

Where Are Springs of Living Water?

Beloved community, this morning's scripture readings invite our reflections on this question: Where are springs of living water in our lives? Let us pray:

God, we are thirsty – sometimes desperately so and sometimes just with a sense that we need a drink of your saving, loving, living water. Be with us during this time of reflection. Grant us serenity to accept things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to discern the one from the other. Amen.

"This isn't the water I usually drink," Jonah said. My son Jonah gave me permission to share this story from the past week. We had just arrived home from a wonderful evening visit with extended family. Jonah had left their home with a cup of requested water in hand. We arrived home a bit past bedtime on a school night so, with efficiency at the forefront of my mind, I directed Jonah: *"Please carry your water to your room for bedtime."*

Following my prompt, Jonah lifted the cup from the kitchen counter and took a sip. After a moment's pause, I heard his matter-of-fact voice declare, *"This isn't the water I usually drink."* So he poured the remainder into the kitchen sink and refilled the cup partway from our tap.

I was struck by Jonah's straightforward acknowledgement. There was no wrinkle-nosed "eewwww." He simply knew that it was unfamiliar water – not what he typically tastes at his own homes and school.

Jonah's observation leads me to ask of us this morning: What water do you usually drink? My question is mostly metaphorical.

When you are spiritually, emotionally, or intellectually thirsty; with what water do you usually attempt to quench your thirst? Does the water that you usually drink satisfy your longing?

“Is the Lord among us or not?” This question was prominent and recurring within the community of Israel as they migrated from Egypt to Canaan. Centuries later, many people would experience the presence of the Lord (that is God – sovereign Love) embodied in Jesus’ ways of healing and teaching. For two millennia, people have gravitated to the way of Jesus. There must be countless favorite qualities of Jesus across history. My own favorite quality of Jesus is mutuality. According to Oxford Languages, mutuality means *“the sharing of a feeling, action, or relationship between two or more parties.”*

Let’s dive into today’s gospel story, which so lucidly depicts Jesus’ way of inviting people to drink of the water of mutuality. We heard, *“A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink.’”* Jesus own Galilean Jewish community held to a norm of not interacting with people of neighboring Samaria. The woman whom Jesus encountered lived in a society whose norms stated that her value was tied (to an extreme level) to her reproduction. It was commonplace for a man to divorce a woman if she were barren. If the bits of the conversation between Jesus and the woman of which the gospel writer caught wind were accurate, then Jesus focused on affirming to the woman (who may have been abandoned by five men) that she was anything but disposable.

On the contrary, Jesus needed her support in the form of a drink of water. Jesus went on to affirm to her and to all of us that we are capable of being vessels for the water of God’s eternally life-affirming love, which can spring up through each of us in unique ways.

“Jesus said to her, ‘...those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’”

At this juncture, we did already hear our neighboring St. Charles’ bells and yet we want to take a moment to just be with ourselves and reflect. Two prompts appear on our sermon response page. It would be my privilege to hold with you your reflections today or you can keep it for your own continued reflection.

- This is a part of my life in which I am undernourished... attempting to live my days (carrying on with responsibilities and relationships) without drawing on deep enough sources to energize, strengthen and sustain me:
- And, given the above, here is a change I would like to make in my life:

Let us hold a moment of silence for extended reflection.

I regularly witness God’s eternally life-affirming love gushing up in our congregation through unique individual ways and through our collaborations.

During this academic year, I have been one of fifteen leaders of local churches participating in a pilot program of the Leadership Center for Social Justice at United Seminary of the Twin Cities. Just yesterday, I submitted my project proposal – a social justice ministry proposal. As I have shared throughout this year, I have wondered: how could I possibly propose something when our Justice and Outreach Team is doing such wonderful work in leading us in this area of ministry?

However, I would like to share with you the proposal that I’ve made. It is entitled “Experiments in Mutuality.”

Summary of the proposed project

As I've said earlier, according to Oxford Languages, mutuality means "*the sharing of a feeling, action, or relationship between two or more parties.*" Mutuality is the purpose, goal, and approach to my social justice informed project. People's Congregational Church has arrived to a multifactorial inflection point. Four phenomena contributing to the inflection point are as follows:

- 1) A Park Improvement Task Force is leading the congregation through a process of brainstorming and discernment around potential improvement in physical accessibility, definition and visibility of our 10-acre park.
- 2) A Joint Church Task Force is leading our congregation and a neighboring congregation through a process of discernment toward potential consolidation.
- 3) Our congregation is approaching the culmination of a process to become dually affiliated – newly with the United Church of Christ and continuing with the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.
- 4) Our Justice & Outreach Team will guide the congregation through its spring quarterly mission focused on land recognition and stewardship.

My project will involve engaging our Pastoral Relations Committee in keeping me accountable to and reflective about my conviction that I need to lead with a posture of mutuality as a model for all stakeholders.

Rationale

Why this project and why now? Why does it matter to you?

I have just crossed a threshold of completing my first two years as pastor among the people of my congregation. Holding an unflinching focus on mutuality will support the congregation as it navigated a time of tremendous potential change and growth.

What concrete issue(s)/injustice does the project seek to address and how?

Power imbalance and dominance. The most aggressive inputs are most likely to be heard and absorbed by others. This “experiments in mutuality” project will engage our Pastoral Relations Committee in collaborating with me to hold space for the hearing of many voices.

How will you ensure that the people most affected by the issue (or injustice) you seek to address will be involved in the project? How will the project remain open to radical revision as a consequence of this involvement?

I will ask that PRC members bravely practice vulnerability by offering their own input on questions related to our 4 inflection point phenomena. I will ask all five of us to commit to watching who might be on the margins (as congregation-wide discernment processes progress) and invite them to the center.

How does this project connect to and build on your congregation’s shared commitments and existing ministries? How does it challenge and stretch shared commitments and existing ministries?

Our vision statement is: *“An inclusive community celebrating God’s unconditional love through engaging worship and faithful service.”* This project will be a direct invitation to embody inclusivity.

I welcome any of your feedback on this newly minted project proposal.

No one can really know the ins and outs of the conversation Jesus had with a woman at that well. Clearly, he approached her with mutuality. After Jesus’ encounter with the woman, we heard him share this in a teaching moment with whomever had ears to hear:

“Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.

The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Friends, we will continue forward in coming weeks and months, through the coming year and next – standing on the shoulders of people who came before us in this congregation, embodying the love of Jesus. Let us hold our senses now radically open to noticing how each other person in our community uniquely gushes with Gods' eternal, thirst-quenching, life-giving love; because Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
March 12, 2023 (3rd Sunday in Lent)
Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:5-42