



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Filling the Well”

a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on August 23, 2015

Even with the recent rain and humidity, it's been an unusually dry spring and summer around here. I saw a story the other day about a house painting company that was offering to paint people's lawns, so they'd be green rather than brown! But our dryness is nothing compared to other parts of the country, where drought is common this time of year. Right now here are over a hundred wildfires burning in the West because it's so dry.

This got me thinking about dryness and about water, about how precious and vital water is, and how easy to take for granted. It got me thinking about thirst, not just for water to drink, but our thirst for what will refresh us when we feel empty and our souls are parched.

Imagine a deep well in a dry land. People walk a long way through the heat to draw water up from its depths. This is hard work, walking in the sun and heat, and carrying that water back, so they stop and rest at the well, in the presence of that cool and life-giving water, before making the trek back home.

The gospel of John tells the story of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at a well. They are of different ethnicities and religions, and aren't even supposed to talk to one another. But Jesus is thirsty, and doesn't have a bucket, so he asks the woman for a drink. And Jesus tells her he can give her a different kind of water, what he calls living water. He says, “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,” he says. And the woman says, “Sir, give me this water so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here” (John 4:15-16).

This passage is often interpreted as saying that Jesus is the only way to salvation, like he's the only access to that living water. Those trying to build up the church would have interpreted it that way, but the text doesn't actually say Jesus is the only one. Isn't he just saying that people can't live on bread alone? Isn't he inviting us, as other sages do, to look down into that deep well, to get below the surface of things, to get in touch with our spiritual thirst, to acknowledge that we are hungry and thirsty for things that simple food and drink will never satisfy?

Is there anyone among us who will never be thirsty again? Thirsty for goodness and gladness, for solace and the presence of Spirit, thirsty for love and for justice? Isn't it part of our human condition to be restless and searching, to be thirsty for these things?

So let's begin there. With the places where you are thirsty; where you feel a sense of longing or dryness or emptiness. We began this morning by singing "O Come, You Longing, Thirsty Souls." I love that hymn, based on words from the prophet Isaiah, because it tells the truth that that we are hungry and thirsty people; that we do long for what we don't have, for what is not yet. So what are you thirsty for? Anyone want to say that out loud?

Do you see that your thirst and hunger and longing are gifts, as unwelcome as they sometimes seem, because they point out our need for that which often eludes us. A mature spirituality knows that dryness and thirst can be messengers from beyond, can lead us to touch deeper springs. That's why some people go to the desert, to be in that place of absence; to be pared down to what is essential.

Ten years ago, I'd just finished three years of seminary and a one year internship, had been credentialed as a new minister and was seeking a place to serve. I was kind of tired and needing a break. And then my father-in-law died, and in the same week that I gave the eulogy at his memorial service and led the burial, I came home and interviewed for an assistant minister position.

A few days later my wife Tracey came home, and when we were talking about what her mom was going to need from us, and I said something that surprised me as the words came out of my mouth. I said, "I'm sorry but I don't think I have anything left to give right now. I feel so empty, and I hate to admit it, but my capacity to care is almost gone."

This was sobering for me. My well was empty, and I was entering a vocation in which you'd better have something to share with others. How was I going to do that if I had nothing left to give?

I expect you know something about this too. Haven't you had times when you were parched and dry, when your well was empty and needed refilling? The question is, how do you do that? It's not like we're cars and can simply go to the gas station and fill up! As nice as that would be.

What I learned from that experience ten years ago is that it's important to monitor your own reserves; it's better to not let your well get so empty. And when it does, to be able to tell the truth about that; to say, "I'm out of gas right now; I'm at the end of my rope." So you can do something about filling that well again.

But I don't assume that we are able to replenish these inner springs by our own doing. There are things we can do that will help, but in my experience, these things can only put us in a place where we are more receptive to being filled, to being nourished, to being blessed. The Spirit goes where it will, and we can't control it.

What we can do is put ourselves in such a place—a physical place or in a particular state of mind or body or spirit—where that grace can come into our lives. Isn't that why you come to church? To drop down into such a place, so you might get a taste of that living water? Don't you come here to be reminded that there are springs that are available?

“Don’t say, don’t say there is no water,” the poet tells us. “Don’t say there is no water to solace the dryness at our hearts.”¹ This is what it means to be a person of faith: to remember that the water is there, even when you can’t see it or touch it. To hold on to hope that it will come to you again, even when it seems to be gone forever. Sometimes all we have is our longing and our thirst. But can you see that even these things, in and of themselves, are a gift and a kind of faith? Are an invitation to openheartedness, to waiting and hoping that there is water, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary?

Carolyn McDade, who wrote the hymn “Spirit of Life,” one of the most beloved songs in our hymnal, says that when it came to her, she was feeling worn out and as dry as dust. She had just come back from a meeting about being in solidarity with poor people in Central America, and says she was “tired with the world.” She sat with friend in silence for a while, and then went home. She says, “I walked through my house in the dark, found my piano, and that was my prayer: May I not drop out. It was not written, but prayed. I knew more than anything that I wanted to continue in faith with the movement.”²

Though we may wish otherwise, often it is in moments of dryness and pain and struggle that we get cracked open and something larger moves through us.

Spirit of Live, come unto me.
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea; move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.
Roots hold me close, wings set me free;
Spirit of life, come to me, come to me.³

There’s nothing shameful in saying “My well is empty. I am as dry as dust.” Perhaps it is that truth-telling that is the first step in getting your well filled again. Being willing to say you are in need; being willing to ask for what you don’t have.

The Grateful Dead, in their song “Ripple,” put it this way:

Reach out your hand if your cup be empty,
If your cup is full may it be again,
Let it be known there is a fountain,
That was not made by the hands of men.

There’s something mysterious about a well, or a spring; there’s certainly something mysterious about that source of living water that our souls long for. My sermon title implies that we have the power to fill our own wells, but in my experience, it doesn’t work that way. The best we can do is put ourselves in the presence of that source—that well or fountain—and trust that we will be filled again.

¹ Denise Levertov, “The Fountain.”

² Carolyn McDade’s telling of this story can be found in *UU World Magazine*: <http://www.uuworld.org/life/articles/35893.shtml>

³ Carolyn McDade, “Spirit of Life,” hymn #123 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

You can put yourself in this place by waiting quietly, by praying or by making music; you can do it by practicing yoga or meditation, by making food for those who are hungry or working for justice. It starts with doing what you long to do, and what you are compelled to do, even when it scares you. It's about opening yourself to that spirit and source of life, so you can be in touch with those living waters, so you can drink from them and be filled. So you can then share them with a world thirsty for love and for justice.

There is a fountain, the poet reminds us.

it is still there and always there
with its quiet song and strange power
to spring in us,
up and out through the rock.⁴

For that, let us be grateful and let us be glad.

Amen.

⁴ Denise Levertov, "The Fountain."