

3rd Sunday of Ordinary Lent

March 12, 2023

Reflection by Sister Patricia Crowley, OSB

Exodus 17:3-7; Romans 5: 1-2, 5-8; John 4:5-42 or 4:5-15, 19b-26, 40-42

Introduction on the physical thirst for water

In the desert south of our borders, people go out every day to put water in spots where migrants, filled with hope for a new life, have died. An organization called “No More Deaths” operates this effort to provide water to some and hopefully to save lives where they can.

Water covers over 70% of the earth’s surface and makes up a high percentage of the human body. I remember that I had such a different reaction to rainbows when I was in Namibia and heard that rainbows are not objects of awe as they are for us because seeing a rainbow indicates that the much needed rain will soon be over.

This past week our House of Representatives defeated Senate bill 914 entitled the Drinking Water and Wastewater Infrastructure Act of 2021, a bill that addressed water resource development sponsored by our own Senator Tammy Duckworth. I only read the headline on this but it seems to indicate a priority issue not addressed – safe water for all.

A while back scientists took a small but important step toward the production of energy. It was called hydrogen fusion. IF that ever works, water, as the source of energy for parts of our world that suffer drought and thirst, could be available to many more.

Here in Chicago on the shores of Lake Michigan, we do not want for water. That is not true in many other parts of our country and the world.

Water is essential to life, as we know if we have ever really been thirsty or lived in a dry climate for a long period of time.

Today’s readings

In our first reading today, Israel’s thirst issues are symbolically presented in the scene at Massah and Meriba, where Moses doubted his leadership and was given water from a rock in the desert for those thirsty Israelites. The Hebrew scriptures highlight many images: water from a rock, water at a well in the desert, wells as places to encounter others, wells as holy places, thirst in the desert, disgruntled responses at the dearth of

water – these are the background for this theological sacred Johannine story in the gospel today.

In Exodus we hear: “The water will flow from the rock for the people to drink....”

In Romans, “The love of God being poured out....”

In the gospel of John, we hear: “the water I will give will become in you a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” In the gospel of John....All of these can speak to our own thirst for fuller Life.

The story of the Samaritan woman at the well is probably not a historical event. Scholars say that it is rather an aspect of Johannine theology to support the post-Easter community in Samaria (cf Wisdom Bible commentary). This powerful memorable story focuses on thirst.

Thirst

Our world is thirsty for depth and for meaning and for a sense of belonging which often comes through an encounter.....

In the midst of war and violence and poverty and racism that mar our human experience, it is pretty clear that people long for, thirst for depth. Just look at the popularity of poets like Mary Oliver or David Whyte or at the many people seeking spiritual guidance or ways to connect to a religious community through becoming Oblates or Associates, or even at the probings of writers trying to express the path of evolutionary mysticism these days. We are thirsting....We are searching....

The woman at the well, unnamed in our tradition but known in the Orthodox tradition as Photina, has limited aspirations. Her first response is to see the categories into which this man at the well falls. That categorization, at first, prevents her from truly encountering Jesus, the Christ.

Encounter as the essence of this sacred story

This woman can represent you and me: she going about her daily task of fetching water; we going about our daily activities. At the well there in Samaria, she experiences a new reality in the possibility of receiving living water through an encounter with this stranger at a famous well, an everyday well for her.

We might ask ourselves where are our own “wells”? Where might we meet a stranger in our daily life? At table? At the store? At work? In the corridor? At a meeting?

And....This woman experienced a rich encounter (not recognized by the disciples as they returned to find Jesus amazingly conversing with a woman from that area)

because she was able to see people outside the “box”, so to speak and the disciples apparently were not so inclined. The living water, of which Jesus speaks in this passage, is ours as we are open to the divine mystery and to the divine in another whom we meet during our day.

Conclusion

As Moses, we need to be open to help and as Photina, we need to move out of our own categorization of people so that we can experience their richness within ourselves and God’s richness therein. At the daily “wells” in our own lives, let us be open to receiving that “living water”...

[Please note: Some phrasing is borrowed from a homily by Rev. Richard Rento 2023 and at one point from one by Mary Ellen Knuth of CTU.]