Openness and Affirmation so that we can claim the Open and Affirming trademark as our own.

We will become one more congregation joining the growing percentage of CT UCC congregations that are open and affirming - a number which exceeds 25 % of CT UCC churches. This will be our way of saying that we, as a people, have set aside the customs, traditions and rules which led to the division and exclusion of some to the detriment of all.

In entering this process we are very like those folk who gathered at Jacob’s Well centuries ago. We are choosing to people who, in the name of Christ, will walk that path which is essential to life. We will enter the process of setting aside the ways of exclusion, embracing the ways of healing division, embracing the ways of extravagant welcome.

Jesus “had to go through Samaria.” He had to go through Samaria so we might discover that ways of welcome, like water, are essential to life. Essential to the life of people in families and in churches, in the communities we call towns, essential to the life of people in nations.

This is what I would offer to us for our prayer and reflection on this, the 3rd Sunday in Lent, in the 2014th year of our Lord.