

Living Water

A sermon for Lent 3a - March 15, 2020

St. Andrew Lutheran Church - Franklin, TN

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

Some of you know that, during a sabbatical I was granted by the congregation I served before coming to St. Andrew, I walked across Spain on the ancient *Camino de Santiago*. That pilgrimage is well-known these days, but seventeen years ago, few Americans had ever heard of it.

A good part of that 500 mile trek is over the *meseta*, Spain's answer to Eastern Montana. It is a high, dry plain. There the Camino moves from one small farming village to another, each anchored by a *fuenta* - a fountain or well - at its center.

Walking across the dry *meseta*, you become very aware of water. The first thing you do before you set out in the morning is to find out where those *fuentes* are. In the high desert heat, you don't want to be without water. But water is heavy, so you don't want to carry more than you have to.

One morning I left a pilgrims' refuge before daylight in order to get to the little town of Nájera before the afternoon heat. But in Nájera, there was not room for me in the inn. So, very reluctantly, I set out to walk eight more miles in near 100 degree heat to a tiny village called Azofra.

Late in the afternoon, hot, tired and dry from the long walk, I climbed a cobblestone incline that led to Azofra's ancient stone church. There I was met by the *hospitalera*, the woman who looked after the tiny pilgrim's refuge attached to the church. She was well past eighty years old and not nearly five feet tall, dressed in a frayed cotton dress and wearing beat-up sandals. She grabbed my arm. "*Pobre peregrino!* Poor pilgrim! You need a drink!" she said. And she pulled me past other dusty pilgrims sitting against the church wall into the tiny kitchen of the refuge, where she opened the door of an ancient refrigerator, and took out a bottle of water.

Then, she turned to an ancient table where about a dozen glasses were standing. All of them had obviously been used by other thirsty pilgrims. She carefully picked the one that had the most water left in it, but instead of pouring out the water and washing the glass, she ceremoniously finished filling the glass with water from the bottle she had taken from the refrigerator. She handed it to me with a broad smile. “*Aqua fria para un peregrino caliente,*” she beamed. Cold water for a hot pilgrim!

In the desert water is too precious to waste. At the sight of that used glass of partly used but cold water, my American scruples vanished, and I drained the glass then another as the *hospitalera* went back outside to lead another newly arrived pilgrim into the kitchen and its shared glasses of water. There wasn't much social distancing in Azofra that afternoon.

At another *fuenta*, in another dry place, in the noon-day heat, Jesus asks a woman for a drink of water. For us, that may sound like a casual request, but for a rabbi at the time to ask such a person - a Samaritan, a woman - for a drink is way beyond belief. Jews like Jesus and Samaritans like this woman had practiced religious social distancing for generations.

This woman knows the way things are between Jews and Samaritans, between men and women: Jesus isn't supposed to talk to her, let alone drink after her! In fact, any contact with her, by religious law would make Jesus ritually unclean, requiring that he undergo a ritual of ceremonial cleansing.

“Give me a drink,” Jesus of her. A startling request. He isn't asking for his own personal Dixie cup of water. To receive a drink from this woman, Jesus will have to take her pottery dipper, the one she drinks from, and drink from it.

At that time, in that culture, sharing food and drink was considered such an intimate act that to eat and drink with someone was an act of solidarity and acceptance.

Now this scrupulosity had nothing to do with hygiene. There was no coronavirus circulating in Palestine, or at least that anyone could have known of. They didn't know about germs in that day. This social distancing had everything to do with religion, class and assumed position in God's order of things.

Surely the *intimacy* associated with eating and drinking at that time is one reason why, on the night in which he was betrayed, as his parting gift *and command* to his followers, Jesus left us a meal to share together. As St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians, eating the same bread, drinking from the same cup is a statement of our unity in Christ. We have all entered this family through the waters of baptism and are now one body, equal before God - all of us equally accepted, equally needy, equally forgiven, equally beloved.

So, when Jesus asks the Samaritan woman to share a drink of water, she is bowled over. This doesn't happen in her world. She knows the rules. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask of me, a Samaritan, a woman, for a drink of water?"

Jesus answers by offering her something she hasn't asked for. He offers her his complete acceptance, his deep and barrier-breaking love. He offers her himself, living water that changes her life.

If you look in the gospels at the teachings and the life of Jesus, you will find that a large part of Jesus' message had to do with one thing: expanding people's understanding of who counts with God. He refused to accept human notions of who was an insider and who was an outsider. He ate with sinners, talked with a Samaritan woman, touched lepers. He insisted that pagan Roman soldiers, religiously suspect Samaritans, loose women, traitorous tax collectors, and prodigal sons were all beloved of God and *welcome* to sit down at God's table.

In God's reign, Jesus taught us, everyone is invited to share the water that gives life - male and female, good and bad, the respected and the rejected.

When Jesus asks this woman for a drink of water, he is breaking with a long tradition of separation. When the Samaritans who hear the woman's testimony welcome Jesus into their community, they in turn are breaking the same tradition of separation.

It is that tradition of human separation, of us versus them, of in and out, that you and I who follow Jesus are called to keep on breaking today. That's why this table is open to whoever comes. If Jesus would drink and eat with anybody, we will to.

And like the Samaritan woman who ran into town and invited others to come and meet Jesus, we could invite the neighborhood too. Having been welcomed and invited into the family, we could in turn go out as we've been commissioned to do in baptism and invite others to come to the living water, to experience Jesus here in this community that is his body.

What a gift it would be to someone you know who is lonely, confused, thirsty and discouraged to introduce them to the St. Andrew community that can, because it is Christ's body, offer them the water of life, the bread of encouragement and acceptance and love in Jesus' name.

In his church Jesus has broken every barrier down, everything that separates us from one another and from God. Even if we have to keep our physical distance from one another in these difficult days, we remain united to one another in Christ. In the water of baptism, God has taken us all in and makes us part of the family. In this place, this *fuenta*, Jesus welcomes all us dry and weary pilgrims, takes us by the arm, leads us to the table and fills our glass with the living water that is himself. Amen