

Parched
Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle
March 19, 2017

The water that I will give them will become in them a spring of water
gushing up to eternal life. (John 4:14b)

Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.

That is the opening stanza of Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's rhymed morality tale of a harrowing journey at sea. It also fairly describes conditions on our planet. It even works as a metaphor for our reading from John. As we all know, water is essential for life. Evidence of water is the first sign cosmologists look for as they scan the skies for other forms of life. Although seventy percent of the Earth's surface is covered by water, only one percent is suitable for human consumption. More than two thirds of the fresh water on the earth is frozen at the two poles though much of that is being lost to the oceans due to climate change. Wikipedia says more than 1.2 billion people lack access to clean water and that waterborne diseases kill 6 to 8 million people every year. For an itinerant preacher in a sunbaked region, water was and remains a powerful metaphor.

Our Lenten journey brings us to the second of four Sundays focused on the Gospel of John. Last week we encountered Nicodemus under the cover of night. It concluded with the universally known verses that whoever believes in Jesus may have eternal life. This week we meet a woman by Jacob's well who after an awkward exchange is offered living water gushing up to eternal life. These are two remarkable examples of inclusiveness from the early days of Jesus' ministry. As he often does, Jesus uses the common elements of everyday life as a teaching aid. He uses the universally understood fact that water literally sustains all lifeforms, to teach the more challenging concept of spiritual life leading to eternal life. But like Nicodemus, the woman at the well understands the

world quite literally and wonders whether the water Jesus offers might save her a few trips to the well. Like Nicodemus we might say there is precious little poetry in the woman from Sychar.

Wm. A. Barclay in his commentary understood very clearly that, "To a Jew, this was an amazing story. Here was the Son of God, tired and weary and thirsty. Here was the holiest of men, listening with understanding to a sorry story. Here was Jesus breaking through the barriers of nationality and orthodox Jewish custom. Here is the beginning of the universality of the gospel; here is God so loving the world, not in theory, but in action. (Wm. A. Barclay, The New Daily Study Bible, John Vol. 1)

It is by being in the world doing God's will –
as best we understand it – that we come to
know our Creator.

There are a number of fascinating cultural insights about why this woman would be drawing water so far from where she lived during the heat of the day. What we sense is that she is a bit of an outcast even among her own people. And we know from other conversations that Jews and Samaritans have been at odds for nearly five centuries. That too has some fascinating history that we won't review this morning. The scene that John sets up would lead the reader to expect a polarized standoff if not acrimonious exchange. But that isn't what happens. Instead, a bone-weary Jesus engages the woman in conversation and soon offers forgiveness and spiritual wholeness.

In our own lives, we can easily imagine these two bumping into each other at the water cooler making thinly veiled remarks about the others political

loyalties. We can easily imagine a group of marginalized individuals confronting local authorities whom they regard as their oppressors. As we have seen in the news, we can all too easily imagine a group of Syrian refugees that no country in the world seems to want pressed against a chain-link fence or barbed wire barrier. Faceless victims living in limbo trying to escape the crossfire of six years of a civil war that they did not start. The woman at the well is parched though she may not feel it in her mouth. The woman from Sychar has been in survival mode unable to imagine a different tomorrow.

New York Times columnist David Brooks has branched out beyond his commentary on the red/blue divide. His most recent book *The Road to Character* put him on the talk show circuit and landed him a lengthy interview in the Christian Century magazine. (Christian Century, February 1, 2017, pp. 27-30) The upshot of the interview is that like the woman at the well we all have an un-slaked thirst that leaves us unfulfilled; that creates a nagging feeling there is something missing in our lives. The suggestion is that our culture and our churches have changed in a way that makes finding the living water more difficult. In the New York Times Brooks has opined that the 1950s aren't coming back and that includes mainline churches like ours and our sisters and brothers in the Methodist, Lutheran, and Episcopal churches. He feels that society has been diminished because we no longer have national conversations of the sort that Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Abraham Joshua Herschel once led. But he also says "The mainline churches are well poised to respond to that desire" – that un-slaked thirst – "if they can have the courage of their own conviction."

The interviewer, a UCC pastor in Chicago, gleaned from Brooks' writing that he felt "until World War II, we Americans had a sense of our own sinfulness and of the fact that the self is something to be tamed." However, in the last 75 years our culture has taught us to feel good about ourselves and *not* to feel restrained in acting out our impulses. Brooks believes that this leads to "a sort of moral mediocrity that ultimately doesn't give you peace." He goes on to say that, "A lot of seekers are looking for God as

a sort of tanning lamp. They wander through life and think it would be nice to believe in God. They seem to be looking for a warm glow that'll shine down on them." Does this recall our brief exploration of cheap grace on Ash Wednesday?

One of the most memorable features of Coleridge's poem is an albatross, a large marine bird with a wingspan as great as 10 feet. As Coleridge spins his tale, the mariner's vessel tries to make its way through the dangerous waters around Cape Horn. An albatross that has taken to following the ship seems to lead the way. But once through the treacherous straits, the vessel is becalmed and the mariner kills the albatross as a malevolent influence. As they sit for days not getting any closer to home port and suffering from a lack of drinkable water the crew believes killing the bird was a bad omen. The mariner is forced to wear the albatross around his neck

Instead of the cross, the albatross
About my neck was hung.

and it becomes a severe impediment in his role as captain. Do we not all have our albatrosses in life? Do we not all have impediments that prevent us from gulping the living water and having the courage to be changed by it?

Where might we find the living water? In Barclay's characterization of this morning's reading as *God so loving the world not in theory but in action* we find an important clue. Paul may be right that it is by faith that we are justified but how is it that we come to faith? Is it through the pastor's words as she shares her understanding of Scripture? Perhaps just after the sermon at an altar call? I have certainly read about those for whom that was the case. But in my own experience we are much more likely to find God through the eyes of those whom God has created; by interacting with you, and you, and you. It is by being in the world doing God's will – as best we understand it – that we come to know our Creator.

When the woman near Sychar left her home to draw water that noon, she had no reason to suspect her life would be changed forever. And while most of us

no longer begin our days thinking today just might be the day, there is every reason we should. Not because we might win the lottery or even to be declared cancer free after many weeks of treatment and tests. No, the reason we should approach each day as potentially life-changing is because of what we have to offer others. By going out into the world as one of God's own; to shine God's light where we see darkness is to tap in to the stream of living water that gushes up to eternal life.

Just before the woman leaves to gather the others from the city of Sychar she has an interesting exchange about where to worship that gets at the nub of the chasm between Samaritans and Jews. Jesus answers that the hour has come when true worshipers will worship God in spirit and truth. It won't surprise you that hearing that, I recalled those hopeful verses from John's Revelation: "I saw no temple in the city, for its Temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb." (Rev. 21:22-23) As Barclay summarizes, "Jesus' answer to the woman was that she did not need to go anywhere special to find God, neither to Mount Gerizim nor to Mount Zion. She did not need to offer sacrifice in some special place; true worship finds God in every place." (Ibid.)

As the Mariner brings his supernatural morality tale to a close he shares this this conclusion with the listener:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

As we continue our Lenten journey, we remember that the next time Jesus would speak of thirst would be from the Cross. We are reminded that the living water that is given so freely and generously comes at grave cost. In a world where water seems to be everywhere we know that very little of it can sustain human life. We seek the living water not on this mountain or that sacred space so much as in the divine spark that lights all of God's creations. By beginning each day as though today might be the

day when everything changes; when we set out to shine God's light in the darkness, living water will freely flow as at Meribah.

Rich Lenten blessings to you all.

Amen