

“A Story of Two Women” –Historic Franklin Presbyterian – July 30, 2017

Scriptures: Genesis 21:14-19; John 4:7-14

This morning, I’m going to share the story of two women from the bible – Hagar from the Old Testament and the woman at the well from the New Testament. Two women in need of that most basic necessity of life – water. The Samaritan woman in John’s gospel lived about 2,000 years later than Hagar in the Genesis story, and yet that primary need for water had not changed. Let’s look more closely at these stories, and listen for God’s word for us that may be found in them:

The story of Hagar and Ismael is heartbreaking. You heard Tonya tell their story in Genesis, chapter 21: Abraham sends Hagar and her son away, she wanders in the wilderness, the water runs out and in despair, she leaves the child under a bush. Then she sits down a bow shot away, and says “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” Then while she and the boy are crying, God opens her eyes and she sees a well of water.

We often focus on the happy ending of God saving her son, so we may miss what it must have felt like at first for Hagar. As a parent, I can’t begin to imagine her pain when her child said, “I’m thirsty,” and she had nothing to offer to him, knowing that he would surely die. “God,” she cried, “do not let me look upon the death of my child!” The sad fact is that today, four thousand years later, over 600 million people in the world still have no access to clean water. And so, for those millions of mothers, when their children ask for a drink, they have nothing but contaminated water to offer, knowing that it will *cause* them to get sick, perhaps fatally so. In fact, over 3 million people die each year from *preventable* water-related diseases – and most of them are children under the age of five! Hagar’s story is their story, as they, too, cry “God, do not let me look upon the death of my child!”

Let’s jump ahead 2,000 years from Hagar’s story, and we see Jesus approaching a Samaritan woman beside the well of his ancestor Jacob, in the heat of the noonday sun. Most frequently, when we read this particular story, we focus upon Jesus’ remarkable offer to the woman: “I would give you *living* water,” he said to her. Jesus was a master of symbolic language, and here he used water as a symbol for life. And an appropriate symbol it is, too, for water is the essential ingredient for all life. No living thing can survive without it, and, in fact, our bodies, like those of most plants and animals, are composed mostly of water. Without it, we die. That’s why it is so important that we recognize that our planet is facing a water crisis of enormous proportions. The availability of clean water is now the #1 problem in the developing world, and it may soon become the #1 problem even in the developed world. Do you remember when the aquifer that supplies Atlanta got so dangerously low, legislation was proposed in the Georgia house to redraw the state line with Tennessee so they could pipe in water?

Back to the story of the woman at the well: We've seen that Jesus offered the woman 'living water', which we understand to be the spiritual nourishment that can come only from the divine source. But take a closer look at the story: verse 7 reads, "A Samaritan woman came to the water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.'" Do you see it? Jesus offered her the water of life. But Jesus also asked *her* to give *him* a very real drink of water to satisfy his very real physical need. *Jesus was thirsty!*

Let's think about that. We are a people of the Incarnation. Alone among *all* of the faith traditions of the world, Christians believe that our Creator so loves the world that God actually became human, taking on flesh and blood in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, experiencing hunger and thirst, joy and sorrow, and every other human condition. God with us, in a physical as well as a spiritual sense, loving our bodies as well as our souls, and promising the resurrection of those bodies. Our savior modeled it, our scriptures attest to it, and our creeds affirm it – body and spirit are inextricably bound together. And so, in a very real sense, caring for both the spiritual *and* the physical health of God's people in the world is the duty of the Christian.

The good news is that there are many ministries and other organizations that are addressing the problem in communities all around the globe. Digging wells, laying water pipelines, treating water sources, educating communities about waterborne disease – these are a few of the ways in which these water ministries are addressing the crisis. It's why those who lack access to clean water has dropped from 1.2 billion to 663 million over the past several years. One such ministry is known well to this church and to this denomination -- Living Waters for the World, which has partnered with people in over 875 communities in developing countries in many parts of the world, establishing water treatment systems to transform contaminated water into clean, healthy water. As I mentioned recently in a minute for mission, our own church fielded such a water team to help a school in El Salvador.

These clean water ministries are one way in which we can respond to Christ's commandment to love one another, a tangible way to care for our neighbors and for our neighbors to care for us. And Jesus left little doubt about who qualifies as neighbor!

To illustrate that point, I'd like to tell you a story. I'd also shared in my recent minute for mission that I had the opportunity to travel to the Guatemala highlands and meet Walter Villatoro, his wife, Carmen, and their family and hear their story of how having clean water from the Living Waters for the World system at their church has changed their lives.

Making small talk as one does when first meeting new folks, I asked Walter, Jr., their son, who is 12 years old, how he liked school. He gave the textbook answer one gives to an adult – that he liked school very much.

I chuckled and asked, "Is that your school shirt you're wearing?"

Walter Jr. answered, “Yes, sir!” “That’s a very nice shirt – looks good on you.”
Walter Jr. flashed a thousand-watt smile.

As we settled into our time together, the family gave thanks to God for their many blessings, including their improved health by having clean water, especially for their children and grandchildren. "Gloria a Dios!"

I shared that if my kids were here they would be instantly playing with their kids and grandkids with not a thought among them of the walls that divide us from one another.

Carmen lifted her hands and said with a big smile, "That's how it will be in heaven!"

The time came to say our good-byes with hugs and promises to stop by if I was ever again in their part of Guatemala.

We reached the road outside of their home when I suddenly felt a tap on my arm. As I turned, at first I didn’t understand what I was seeing. There stood Walter, Jr., holding his school shirt in his hand, smile on his face.

I looked to Rubenia, our Living Waters staff person serving as our translator. “He wants you to have it,” she explained.

I was speechless but recovered enough to thank him for his gift and give him another hug. As our group continued to walk down the road, I glanced over and saw Rubenia wiping away tears. She wasn’t the only one.

We think of clean water as a precious gift, as well we should, yet I received a gift just as precious that day, symbolized by a boy giving me the best that he had. The gift of relationship, of common humanity, of having an encounter with the living Christ.

Jesus lives today, lives among the least of these in El Salvador, Cuba, Honduras, Ghana, Nicaragua, Mexico, Haiti, Belize, Guatemala, Peru, Dominican Republic.... and through their voices, Jesus asks of us, “Give me a drink.” We are called to respond to this request in a tangible way.

Like Hagar’s child, and Jesus at the well, there are millions in the world this very day saying, “I’m thirsty.” We have within our power and ability a way to help those mothers respond to these requests with clean, healthy water – that they may have life, and have it abundantly! Jesus freely gives us that living water, the water of eternal life. And in grateful response, we can offer to Jesus and to those whom he loves the clean water so necessary to a healthy life for all God’s children everywhere.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Steve Young, July 30, 2017