Streams of Life

Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Meditation

Ah, spring… The long winter is over…
The light grows longer each day…
The air grows (mostly) warmer each day…
Green shoots… buds… flowers…
Song of sparrow and red-wing… Peepers soon too…

Ah, spring… Reawakening earth, dormant life come back to life…

So may it be with our spirits after this long winter…
So may it be with all our brothers and sisters…
So may it be with all life… on this home planet, water planet, we share…

Reading – John 4:7-14

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink," since his disciples had gone off into town to buy food.

The Samaritan woman asked him, "How can you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" Because Jews do not have anything to do with Samaritans.

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you, 'Please give me a drink,' you would have been the one to ask him, and he would have given you living water."

The woman said to him, "Sir, you don't have a bucket, and the well is deep. Where are you going to get this living water? You're not greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it, along with his sons and his flocks, are you?"

Jesus answered her, "Everyone who drinks this water will become thirsty again. But whoever drinks the water that I will give him will never become thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become a well of water for him, springing up to eternal life."

Sermon

Today, March 22, is World Water Day! What could be more important that a day devoted to life-giving, life-sustaining water… especially now as water becomes an ever more scarce and endangered resource.

And today we are also celebrating the annual Unitarian Universalist Service Committee's "Justice Sunday"; and one of the priorities for the UUSC is water justice, ensuring that everyone has affordable access to clean and safe water.

How many of your most pleasant memories have to do with water?

I've got plenty:

Summer days at Jones Beach on Long Island when I was growing up, wading… diving … body surfing… exhilarated!

Early morning swims in a mountain lake in the Adirondacks when I was a camp counselor… really cold water! But it really woke you up.

A cool glass of water on a hot day.

Hot tea on a cold morning.

Daily showers… occasional bath.

Here at Old Ship our annual water communion, our lovely September gathering of waters from near and far as we re-gather our community.

And Hingham water in our ancient baptismal bowl to help us welcome and dedicate our newest and youngest Old Shippers.

You have your own water memories. How many water memories we have, we creatures who are, after all, mostly water ourselves and who live on a planet whose surface itself is mostly water.

"Streams of life" – we know that we can't survive more than a few days without water to drink. Yet with running water on demand from our Hingham and Hull and Weymouth and Quincy taps we can afford not to think much about how fortunate we are; we can also afford not to think much about the hundreds of millions of others who are not so fortunate.

For though most of my water memories, and perhaps yours too, are pleasant ones, for millions of others the struggle to have enough water every day for drinking, for cooking, for washing, for sanitation is not so pleasant, is daily and hard – not so pleasant at all.

And though it might seem to us obvious that access to water ought to be a human right, many nations (ours included up until now) have refused to sign a declaration affirming this.

This, at a time when over one billion of the world's people do *not* have access to clean, safe drinking water.

This, in a world in which 2.6 billion souls lack access to adequate sanitation.

… a world in which unsafe water and poor sanitation and hygiene cause 89% of illness in developing nations, and the deaths of 5,000 children… every day.

… a world in which, according to a 2005 United Nations report, unless we change course, by the year 2025 3.4 billion people will be living in nations defined as water scarce.

And in case we are tempted to file all this away in the category of far-away problems that are important but don't really affect us, note this: According to UUSC partner Massachusetts Global Action (MGA), in 2006 there were almost 2,000 shut offs of water in Boston neighborhoods – not surprisingly, mostly affecting people in poor areas of the city.

And water shortages *now* in many parts of our own country will lead to greater difficulty in ensuring water justice close to home as well as around the world.

And why should all this be so? Why is access to water a problem?

Well, part of the reason is simply that the amount of fresh water on the planet is not unlimited, yet the number of people on the planet continues to grow. So in many parts of the world (including as I've just said in parts of our own nation) the density of population is bumping up against the available resources, pressure which will only get worse as climate change will in many parts of the world contribute to even greater scarcity of clean fresh water.

The pressure is also exacerbated by the trade in what economists call "virtual water" – the water it takes to grow, for example, a pound of rice (several hundred gallons) or a pound of coffee (over 2,000 gallons)… and so on.

And as Fred Pearce jokes in his book *When the Rivers Run Dry*, we ought not to think that the solution to all this is to buy a t-shirt with the slogan, "save water, bathe with a friend." Because it takes about twenty-five bathtubs of water to grow the nine ounces of cotton needed for the shirt!

Feeling guilty yet? Well, at least its not all our personal fault.

For example, the situation is sometimes made yet worse by those corporations which buy up scarce water resources for profit and gain rather than for health and well-being.

In 1999, for example, Bolivia sold the public water supply of the city of Cochabamba, to a multinational consortium including a subsidiary of Bechtel Corporation. Government subsidies for water ended. The price of water soared. Riots ensued. Protesters were imprisoned, many were injured, several were killed.

This story has a good ending, though it was a close call. Bechtel was kicked out of Bolivia, and water resources were returned to the people… where they belong.

For as Indian activist and author Vandana Shiva writes:

> Since nature gives water to us free of cost, buying and selling it for profit violates our inherent right to nature's gift and denies the poor of their human rights… Water is a commons. . . It cannot be owned as private property and sold as a commodity.

Now of course a corporation *can* ensure the right to water, and conversely water injustice can be perpetrated by public utilities. A UUSC report (from which I'm quoting) tells the story of Grace Munyai, an unemployed 43-year-old woman living in Soweto, South Africa. Her household included twenty people receiving less than five gallons of water apiece each day from the utility Johannesburg Water. Yet South Africa's new constitution was the first in the world to affirm that all citizens have the right to water. So, with UUSC's assistance, Grace and her neighbors organized the Coalition Against Water Privatisation and won a landmark court case in April of 2008, reaffirming their right to water and setting clear standards for water access.

Even so… though there are success stories which lift the spirit… the problem is huge; which means that this may feel just like yet another huge problem about which to feel terrible and helpless. As if we didn't have enough to worry about these days!

But I'd like to put it another way. Actually, here is another huge problem which we can *stop* ignoring (and ignored problems just fester somewhere inside, leading to a kind of free-floating despair at the state of the world)… but here's one we can *stop* ignoring and actually do something about!

What can we do? We may not be able to go to Turkey and protest as hundreds have this past week at the World Water Forum. But there are at least two, maybe three… other things we can do.

First, we can support the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. As I said at the outset, ensuring the right to water for everyone in the world is a high priority for the UUSC, which works with local partner organizations to do this critically important work – whether in Boston, South Africa, or elsewhere.

And since Old Ship supports the UUSC through special collections and advocacy… *you* already support the UUSC through your church! Of course if we are able, we can each individually do even more to support the UUSC, whether by sending another check, or by checking out their web site for advocacy tips on water issues and many other issues of economic and social justice.

The UUSC is our UU human rights arm! We can and ought to support the UUSC.

Second, we can *stop* supporting those corporations that are helping to turn water into an even scarcer commodity than it already is.

One way we can withdraw that support is by limiting or eliminating our use of bottled water.

In recent years we have somehow allowed ourselves to be convinced that water in a bottle with a fancy name is more pure, safer, healthier than water from our taps. But in most parts of the United States tap water is among the cleanest and safest in the world. Why are so many of us paying hundreds of times the price for bottled water when perfectly good water flows from tap and fountain? How have we become convinced to pour our money (excuse the metaphor) down the corporate drain?

Yes, sometimes – maybe in the midst of a long trip – a store-bought bottle of water is handy. I've been known to imbibe. But most of the time? We could be drinking from the tap (or filling our own reusable perfectly safe stainless steel bottles) for pennies what it costs dollars to buy over the counter.

And maybe we could then turn around and give the money we just saved to the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee!!

Finally, third thing to do, many things really: Because we can remember that whatever we are doing to help reduce global warming will also help address global water scarcity and therefore water injustice.

(And if you want to learn more about ensuring a right to water? Go to the UUSC web site: www.uusc.org.)

Let me close with a brief word about the reading we heard from the Gospel of John.

What is going on in this story, and how does it connect to my message today?

There are many stories, whether in the Bible or in other ancient traditions and cultures, which center around a well. For as a source – and a mysterious source at that – of literally life-giving and life-sustaining water, wells have also come to symbolize deeper wellsprings of spiritual sustenance.

In this story, we see Jesus asking a Samaritan woman to draw water for him to drink. Straightforward enough it would seem… but not really. First the woman is taken aback because in asking her for water, Jesus is crossing two lines, breaking two barriers. Jews and Samaritans didn't usually get along; and a man ought not to be speaking to an unescorted woman.

Then Jesus confuses the woman further when he starts talking about water he could give to her – water that never ends. What kind of water never ends?

If you ask me… there is something spiritual going on here!

There are, in short, two kinds of water in this story… and in our lives. There is the water we need for our biological lives – a basic human right it ought to be. And there is the water of spiritual nourishment we need for our spiritual lives – to put it simply, the water of love, the water that transcends all the usual barriers that divide us, rich and poor, black and white, Jew and Samaritan.

We need both kinds of water. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms this, at least indirectly. Our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, basing its work on both the Declaration and on our Unitarian Universalist Principles, affirms this too, and works for it on our behalf

So… when we do our small part for water justice, to ensure that all people everywhere have equal access to inexpensive, clean, safe water – so that everyone's "water memories" will be pleasant, life-giving memories – we are expressing our love, that other water, that deep wellspring, the water of "eternal life."

So may it be.