

“Water in The Desert”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
September 28th, 2014
16th Sun. after Pentecost

Exodus 17:1-7

Matthew 21:23-32

The people argued with Moses and said,

“Give us water to drink.”

Moses said to them,

“Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the Lord?”

Exodus 17:1-7

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to find the water we need whenever we cross the desert places of our lives,
of the life of our congregation, of the life of our denomination.

Amen

Living in a temperate land that has frequent rainfall,
we may take it for granted that we have ready access to water
and not consider how difficult it can be just traveling through a desert.

*There was a man crossing a desert who ran out of water;
and after several hours, he was getting desperate, crawling across the sand –
when in the distance he saw another man approaching on a camel.*

As the rider got close enough, the crawling man said,

"Please, can you help me? I need some water."

The man on the camel says, "Sorry. I don't have any water.

But I can sell you some neckties."

The man says,

"Neckties? I don't need any neckties. I need water!"

The other man says, "I'll sell you one for four dollars."

The man says, "I need water!"

"All right, two for seven dollars," says the man on the camel.

"Please!" says the man, "Can you just tell me where the water is?"

"Okay, okay," says the other man, "Just keep crawling straight ahead for three miles.

Turn left at the arrow painted on the big rock.

Crawl another mile and you'll get to the oasis.

Sure you don't want a necktie? Three for ten bucks? That's the best I can do."

The man just kept crawling toward the water

until he came to the arrow painted on the big rock, and turned left.

He crawls another mile until he sees some palm trees!

He gets up on his feet and stumbles toward the oasis,

where he meets a man standing at the entrance.

The thirsty man asks him, "Is this the oasis? Can I get some water here?"

"Oh, sure, there's plenty of water here," says the other man.

"Great!" says the man as he starts to stagger toward the pool of water.

"I'm sorry," says the other man, "neckties required!"

Willard, p.2

Just like there had been no food for the Hebrews who escaped from Egypt,
there was no water in the desert!

The people complained and were justifiably concerned –
though it does seem like they were expecting a miracle.

Moses goes to God for help and says,

“What am I gonna do? These people are about ready to stone me!”

Does this sound familiar?

Isn't this a classic situation of leadership dynamics?

Anybody who has ever been a leader has been on the receiving end
of someone else's disappointment
and it's not funny when it's happening to you.

So, God instructs Moses to take his walking stick and
strike a rock to bring forth water.

Besides Exodus, this event is described in the Book of Numbers
and also referred to in the Book of Psalms and Isaiah.

In Deuteronomy, it is mentioned again when God takes Moses up the mountain,
to show him the Promised Land.

However, God tells Moses he won't enter the Promised Land because of what he did
during the incident of striking the rock to bring forth water...

Now, in the version of this story found in the Book of Numbers,
Moses strikes the rock twice while angrily saying,

“Listen, you rebels! Should we produce water from the rock for you?”

[Num. 20:10^b]

Perhaps it is for this reason that God punishes Moses so that this story
serves as a cautionary tale for leaders to keep their cool and
not let emotions get in the way of being professional.

There is another detail in this story in which Moses strikes the rock *twice*
suggesting he did not have enough faith in God,

or that he was presuming it was by his action that the water came forth,
rather than God working through him.

So, Moses struck the rock and water pours out from it –
and the people were saved.

This place was then called Massa and Meribah –

“The Place of Testing and Complaining”...

When I was in the service, I remember a class on leadership theory
that included a square divided into four smaller squares,

showing four different styles of being a leader,
which I describe roughly as:

the Boss, the Coach, the Cheerleader, the Golfer.

Willard, p.3

The Boss is high task, low relationship and tells people what to do.

The Coach is high task, high relationship and gets people to collaborate.

The Cheerleader is low task, high relationship and supports the team.

The Golfer is low task, low relationship like being a member of a country club.

That last example of the 'country club' works just fine

if everybody knows their job and they are motivated to perform.

The first example of the Boss as someone who pushes people into action

might be required to get things going, but that is not good

for the long-term health of the organization.

Recognizing the skills and gifts of others in the group –

and persuading them to use those gifts,

is key for a more effective and adaptable organization

that goes beyond the charisma of any one person.

Jesus' parable about the father with the two sons

is such an example of leadership dynamics.

The father speaks to both sons – apparently without threats,

one responds 'no', but later obeys; while the other says, 'yes', but doesn't go.

Nothing is said about consequences or rewards,

but what Jesus seems to be emphasizing is the initiative

of the one who has a change of heart to take on the task and co-operate.

When you are the leader and help shows up –

especially when it seemed like you are on your own,

that is just like water in the desert,

or in the case of this vineyard, like grapes turned into wine.

We need you to go out into to the vineyard...

Next week, I would like as many of you as you feel moved

to show up for our Leaders Meeting and listen to our committee leaders

tell about what our church is doing in the areas of

worship, proclamation, mission, education,

administration, fellowship, fundraising, finance & stewardship;

Then, fill out or update your Time and Talent sheet where you may find

some new way to serve God through our church

on a project close to your heart.

Many of you as church members are already involved –

you have been like water in the desert to me as your pastor;

As you are able, please stand if you are an officer of this church...

Please stand if you are on a committee...

Please stand if you have volunteered in some way or attended an activity here...

Everyone else please stand – because you are potential volunteers!

Thank you! Please be seated...

Willard, p.4

We are a strong church with many talented members serving God in wonderful ways, but that is not the case for many churches in Florida and throughout the UCC.

The United Church of Christ has had to make drastic cuts;
An example is the UCC National Musicians Network
which can no longer be supported by the national setting –
though it will continue as a separate organization.
Monica Peidl attended their annual retreat this summer,
but it remains to be seen if there will be another one.

It is possible for such organizations to exist outside of the formal church
The United Church Board of Homeland Ministries and
the United Church Board of World Ministries both pre-existed
the formation of the United Church of Christ,
and were later incorporated as the backbone
of our denomination's mission work.

Our General Minister, Geoffrey Black is resigning –
this is after an inspired time of his leadership during which he provided
good goals for us with events that addressed
hunger, the environment, and this year, literacy.
At the same time he has had the difficult job of
downsizing the national setting of our denomination.

Florida Conference has had to make cuts, too, and will likely make more,
so the matter touches us.

We have had a very able leader with the Rev. Dr. Davida Foy Crabtree
as interim, who has completed her work with us
and has returned to Connecticut.

The Rev. Dr. Jim & the Rev. Dr. Sandy Boler –
both long-time ministers serving in Florida, will be co-leading
as interim conference ministers until our new Conference Minister
is announced hopefully by the Fall Meeting October 26th.

This past week we have also received news that the Rev. Dr. Sarah Lund
has resigned to take a position as Vice President
for the Christian Theological Seminary in Indiana.

As a progressive minister, I struggle with the prediction that mainline churches
are in decline and that the UCC in particular is struggling
for both financial and membership support.

I find myself very concerned about this desert time and
the difficulty we have as a denomination to hold on.

Willard, p.5

If these state and national structures were to collapse,

I believe we would survive as a self-sustaining community of faith.

However, it would be a whole lot easier for us all if such a collapse didn't happen –
we need one another.

We need strong allies – like they need us. It is not just about money.

It's about spirit and conviction to be a progressive Christian voice.

This may sound like a pitch for giving to the Mission concerns of

Neighbors In Need or even Our Church's Wider Mission,

but what is really needed right now

is a commitment to be the United Church of Christ.

We must succeed by being the church in this time and place –

first of all, by just hanging on to keep doing what we're doing

and be there to help other UCC congregations that are not as fortunate.

We need to fight – not like radicals who lure disaffected young people

to a cause that leads only to death and social ruin,

giving their bodies to be burned, but have not love.

They are noisy gongs and clanging cymbals who one day will be silenced –

no longer to be heard, God willing.

We actually have something better to offer the world through a loving God

who calls us to be 'open & affirming' of 'justice & peace'.

Is there not that commitment to be found among us

to help bring about a beloved community that is possible?

Can we not fight with the same determination as the apostles

who had nothing to begin with so long ago?

The goal of what we are about is a beloved community

not just for the time to come, but as it says in Psalm 27:13...

'goodness in the land of the living'.

Let us not complain or lament about our situation.

Instead, let us be that water in the desert for those who thirst.

We are about proclaiming that God is a living being who is still speaking;

that love is the only way to salvation, as it has always been;

and it is through Christ that we are to be an example to the world.

Amen

*Our lesson from Exodus 17:1-7 continues the story
of the Hebrews' wilderness experience –
who are now faced with the problem of finding water in the desert and
the challenge for Moses of leading in the midst of complaining...*

[17:1] The whole Israelite community broke camp and set out from the Sin desert to continue their journey, as the Lord commanded.

They set up their camp at Rephidim,
but there was no water for the people to drink.

[2] The people argued with Moses and said,
“Give us water to drink.”

Moses said to them,

“Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the Lord?”

[3] But the people were very thirsty for water there,
and they complained to Moses,

“Why did you bring us out of Egypt
to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?”

[4] So Moses cried out to the Lord,

“What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me.”

[5] The Lord said to Moses,

“Go on ahead of the people,
and take some of Israel's elders with you.

Take in your hand the shepherd's rod that you used to strike the Nile River,
and go.

[6] I'll be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb.

Hit the rock.

Water will come out of it, and the people will be able to drink.”

Moses did so while Israel's elders watched.

[7] He called the place Massah and Meribah,

because the Israelites argued with and tested the Lord, asking,
“Is the Lord really with us or not?”

Let us be guided and challenged by these words

Matthew 21:23-32

[21:23] When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and elders of the people came to him as he was teaching. They asked,
“What kind of authority do you have for doing these things?
Who gave you this authority?”

[24] Jesus replied,
“I have a question for you.
If you tell me the answer,
I’ll tell you what kind of authority I have to do these things.

[25] Where did John get his authority to baptize?
Did he get it from heaven or from humans?”

They argued among themselves,
“If we say ‘from heaven,’ he’ll say to us,
‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’

[26] But we can’t say ‘from humans’ because we’re afraid of the crowd,
since everyone thinks John was a prophet.”

[27] Then they replied,
“We don’t know.”

Jesus also said to them,
“Neither will I tell you what kind of authority I have to do these things.

[Then Jesus said,]

[28] “What do you think?
A man had two sons. Now he came to the first and said,
‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’

[29] “‘No, I don’t want to,’ he replied.
But later he changed his mind and went.

[30] “The father said the same thing to the other son, who replied,
‘Yes, sir.’ But he didn’t go.

[31] “Which one of these two did his father’s will?”

They said,
“The first one.”

Jesus said to them,
“I assure you that tax collectors and prostitutes
are entering God’s kingdom ahead of you.
[32] For John came to you on the righteous road, and you didn’t believe him.
But tax collectors and prostitutes believed him.
Yet even after you saw this, you didn’t change your hearts and lives
and you didn’t believe him.”