

Rev. Carrie Bail

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Stewardship Sunday (Lent 3)

First Congregational Church UCC of Burlington, VT

We live in a world abundantly blessed with water. There was a movie about twenty years called “My Favorite Martian.” As the title character left Earth, he said: “Remember how you are blessed with these great beautiful oceans. On Mars we have to squeeze water from rocks!”

Those of us living in a water-rich places like this might find it hard to identify with the people in our scriptures stories today, those who literally found water from the rock, and those who had to think a lot about the availability of “living water” (the opposite of stagnant.) In New England blessed by plentiful lakes and streams, we rarely know thirst, perhaps only when we’ve gone on a long hike and have forgotten our water bottle.

Yet the world is full of communities where access to water – and in these days we need to say clean water – is very difficult. I have experienced it in Mexico, and in Africa. And so I can at least imagine how it must have felt for the Hebrews in the raging heat of the desert near Massah and Meribah when they became thirsty. Slavery in Egypt even started to look good. Moses is at his wits’end, not only with their complaining, but with his sense of responsibility to keep them alive. Is God really with us? Thirst is the physical symbol of their doubt.

And then God restores Moses’ confidence: just take that magic staff of yours and strike rock. Just like on Mars! Water from the rock, imagine how the Hebrews must have rushed forward to the spring, splashing their faces, drinking long and deep, searching for containers to hold that precious liquid. Living water.

But there's more to this story. It IS Lent, after all. And in both the OT and NT today, we have people who need that Lenten discipline of self-examination. They are feeling sorry for themselves, people who are blaming and pointing the finger, people who are cranky and fearful, and suspicious. That's the worst: lack of trust. Lack of trust in God, lack in trust of their leader, and at bottom, lack of trust in themselves. People who strike out at others are often projecting their own self-hatred.

These Hebrews, former slaves? Of course it's not easy to live forty years in a desert. Nor is it easy to recover from the trauma of being slave. Being thirsty is no joke; it triggers stress hormones. But instead of confessing their doubt and their lack of trust, they turn to the scapegoating option, to someone outside of themselves to blame: Moses. Moses is plenty irritated with them, but he responds by crying out to God, in honesty and trust. "What shall I DO with these people?" And God does not disappoint. Water gushes from the rock.

If you knew the gift of God. It's not "just" water, but it is the overwhelming LOVE of God it expresses that enables us to trust.

Scripture story #2: the woman at the well. One of my favorites (I'm not sure how many times I've said that already this year...) Jesus and his friends have been on the dusty and dry road near the town of Sychar in Samaria. The disciples have gone into town, but Jesus is just sitting by the ancient well of Jacob all by himself. Maybe he doesn't want to have a mob scene in town; maybe he wants some time apart from his chattering disciples; maybe he's just tired and thirsty. But you know, even if there were a wonderful well right here in front of us, you can't get a drink if you don't have a way to draw the water up. There are no spigots on a well.

Jacob's well is in Samaria, the borderlands belonging to some "diluted" Jewish cousins, not exactly foreigners, but Jews whose beliefs had changed enough from the

gold standard in Jerusalem that they were considered heretics. Suddenly Jesus sees a woman approaching to draw water for her household.

Now what's the surprise Jesus feels? Not that she is a Samaritan, OR that she is a woman. But rather this: that she is an outcast. No sensible person will come to the well if they have to walk there in the heat of the day. Most of the village women will come together in the early morning or perhaps in the cool of the evening. But this one comes is alone at midday. Why?

We learn more about this later when Jesus does a kind of psychic history reading: he tells the woman she has had five husbands, and the man she is with now, is not her husband. And we understand, whether widowed or divorced or otherwise displaced, she is excluded by "good" company in town. She is guilty because she's done what she has to survive in a man's world. And so she's comes to the well when she won't have to confront anyone else. She is wary, defensive, probably bitter.

Jesus had asked her for water – what a shock! She is woman and a Samaritan: two strikes against her for devout Jewish male. She is so shocked she asks a question in return, buying time to think of whether this is some kind of trick that will get her in trouble. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

Jesus answers with the greatest invitation there has ever been: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.

If you knew the gift of God.

The woman's life is changed. Here at last she meets a human being – a man - so honest, so transparent, and yet still so full of love and compassion that her defenses come crashing down. Here is some one who loves her and wants to give her the

greatest of all gifts, no matter who she is or where she is on life's journey.

Unconditional love.

This one human being is the source of living water – which is love – and she discovers that there is no longer room for things she has clung to: defensiveness, bitterness, fear, blame, rejection. All these things evaporate in the light of Jesus' love.

If you knew the gift of God.

For those who remember studying Ericson's psychosocial stages in psychology, it is the very first level we are talking about here: trust. If provided with love and with all their needs met, infants learn to trust. We are the same even as adults: if provided with love, then we can trust and all the defensiveness, all the litanies of blame and shame, all the trauma can be washed away in that rush of abundant living water.

If you only knew the gift of God: it is the eternal abundant living water which is the love of God, the most basic sustenance without which we cannot live.

There's a lot more to the story of the woman at the well – in fact, it is the longest conversation recorded in the gospel – but let's skip ahead to the end. Having lost her shame and reclusiveness and distrust, she runs back to the village to tell everyone she has ever known about this amazing man and his living water. She tells his story from beginning to end.

Sing: "If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus who died to save us all."

If you only knew the gift of God...

Time to turn that question around: do you know the gift of God? In your own one life, are you willing to let go of the blame, the anger, the bitterness, the fear and distrust, the secrets, all those things we cling to and beat others over the head with. Have you

let go of it, and learned instead how to tell others about the living water, the abundant love of Jesus?

Wait a minute now: this is supposed to be the sermon on stewardship, but here's a new thought: maybe it's the same thing. Maybe they are both the cup running over with the abundance of the love of God.

So here's the stewardship part:

Like the infant learning human trust through love, we are invited – yes invited – to come to that stream of living water, to acknowledge the love that comes from our abundant God. Then what? We share it. We share the living water and the love of God. Our resources, our time, and our talents.

What's money got to do with it? Lots. We share ALL of our resources. We need financial and physical resources to support all the ways we share God's love in community. Without it, we cannot sustain the ministries we have in the five areas stewardship has drawn for us, in the five rays of the sun. Those five rays are well described in the stewardship packet you'll pick up after the service, so I'll just summarize them here:

Worship – providing the opportunity for ourselves AND FOR OTHERS to praise and to give back to God

Mission – offering our love and abundance to those in need, who like the woman at the well may never have had any human reason to believe in that gushingly abundant love of God

Children and youth – creating a place where our children can feel and see and understand this abundant love and then to learn to trust and share it.

Care and fellowship – caring for and spending time with one another, not just because we like it and benefit from it, but so that others can see how the abundant love of God changes a community from the inside out. (Find scripture about “see how they love one another!”)

Building – we often put this first as a point of pride, just like the woman was a little nationalistic about “Jacob’s well” . The main reason to support a building is that it is very practical and functional: so that we will have space can be used for all these ministries.

If we can truly trust in the abundance of God’s love, at most basic level, then stewardship is a breeze. It is a joyful giving back of the overwhelming love we have received. It is, like the woman at the well, running out into the middle of our community to offer that living water and to share the love it has given us.

Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

John 4:5-42

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must

worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. 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."

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."