

Give Me a Drink

John 4:1-42

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First Central Congregational UCC

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First, a word of thank you to Charlene and Jim who preached the last two weeks. Michael and I were on a week's vacation to the Big Island of Hawai'i. Two years ago I told Michael that I didn't want to turn forty years old in the middle of a cold, Omaha winter that I wanted it to be somewhere warm, so we went to Hawaii. The day we flew out of Kona, the temperature was 89. When we got back to Omaha last Sunday, it was 1.

We had a great trip—we ate good food, kayaked and snorkeled, saw the volcanoes, and went to the summit of Mauna Kea for stargazing. We also visited Gary and Kathy McConnell. I asked Lou Lamberty, our financial secretary, this week if I could get a mileage reimbursement for my pastoral visit to the McConnells. He said I could try.

Everywhere on the Big Island that we encountered an historical site of the Native Hawaiians there were signs informing people that this was sacred space and should be treated with respect. These warnings weren't just for sites associated with religious practices, but with all aspects of life. I found this to be very interesting.

It didn't seem to be simply a matter of respecting cultural or historical artefacts--the proclamation of sacred space connected to the entire location and lifted it to a higher level of respect than general historical or cultural sites.

It left me wondering if Native Hawaiian religious practice views all aspects of life as sacred?

Often, these locations are in the middle of tourist areas. Sacred locations are adjacent to beaches where people are lying out in the sun, playing, swimming, surfing, and snorkeling. The result is an integration of the sacred with a wide array of daily life.

To me, the signs suggested that I as a visitor should also look for sacred interpretations of my experiences. That maybe every space is, in its way, a sacred space. I liked that.

This last Wednesday I performed one of the most sacred acts it is my honor to perform every year as a minister—I marked crosses of ash on people's foreheads and intoned, "Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return." Honestly, that translates more simply as "You are mortal; you are going to die." Ash Wednesday is supposed to remind us of our own mortality, but in doing so we hopefully examine our lives and choose to live each day more fully. Part of the purpose of that liturgical day is to help us encounter death and thereby quit fearing it. The Ash Wednesday ritual is a sacred and healing act.

The Isaiah passage that is the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures for Ash Wednesday includes the following verse:

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly.

And few verses later, we read:

The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

Months ago, when the church staff was looking ahead at the Lenten season, we chose as our theme this year “A Healing Spring.” The spring has a double-meaning. It is both the season of new life and colorful flowers that we are all longing for after this bitter cold winter. It is also the body of fresh water, refreshing and renewing us. Thus, there will be many water images accompanying us this Lent.

We chose to focus on healing, because as 2013 came to a close, we felt that a healing message was needed. Last year we had so much death and illness in this congregation. As I’ve continued to ponder this theme, I realize the large number of things affecting this congregation for which we might seek healing in some form. There are the illnesses such as cancer, depression, anxiety, mental illness, heart disease, Alzheimers, and more. There is the grief and loss that accompany death, caring for an elderly or sick family member, divorce, unemployment, and more. There are the traumas that result from domestic violence, sexual assault, or serving as a soldier in combat. There are wishes and dreams that go unfulfilled, hopes that are not realized, and goals that we might never accomplish. What in your life do you seek healing for?

Thinking about all those things, I’m now somewhat intimidated by this theme. No six week sermon and worship series will be able to answer all the questions and concerns that arise for each of you. Nor do I think that our worship will work miracles—that persons with disabilities will no longer have them, that people dying of cancer will suddenly be cured, that bitterness and anger will immediately be overcome and relationships restored to health and wholeness. We must admit that healing may be more abstract and spiritual than that. And it is probably a process which takes time.

Yet, with those caveats in mind, we remember that healing is promised to us by a loving and powerful God. And one of the best stories to remind us of that is this familiar one from the Gospel of John when Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman at the well and tells her that “The water I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to a life not bound by time.” Give me a drink of that water, Jesus.

Let me remind you again of how radical this story is. And to help us realize that, just think about traditional cultures in the current Middle East. Think about all those places where women are veiled or even the more extreme places where burqas are worn. The veil cuts women off from men and from engaging in the broader society. The proper space for women is the home, the domestic sphere, where they primarily interact with other women. Even today interactions between women and men they are not related to are taboo. Similar cultural norms

existed in Jesus' day.

And, yet, the early Christians tell us this story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman breaking those rules. Not only does Jesus talk to her in a way that he should not, even more radically is the way that she engages him back. And then the very topic of their conversation is scandalous, for they discuss her sexual history!

Probably the most radical thing in the entire story, however, comes when the woman leaves her water jar, rejecting her social location in the domestic sphere, and runs into town, into the marketplace and starts talking publicly about Jesus. A woman was not supposed to engage men in public, much less give them instruction. Yet, this brave woman does.

The healing that comes for this woman is her own empowerment. She casts off any shame and dishonor which had been attached to her, rejects the place that society would try to create for her, and, instead, creates her own space.

This year in our Wednesday night Lenten book study we will be reading *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation* by J. Philip Newell. Newell writes that the emphasis of Christ's message is "not on becoming something other than ourselves [as much traditional Christianity has taught] but [instead] on becoming truly ourselves." He believes that among the things we need healing from are the doctrines which have obscured the image of God within us.

One of those is the teachings of original sin, which he rejects. Though sin is very much a real part of who we are, too often the church's focus has made us doubt our inner beauty that participates in God's image. He writes,

But what does it mean to be made in the image of God? . . . In part, it is to say that wisdom is deep within us, deeper than the ignorance of what we have done or become. It is to say that the passion of God for what is just and right is deep within, deeper than any apathy or participation in wrong that has crippled us. To be made in the image of God is to say that creativity is at the core of our being, deeper than any barrenness that has dominated our lives and relationships. And above all else, it is to say that love and the desire to give ourselves away to one another in love is at the heart of who we are, deeper than any fear or hatred that holds us hostage.

So, what is primary is not our sin or our failings but the wisdom, passion, creativity, and love of God that is within us. In other words, we are sacred space. And the living water that Jesus offers is the grace of God that reminds us of who we really are.

Newell writes, "[Grace] is given not to make us something other than ourselves but to make us radically ourselves."

God's grace is the awakening and the empowering of our true selves. That's the healing the Samaritan woman found in her encounter with Jesus. It is the healing we too are offered by Jesus.

This Lent I cannot promise miracles. Or the answers to all the concerns that afflict members of this congregation. But what I can offer is the grace of God, revealed in these stories in John's gospel. A grace that heals, first by empowering us to become our best selves, who God always intended us to be. This is the living water that becomes a spring within us gushing up to a life not bound by time. Yes, Jesus, give me a drink of that.