

LIVING WATER

Water is a big deal. Water is an especially big deal in California, indeed throughout the West. Look at the front page of Friday's *Chronicle*, about the battle over how much water to send down the rivers to help the fish, and how much water to divert to help the farmers. There's a water rights specialty in law, and many fierce battles have been fought in the West over water.

Water is a big deal, whether it's a drought like the one we've been through for the last 4 or 5 years, or whether it's like this year, with floods and mudslides and snow slides in the mountains. It's either too little or too much, isn't it.

Water is a big deal in the Bible too. The Israelites, when Moses was leading them in their 40-year wandering through the desert from captivity to freedom, ran out of water and were thirsty. They demanded of Moses: "Give us water to drink." And God told Moses to take his staff, the one with which he parted the waters so they could cross, and strike the rock. Moses did what God commanded, and water gushed out.

In today's Gospel, Jesus uses water as a metaphor for the spirit of God. Jesus said to the woman at the well, "I will give you living water." Back in 1960, on a trip to the Holy Land, I visited that well. It's too dangerous to visit there now, with all the fighting going on, but then you could. I went and drank of that water, and Jesus was right. Pretty soon in that desert heat I was thirsty again.

Our bodies are about 60% water. That means that there's about 114 pounds of water standing up here in this pulpit. Some may call the preacher an old wind bag, but really I'm an old water bag! During the first nine months I was in the water of my mother's womb, immersed in water, until the waters broke.

Water is life. After we lose only 1% of our body's water we start to lose mental performance and physical coordination. As the nutritionists keep telling us, "Hydrate, hydrate, hydrate."

And of course we have our ever-flowing spring out there in the courtyard, which never ran dry during the drought, and which I understand was one of the few sources of water in this neighborhood during the 1906 earthquake.

So it's with all this in mind that we hear Jesus say, "the water that I will give will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Living water.

Today's Gospel reading is a great story. It's the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone, even his disciples. And the Samaritan woman is a rare specimen – she's a triple outsider. A triple outsider. First of all, she's a Samaritan, and for centuries Jews had not associated with Samaritans, who they considered to be an inferior race. Jews normally would go out of their way to avoid passing through Samaritan country. But in this story Jesus led his disciples right into the heart of Samaria, and seemingly went out of his way to break with the traditional Jewish prejudice against these people. Luke's parable of the Good Samaritan had its impact on its first century Jewish hearers largely because it's the ostracized outsider, the Samaritan, who shows compassion and is held up by Jesus as the example, rather than the traditional good guys, the priest and the Levite, who pass by on the other side.

If we were writing this story today, we might have the woman at the well be an immigrant woman, with her family, asking for assistance in finding the living water of new life in our country. She was a Samaritan, an outsider.

The woman at the well was an outsider secondly because she was a woman. In Jesus' time women were hardly what we'd call liberated. Jewish men's morning devotions included the prayer, "Thank God I am not a woman."

Of course today women are still second-class citizens in many societies, as far as what they earn and the positions they hold. In many ways they continue to be second to men in our own society. She was a woman, an outsider.

She was a Samaritan, she was a woman, and thirdly she was also a fallen woman, an adulterer. Respectable women went to the well in the cooler morning hours, when they would greet each other, share gossip, and talk about the latest news. This woman was probably one of the ones they talked about, who had been married almost as many times

as Elizabeth Taylor, and was currently living with a guy who wasn't her husband. We can readily understand why she wanted to go to the well alone, after the others had gone, even in the heat of high noon. She was an adulterer, an outsider.

So when Jesus goes up to her and asks her for a drink he is confronting and overcoming three prejudices of his time: racism, sexism and sexual ostracism. Who says the Bible is out of date! Does it make you wonder how much we've progressed in 2000 years in our attitudes toward those who are different from us? Our attitudes toward refugees and immigrants, other races, other belief systems, those who are poor or homeless, those who look differently, maybe even those who vote differently? Jesus reminds us, in Matthew's Gospel, that "inasmuch as you have shown compassion to the least of these, you have shown compassion to me." Those words are a constant challenge to us as to how we treat those who are different from us – those who we see as the outsider.

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, along with many other stories about Jesus, make it abundantly clear that the religion of Jesus is inclusive rather than exclusive. Jesus never called anyone a sinner, never excluded anyone from being one of his followers. Far from it! That seems to be a more recent phenomenon, when some Christians are spending an inordinate amount of time and energy and money trying to decide who's in and who's out, whom to help and whom not to help.

Jesus never called anyone a sinner, he never said anyone was outside the orbit of God's love. Instead, Jesus reached out to everyone, like this Samaritan woman adulterer, and told them, as he tells us, that they are accepted as they are, and forgiven. The Church today would look a whole lot more like its master if it broke with some of its practices of judgment and exclusion, and reached out in love and compassion to those who have long been considered outsiders.

So the first point about living water is that like God's love it's inclusive, reaching out to encompass everyone and everything in God's embracing love.

The second point is that the living water of God's love changes us, transforms us, from our old selfish ways into a new creation. In the second lesson, St. Paul reminds us

that “God’s love has been poured into our hearts (doesn’t that sound just like water, and isn’t that a lovely image?) -- God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” The Gospel proclaims the power of love to change us, to transform us and to make a difference in the lives of all of us.

The woman at the well left her water jar and went back to the city to tell everyone that Jesus was the Messiah, the living water. She was transformed, freed from her position as an outcast, and went back into the city to tell everyone she had found the Messiah.

So -- what’s the business of the church? The business of the church – its ‘product’ if you will -- is transformation. Transformation. We exist so that all people can come to know the living water and be transformed. That’s what the Kingdom of God is. People whose lives are self-centered, focused only on me, me, me, can be transformed through the power of God’s living water into lives of love and compassion, working for peace and justice, especially for the most vulnerable.

Sometimes the church succeeds, sometimes it doesn’t. A lot of drunks fail to be helped by AA – a lot of church people fail to love their neighbors as themselves. A lot of Americans fail to remember the words on the Statue of Liberty; "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..." But transformation is possible, by coming to God’s living water, God’s loving spirit to change us.

As you come to God’s holy table this morning, will you join the woman at the well, and be transformed by the power of the living water? Let’s remember to hydrate, hydrate, spiritually hydrate.

Come, come to the water.