



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: March 27, 2011

A Thirst-Quenching Drink, Shannon A. White

Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42

Water concerns have been in our recent headlines. In Japan, conflicting reports as to the safety of the drinking water have plagued residents as far as hundreds of miles away from the site of the largest natural disaster in the country's history. People are mistrusting of assurances from the government that the water is safe and there are shortages of bottled water everywhere. Water...it's essential for life. Every living being needs it, and yet, many have limited access. A decade ago a working group out of the World Summit on Sustainable Development which met in Johannesburg listed these statistics:

- Four out of every 10 people currently live in river basins experiencing water scarcity. By 2025, at least 3.5 billion people, nearly 50 per cent of the world, will face water scarcity.
- Some 6,000 children die every day from diseases associated with lack of access to safe drinking water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene.
- At any one time, half of the world's hospital beds are occupied by patients suffering from waterborne diseases.
- In China, India and Indonesia, twice as many people are dying from diarrheal diseases as from HIV/AIDS.

WEHAB Working Group, "A Framework for Action on Water and Sanitation", World Summit on Sustainable Development - Johannesburg 2002 - United Nations, August 1, 2002, Num. 0, Water...clean drinking water...that can bring life and quench thirst is often taken for granted, until it's scarce. And water the theme of the texts we read today. The text from Exodus takes place as the children of Israel are wandering in the desert after having left Egypt. It's one of the passages called the "murmuring stories" because, in this case, the people grumbled when they were thirsty...they were discouraged and didn't trust that God was really there with them and providing for them. At that point, they had not yet received the covenant at Mt. Sinai...and they started wondering if they had not been better off in slavery.

Many of you have either visited or lived in desert regions. Try and imagine what it would be like to wander in that environment for years without an end in sight. The anxiety would be hard to manage at times. I'm sure many of us would murmur as well. They questioned Moses' leadership. They faced possible death from a lack of water. Struggle was the name of the game... clouded by the fact that their bodies needed water for survival. Their physical needs hadn't been met. It's hard to have faith when you're parched.

But God heard their moaning, built trust with the people and gave them what they needed most...water, life giving water, which quenched their thirst and allowed them to continue on in their lives.

The passage in John also deals with the giving of a thirst-quenching drink. This time Jesus was the thirsty one. He had been travelling by foot throughout the desert and was exhausted from the heat of the noon-day sun. He came across a Samaritan woman and asked her for a drink. Now, there are several things about this interaction which need further comment. First of all, Jews and Samaritans didn't co-mingle. Secondly, Jewish men and foreign women didn't co-mingle; and thirdly, a conversation with a woman of questionable background would have been a real eyebrow raiser to anyone around in those days.

Yet once again, we're given an example of who Jesus REALLY was. He engaged with this woman. He saw her. He saw who she was...everything about her. He saw all of her dark past... the men, perhaps her lack of self-respect, perhaps her lost hopes and dreams, perhaps her feelings of loneliness at rejection she may have faced. He saw her and he spoke the truth to her, telling her all about who she was....all without judgement. The woman was so taken with her interaction with him, and his treatment of her, that she left to go and tell others about it. What would you do if someone came up to you, started a conversation with you, and started telling you all the things you'd ever done...ALL of the things you've ever done and then concluded with "and I love you and see the best in you." The power of that kind of knowing can set a person on a whole new path.

Several years ago, I was at a conference in Westchester when I met the executive medical director at a drug and alcohol rehab. He was speaking that day about the power of love and acceptance that parents can give their children...I've since interviewed him several times, in part because of the true, personal story he shared with us that day.

The man was born in Belgium to an Orthodox Jewish family. He became a refugee in World War II, landing in Brooklyn in 1941 at the age of 9. Educated in yeshivas, he said school was hard for him. When report cards were sent home throughout his elementary years, his mother would greet him with a big hug, and when he asked how he had done. She would tell him without hesitation, "You did beautifully. You got all A's...I'm so proud of you." Year after year, he never saw his report cards, and her response was always the same. He continued on.

He felt good about finishing high school and made it into college. It was at that time his mother grew ill and close to death. During one of their conversations, he asked her why she had never shown him his report cards over all those years.

She motioned to him to go to her closet and to bring down a box that was on the top shelf. He did as she asked and brought it to her bedside. As he opened it, he saw all of his report cards from all of his years of school in the box. He opened them one by one...for most of the years his grades were barely passing. He was shocked as he saw each of them...year after year. But in high school things seemed to turn around enough to get grades to get barely get into college. From there he went on to Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan. Eventually, he left the seminary to go to medical school to follow his passion, psychiatry, which now has practiced for the past 50 years. He's been executive medical director at that hospital for decades, listening to the spiritual and psychiatric needs of people and telling them all they've done without judgment and it'd because of the love and acceptance his mother showed him all those years. Her belief in him helped him succeed to be the man he was meant to be.

Stories such as that one and that of the encounter of the Samaritan woman with Jesus are only possible because there was deep connection. I worry today about a lack of REAL connection among people and particularly for young adults and teens. Sure we may be "friends" with hundreds of people on facebook or twitter...but what do those connections REALLY mean? How can you really communicate with someone with one or two sentences on facebook or 140 characters including spaces in a tweet? Email and text messages have replaced handwritten communications which require more time and thought than a quick hit of a button. But more importantly with the advances of technology I fear we lose the value of face to face contact, making it harder for the recipient to fully grasp the intent of what the other person is really trying to communicate without the advantages of tone and body language. Maybe video-chatting will help us with that. There's a great danger of an entire generation of people who think connecting with people only goes so deep. And while positive messages do little to quench our need, negative messages which can spin out of control on the web.

There's even a movement called "Facebook suicide" where people are deleting their online profiles after seeing the effects in their lives. An article in The London Times told the story of 27 year old Stephanie Painter, a personal assistant in West London. "It was hard to kill the profile I'd spent so long creating, but I felt it was the only way out," she said. She tells the story that she had hundreds of "friends" on-line and then former boy-friends started re-connecting with her and flirting on-line. She said "Facebook was damaging my relationship with my boyfriend to such an extent that if I hadn't done it (gotten off permanently), we wouldn't be together now." (Thurs 9/27/07 as reported on Fox news.com)

People long for REAL connection. Those connections water and nourish us deep in our souls. The experience of the Samaritan woman at the well..."Here's a man who's told me everything

I've ever done" was so transformative, that she couldn't keep quiet. People want to be known. It's what we're made for...to be together, to urge each other onward and upward. We're not meant to live isolated and alone. And some know that feeling isolated and alone can even occur when you live with others in the same house. It's a matter of how people are connecting...either with or without an openness of the heart.

The experiences which we have offered here at RHCC where true connection can take place have been life giving to this community. The men's breakfast, and the women's gathering, where members share pieces of their life stories in more than just sound bytes were started with the idea that that kind of sharing needs to take place within community. At our recent Women's Retreat...those of us attending had the privilege of hearing, REALLY hearing the sharing of each other stories, in an uninterrupted format. There as great vulnerability around the circles and bonds were deepened which will never be broken. The group left completely energized.

Some may say that kind of sharing is an anomaly in this day and age and that it can't happen everyday. People in 12-step programs know differently. They share their deepest fears, shortcomings and concerns with others/sometime strangers on a daily basis because they know that if they don't, it could be the difference between life and death. They know that sharing openly and honestly...being connected and known within the community is an antidote for addiction and doesn't leave room for a drink, or drug or a binge on food. The saying "you're as sick as your secrets" is taken very seriously.

In a recent issue of the magazine "Christian Century" Matthew Meyer Boulton of Harvard Divinity School when writing about this morning's texts introduced me to a term in Spanish... *desahogarse* which means literally "to undrown oneself". "It refers to disclosing a story of grief or difficulty in a way that liberates the teller, or at least lightens her load." That's the kind of sharing I'm talking about...

But beyond being known by others, these scriptures speak of the knowledge and assurance that we are intimately known and completely accepted by God. Jesus showed us that example through a human encounter. We can experience that connection to this life-source every day. Imagine...The Creator of the universe knows EVERYTHING you've ever done small or large and loves and accepts you anyway. Every mean act, every shameful thought, every self-defeating disposition, every selfish attitude, every white lie or dishonest action. We've all done them. Such a thirst-quenching affect in a parched daily experience is life-transforming. But doesn't end with acceptance and love for its own sake. It can't. We must do something with it. Love and acceptance must be shared. We are asked to be there to help "undrown" others. Remember, the woman at the well was SO moved that she ran and told others. She couldn't keep it in...the result was that others then came to hear for themselves and were changed as well, not because of the woman's experience, but because they found life-giving water as well.

The quote from Matthew Boulton printed on the back of the bulletin speaks to this idea. “The difficult work of spiritual formation cannot be carried out through talk, study or even excellent preaching and worship alone, though each of these can and must play a part. Christian discipleship ultimately comes down to life experience and actual practice—that is to various forms of hunger and thirst lived out as opportunities to trust God, follow God and call on God to provide nourishment we need.”

Providing the loving act of “undrowning” others and sharing our own stories...is really only possible when we know we are loved beyond measure by the fountain of life-giving water. May your thirst be quenched.