

Homily – Living Water

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This has been a week unlike any other week. New things can be wonderful, except when they are not. Or, maybe it is more accurate to say that new things can be wonderful when we feel like we have some control over them. Where can we see God in all of this new stuff? Perhaps it is too soon. We are in the midst of something new that can become an aid to our spiritual journey. Or, it can become a barrier. We get to choose.

Last week I used the story of Nicodemus to preach about how Jesus was a non-anxious presence for someone who was worrying. In that story we saw Jesus work with Nicodemus to let go of his demand for answers. Like Nicodemus, we want instant answers from our politicians, from our doctor, and from our God. Sometimes the way to manage anxiety is to realize that there just aren't answers, or at least answer that will satisfy us. Last week, I shared that we can be a non-anxious presence in a world that sorely needs us. And, at the end of last week's sermon I suggested fasting from the 24-hour news cycle. How did that work for you?

This week we have a completely different story. We have the story of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well. This woman is not anxious like Nicodemus. In fact she seems to be quite with it. However, she is surprised when Jesus breaks from societal norms. Jews and Samaritans don't talk. While they both worship the same God, Jews center their worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, and Samaritans worship on the local mountain. Nevertheless, both Jews and Samaritans are awaiting the coming of the Messiah who will lead them all out of bondage. And, it is this common bond that provides a connection between Jesus and the woman at the well.

And, Jesus shares wonders with the woman that shake her world to its foundation. And, curiously instead of rejecting all of these new things, the woman at the well embraces what Jesus tells her. She embraces the Living Water that connects all things. This woman trusts what Jesus is telling her. She has a willingness to trust that she is the beloved of God. She let's go of the false self of the ego that was based on the many relationship she had with men. She surrendered these things so that instead she can be quenched by the Living

Water that connects all things. And, in her surrender she is able to become a conduit of the flow of the Living Water. It really is that simple, which for the human ego is very hard. The woman at the well reclaimed the Living Water by seeing God at the center of her being.

So how do we do what she did? How do we embrace the Living Water?

First, we must realize that our connection to God already exists. God is already with us, but we must make sure we are connecting from our side.

Second, we must quiet our minds and peer inward with our heart's eyes. We must place our consciousness at our innermost center as best we can.

This inward gazing is like diving into a well, but the well is full of debris. When we encounter debris, we take hold of it, bring it to the surface, and deal with it courageously. Otherwise, it will block our way. We find God by peeling away ourselves. God is the hidden treasure buried in the center of our souls, and we can find God when we tear away the onion-skin layers of the false self.

And, if we persevere in clearing this well of its clutter, we'll discover that the water of this inner well—the water in which we're already swimming—is God. We'll find ourselves floating in God, and encompassed by love. In a wonderful reversal, our soul is now wrapped in God, and we will be flowing in a river of Living Water. God will be spilling out into our lives and into the lives of those we touch.

God, give us this Living Water, or more accurately, God help us see the Living Water that through God's grace we have already been given.

Now, I am sorry to say that most of us must stumble and fall before we begin the process to embrace the Living Water. We must be out of the driver's seat for a while, or we will never learn how to give up control to God. I wish this pattern wasn't necessary. But, for most of us, until we are led past our limits it can be hard to declutter and re-aim our selves at what Jesus calls this Ultimate Source the "living water" at the bottom of the well.

For some the uncertainty and out of control nature of a pandemic virus may be just that opportunity to embrace the Living Water. Let me explain what I mean.

A few years ago, my bishop in San Francisco shared a story about the Great Depression of the 1930s. He said that there were two types of people that lived through the Depression. First, there were those that remember never having enough. And, these people lived life after the Depression like they always needed more. There was a value of scarcity that guided the lives of the people in this first category.

The second category of people always remembered have enough. Neighbors shared with neighbors, and there was a give and take that made sure that everyone was OK. These people had a value of abundance that guided them for the rest of their lives.

The Great Depression was a turning point for many lives, and they didn't all turn in the same direction.

Now, my crystal ball gazing skills are not good enough for me to know if this latest pandemic is going to be a turning point in our lives.

How many will get sick?

How many will die?

What will happen to the economy? The stock market has been taking a nose dive. And, those of you that work in parts of the economy that depend on consumer spending may see sales tank.

And, as we learn to practice "social distancing" what will happen to our relationships? Will this moment in our history be one that we use to draw us upward or downward in our spiritual journey.

Now, this past Friday, I found the New York Times op-ed column by David Brooks to be incredibly insightful about this crossroads. So, I want to deviate from our norms, and spend a few minutes reading some excerpts from that column.

Some disasters, like hurricanes and earthquakes, can bring people together, but if history is any judge, pandemics generally drive them apart. These are crises in which social distancing is a virtue. Dread overwhelms the normal bonds of human affection.

In his book on the 1665 London epidemic, "A Journal of the Plague Year," Daniel Defoe reports, "This was a time when every one's private safety lay so near them they had no room to pity the distresses of others. ... The danger of immediate death to ourselves, took away all bonds of love, all concern for one another."

Fear drives people in these moments, but so does shame, caused by the brutal things that have to be done to slow the spread of the disease. In all pandemics people are forced to make the decisions that doctors in Italy are now forced to make — withholding care from some of those who are suffering and leaving them to their fate.

Frank Snowden, the Yale historian who wrote "Epidemics and Society," argues that pandemics hold up a mirror to society and force us to ask basic questions: What is possible imminent death trying to tell us? Where is God in all this? What's our responsibility to one another?

Pandemics induce a feeling of enervating fatalism. People realize how little they control their lives. The writer, Anton Chekhov, was a victim during a TB epidemic that traveled across Russia in the late 19th century. Snowden points out that the plays he wrote during his recovery are about people who feel trapped, waiting for events outside their control, unable to act, unable to decide.

The Spanish flu pandemic that battered America in 1918 produced similar reactions. John M. Barry, author of "The Great Influenza," reports that as conditions worsened, health workers in city after city pleaded for volunteers to care for the sick. Few stepped forward.

This explains one of the puzzling features of the 1918 pandemic. When it was over, people didn't talk about it. There were very few books or plays written about it. Roughly 675,000 Americans lost their lives to the flu, compared with 53,000 in battle in World War I, and yet it left almost no conscious cultural mark.

Perhaps it's because people didn't like who they had become. It was a shameful memory and therefore suppressed. In her 1976 dissertation, "A Cruel Wind," Dorothy Ann Pettit argues that the 1918 flu pandemic contributed to a kind of spiritual torpor afterward. People emerged from it physically and spiritually fatigued. The flu, Pettit writes, had a sobering and disillusioning effect on the national spirit.

There is one exception to this sad litany: health care workers. In every pandemic there are doctors and nurses who respond with unbelievable heroism and compassion. That's happening today.

Mike Baker recently had a report in The Times about the EvergreenHealth hospital in Kirkland, Wash., where the staff showing the kind of effective compassion that has been evident in all pandemics down the centuries. "We have not had issues with staff not wanting to come in," an Evergreen executive said. "We've had staff calling and say, 'If you need me, I'm available.'"

Maybe this time we'll learn from their example. It also wouldn't be a bad idea to take steps to fight the moral disease that accompanies the physical one.

Can you see why I wanted to read you these excerpts? I think they hit the nail on the head. We have a choice. We can be like the woman at the well, but before she met Jesus. We can let the winds of life take us to the dark places in which we feel trapped, waiting for events outside our control, unable to act, unable to decide. Or, we can be like the woman at the well after she met Jesus. We can embrace the Living Water that is God at the center of our being. I think these are they choices that we have today.

In this time of crisis, which way are you going to go? In this time of crisis, which way are we going to go? Choose the way of the Living Water.