

What We Long For  
Sunday, June 29, 2008  
The Rev. Barbara E. Davis  
Matthew 10:40-42  
Exodus 17:1-7

When I was pregnant with my daughter Hannah, I learned quickly about the importance of drinking water during pregnancy. As first trimesters go, mine was manageable; I was exhausted and I was a pickier eater than I had ever been, but I was happy with vegetarian sushi most nights – although I can't speak for my partner, who for some reason wearied of it after a few nights in a row. I learned to snack throughout the day, eating multiple smaller meals. I had given up coffee before I started trying to get pregnant, so I drank tea in the morning and then water throughout the day. I thought I was doing pretty well managing all of these new routines until I passed out one Friday afternoon at Grand Central Station.

Karen and I were going to Connecticut for a conference that started that evening and lasted through Saturday. We were meeting at Grand Central, and I had arrived first. Standing there, somehow, things just didn't seem quite right. Thankfully, I kneeled down and the next thing I remember there was a paramedic beside me along with a ring of police and heavily-armed National Guard officers. I was trying to explain to the paramedic that I was fine, just pregnant, when my cell phone rang – it was Karen asking where I was. I mumbled something about passing out and being surrounded by the National Guard, and I'll never forget her response – “oh, I see you” as if it had been our plan to meet at that spot all along. After a short ambulance ride and two bags of fluids in the emergency room at St. Vincent's, we were on our way home, having learned a great deal about limitations and the importance of hydration.

I don't know if bags of saline count as cups of cold water, but they should. The passage from Matthew that we heard today models an expression of hospitality that overflows. It begins with a description of hospitality that equates it to a chain reaction: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,” Jesus says, “and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” Hospitality is like a line of dominoes, the challenge is to remember that we always want to get to that last one, the domino that embodies the divine presence of God.

Being hospitable to God is crucial, and yet it has presented generations with the problem of having a personified God whose face we are not able to see, we never know when God is among us. Jesus' guidance on this problem was consistent and challenging: treat everyone as if they were the presence of the divine. He witnesses to this practice by eating with tax collectors, healing lepers, not shunning the woman with the flow of blood. He welcomes all those who might expect to not be greeted with much hospitality, and then reminds the people he is talking with that their tradition actually calls them to do the same.

Quenching thirst is a common metaphor in the Bible describing our spiritual thirst. “Cups of cold water” are one of the distinct metaphors for offering hospitality. Our congregation and Presbytery know about extending this kind of hospitality; we take pride in the fact that we sponsor the Evelyn Davidson Water Table in front of our building on this day every year. As the marchers in the Heritage of Pride march come down Fifth Avenue, whether they are prophets or righteous persons, they are in need of cups of cold water. It is a satisfying way to spend the afternoon, and frankly the interactions with all the people are reward enough on this day, but we should not think that having literally lived out giving cups of cold water means that our mission is accomplished.

The last verse of this passage from Matthew begins “and whoever gives *even* a cup of cold water to one of these little ones...” When Jesus puts it like that, it sounds as if giving cups of cold water is the least that we are called to do. If you have nothing else, “even a cup of cold water” will do. In fact, water would be the least one would offer in Jesus’ time by way of hospitality. A visitor who was fully welcomed might anticipate a meal, their feet washed, and even lodging in exchange for news from where they had been traveling. A cup of cold water would be a simple gesture in comparison to the fuller limits of hospitality.

Another issue is brewing in these verses from Matthew and it is the issue of “reward.” This idea strikes a discordant note; given that a cup of cold water would be the least that could be offered, shouldn’t it just be offered without expectation of reward? The very idea of hospitality offered with expectation flies in the face of a whole body of Reformation theology, from Luther to the present, who try to break the connection between works and rewards. It’s a relationship too prone to corruption. Commentators understand this passage from Matthew in different ways, but one explanation that may be helpful to us today is that these verses are actually the conclusion of a larger teaching in which Jesus is explaining that the time of final judgment will be a time when all secrets will be revealed, especially one’s faith allegiance.<sup>i</sup> Christianity’s early roots are connected with secrecy, mostly because of fear of persecution and rejection. The reward of sharing cups of water is about revealing one’s faith and breaking the cycle of living in fearful secrecy.

If offering cups of cold water in Jesus’ time were to reduce secrecy and fear, how many more thousands of years and millions of cups will this project take? Too many people still live in the grips of fear and secrecy. There are many kinds of secrets that our culture encourages people to keep. A relative who committed suicide, a loved one’s battle with mental illness, a friend’s disability, a struggle with alcoholism, a child’s gender identity or sexual orientation. In the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender community secrecy and fear are still real and present issues, and the church of tradition stands as guilty as the culture it competes against in perpetuating homophobia. But there are places, like this congregation, where the welcome is wide and the work has begun. These places are like Massah or Meribah, where Moses got water from the rock, and the question was asked “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Testing the Lord is not always viewed favorably in the bible, and even in the Exodus story, the reader’s ear is tuned more to relate to Moses and to hear the Israelites as a bunch of complainers. The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible outlines two patterns of the murmuring stories from the people’s journey in the wilderness. One is this pattern: a complaint by the people, followed by punishment from God, followed by intercessions, ending with reprieve. The second is the pattern followed in section we heard from Exodus 17 this morning: there is a need, a complaint is expressed, intercessions are made, a miracle occurs.<sup>ii</sup>

This passage is challenging to our usual hearing, because when we stop and think about it, the people being in need of water is not such an unusual or demanding request. This pattern is not one where water had been provided in some way that was not the people’s liking or where the people were provided water and asked not to hoard it, as happened with the manna. The problem is simple: “They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.” It is Moses who seems irritated with the people’s need for water; Moses who accuses them of quarreling, Moses who suggests they are testing the Lord. Once Moses puts their request to the Lord, the response is simple and miraculous.

The elders are to go ahead with Moses until they find the Lord standing by a rock at Horeb (really this is what the text says), and Moses is to take the staff he used to strike the Nile

River and strike the rock on which the Lord is standing, and water will come from it. Moses does what the Lord commanded with the elders, and the people are provided with water. It is almost as simple as the pattern outlined earlier: need, complaint, intercession, miracle.

Imagine applying this method to other problems in our life: gas prices, mortgage payments, health issues, daycare – it could all be as easy as finding that rock where God is standing and having a good staff, and good aim. The problem however is not just that we don't come face to face with God on a rock very often, the problem is that like the Israelites we fall victim to being halfway to the promised land with one foot still in Egypt. That problem is highlighted right in the middle of this Exodus passage in verse three, which says: "But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?'" The problem is not that the people want water, the problem is that the people are looking to the past for the solution to being thirsty in the present, instead of believing that the thirst quenching water can be provided right then, right there. Egypt quickly becomes the good old days, and the promise of that day is lost in the way things used to be. The Israelites are halfway people in this passage and being halfway people lends itself to secrecy and fear finding footholds too easily in our lives.

Fear and secrecy worry me the most as my partner and I try to navigate our way through the maze of parenthood. We have many of the same fears that any parent has, is our child safe? Is our child learning how to treat others with respect? Are we responding adequately to her independent spirit? Is she eating enough vegetables and getting enough sleep? I never tire of watching her sleep, and my thoughts in that time are full of how much better my life is with her in it. But my partner and I have unique fears as lesbian moms, which center on how to respond to homophobia in front of our daughter so that she inherits strength from her parents and not shame or fear. Parenthood dismantles a layer of secrecy in a relationship; there is no longer room to pass for something other than who we are. To Hannah, we are her Mommy and Mutti – the name she calls Karen from her German heritage. Other people we encounter occasionally have trouble figuring it out.

The most difficult time so far was when we took Hannah to the emergency room near our home in Brooklyn with a very high fever. When we were moved into the intake area, the person filling out the paperwork asked us, "Which one of you is the mother?" Our unison reply, "We both are," was met with another question, a clone of the first, apparently in more remedial form for us: "Which one of you is the real mother?" This question is an expression of being halfway people. We live in a world that expects children to have a mother and father, despite myriad of family structures lived out everyday. We live in a world that reinforces halfway thinking, and makes it difficult to live beyond that perspective. We all have one foot in that restrictive structure as we try to lunge forward past the halfway point. Being halfway people is not a place where we can flourish. What we long for is, whatever our circumstances, to never be asked a question like "Who is the real mother?" again. What we long for is for something to get us past that halfway point.

The fear that the world will never change keeps us from trying to change the world. God is leading us to the water in the rock, but it is up to us to decide if that water merely reminds us of Egypt or inspires us to something new. The problem is that in order to get past halfway, where we can no longer feel so committed to mistakes of our past, we must decide what tools are going to help us build our future. This decision is a decision about survival. This decision is a decision about healthy survival. The essayist Audre Lorde reminds us of this important point about the tools for survival: "Survival is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled,

and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at this own game, but they will never bring about genuine change."<sup>iii</sup>

The call to begin a chain reaction of hospitality and the call to find and strike the rock at Massah are calls to bring about genuine change. These calls recognize the human condition without condemning the humans in those conditions. They call us to quit being halfway people and move into a place where we all can thrive. The cups and the staff are before us. They lead us to a way of imagining how we can all flourish, how our differences can make us stronger. Reach for them, they are just over there, just a bit beyond halfway.

---

<sup>i</sup> Boring, M. Eugene. "Matthew" in The New Interpreter's Bible, vol. VIII. (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1995), p. 263.

<sup>ii</sup> Williams, Michael E., editor. The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible: Exodus – Joshua, vol. II. (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1992), p. 73.

<sup>iii</sup> Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. (The Crossing Press: Freedom, CA, 1984), p. 112.