

Sermon, 3 Lent A

John 4:5-42, Exodus 17:1-7 & Romans 5:1-11
Preached Feb. 24, 2008 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

Sometimes, you don't realize how thirsty you are ... until you can't find anything to drink.

Such a self-evident truth may be perfectly obvious to everyone else. But it didn't hit me with much force until recently. About two weeks ago, I had a few hours of free time and decided to take a hike in the woods behind our house. It was a sunny day, not too warm, not too cold — just right for a walk in the forest. It was so nice that I didn't bargain for how long I would go or how thirsty I'd become. I had on a long-sleeve shirt and long pants, which — 90 minutes into my adventure — proved to be the wrong things to wear.

So, there I was: taking a break on the side of the trail, wishing I had brought a bottle of water with me. Not long after that, my two dogs found a creek, with what looked like cool and refreshing water, and they wasted no time drinking and splashing around to their hearts' content. As I watched them, all I could think about was how thirsty I was — and how I knew better than to drink from a creek I didn't know anything about. The end of my little story is that I made it safely back to our house, stood in front of our kitchen sink, and drank a big tumbler full of cold water until I couldn't drink any more.

I remembered this when I began looking at today's readings. The Israelites, wandering in the wilderness, become so thirsty they're ready to revolt against Moses when there seems to be no water for them to drink. In the Gospel reading, the woman at the well gives Jesus a drink of water to satisfy his bodily need. But he offers her "living water" — to quench a different kind of thirst. Even in the second reading from Romans, it's not hard to imagine Paul talking about God's grace as the one thing which can refresh our souls when they grow weary through hardship and suffering.

But, here's the rub: a cool and refreshing drink doesn't mean much until I really need it — until I'm at the point of anticipating how good it's going to feel going down the back of my throat! Back when the Israelites didn't lack for water, I doubt they worried very much about being thirsty. Until the woman at the well had been through her third or fourth marriage, perhaps she didn't notice the ache in her soul for a love that would not disappoint her. And until Paul endured real hardship, perhaps the grace and mercy of God didn't seem so amazing. How else can we make sense of his claim that human suffering is worth boasting about?

I did some checking around, and it turns out that the human body consists of more than 70 percent water. If we have a deficit of just 1 percent, we will feel thirsty. A 5 percent deficit will bring on a slight fever. At 8 percent, serious physiological problems will occur. A deficiency of 10 percent is life-threatening, and death is certain if the proportion is 12 percent or more. We know with precision how to describe the physical impact of such a deficit. The science of the human body has advanced to this degree. But no one seems to know how to measure a lack of spiritual nourishment on our souls.

In my sermon two Sundays ago, I spoke about my experience of feeling as if I am in the wilderness. I said that my soul is weary, and the grief I am now experiencing has been more difficult than I thought it would be. It's been hard for me to come to this realization and admit it to myself. Normally, I'm a hopeful person who is not inclined to despair or cynicism. But I'm beginning to understand that you can't get what you need until you figure out what that is. Like most people, I won't seek out refreshing water until I acknowledge how thirsty I am. And no

one can plot a course out of the wilderness until he owns up to the reality of where he is.

Think of the Israelites. On the one hand, we could call them a whiny bunch of complainers who should have simply toughed it out until they found more water. On the other hand, we could say they got what they needed sooner than that ... because they asked for it. Moses might never have raised his staff and struck the rock if he hadn't pleaded for God's help out of sheer need. And the woman may never have met Jesus if she hadn't gone to the well in the heat of the day to draw water.

There's something mysterious about human nature and the grace of God. A friend of mine observed recently that it must be part of our fallen condition to assume there's not enough grace to go around. My friend went on to describe how abundant God's blessings had been in his life. But even as he cataloged these gifts and gave thanks for them, he recognized an insidious little voice whispering these words to him: "This could be the end of the line, you know. You've probably received your lifetime allotment, so don't expect any more grace to come your way."

I think one of my perennial challenges is to learn to trust the amazing abundance and availability of grace. See if you can relate to this story: Many years ago in South America, a crew of Peruvian sailors was heading toward the Amazon River when they came upon a strange sight. A Spanish ship was anchored off the coast and all the sailors were lying out on the deck. As the Peruvians drew closer, they saw that the Spaniards were in terrible shape. Their lips were parched and swollen; they were literally dying of thirst.

"Can we help you?" shouted the Peruvians. The Spaniards cried out, "Water! We need fresh water!" The Peruvians told them to lower their buckets and help themselves. The Spaniards — thinking they'd been misunderstood — cried back, "No! We need fresh water!" But they received the same reply, to lower their buckets and take what they needed. They finally did lower their buckets into the ocean waters, but when they raised them again, they discovered — to their amazement — fresh water. Unknowingly, they'd been anchored for days at the mouth of the Amazon River. They were too far from land to see the coast, but not too far from the mouth of the river. They had access to fresh water in abundance. Dying of thirst, the sailors had given up hope. But all they needed to do was lower their buckets. Water, water everywhere ... and all of it completely drinkable. How often do we think about God's grace in the same way? Sometimes, we look for it everywhere when it's actually right under our noses!

My other challenge is to not insist that grace must always come in the same form or from the same source. Water doesn't have to come from a creek or river or well. Sometimes, it might even flow from a rock. A family went to Florida on vacation one spring. They were driving from Fort Lauderdale to Tampa. As far as the eye could see, there were orange trees loaded with fruit. When they stopped for breakfast one morning, the father ordered orange juice with his meal. "I'm sorry," the waitress said. "I can't bring you orange juice. Our machine is broken." At first, the man was dumbfounded. They were surrounded by millions of oranges, and he knew the restaurant had oranges in the kitchen — because orange slices garnished their plates. The problem wasn't a lack of juice. The problem was that they'd become dependent on a machine to get it (from Leroy Eims, The Lost Art of Disciple Making).

In God's economy, you just never know. A Samaritan woman might receive a life-altering gift from a mysterious Jewish man at a public well. An itinerant evangelist named Paul may discover the hard way that God's gracious power is made perfect in human weakness. And a 44 year-old man may discover there are blessings to be found in the wilderness.

So here's my question on this third Sunday in Lent: Is anyone else out there feeling thirsty?