

## Constant Thirst

Constant thirst...or constant hunger...these are realities in many communities. I used to think that they were realities only in those third world countries that appeared in the news or in mission requests...but unfortunately the reality is that constant physical hunger is a reality in many communities much closer to home. As the reality of the upheaval caused by the corona virus has come closer to our area, so has the reality of this being the reality here...that physical hunger faced is faced daily by many in our communities. As the closure of all K through 12 public schools was announced, the issue of how to feed the many children in these schools whose only meals come through those received at school was not only mentioned at the school board but by the governor when he announced the closing. Yet the sheer number dependent given was astounding. Related to that, it was only last week that I was made aware that the number of children in Cabarrus county where I live, who cannot pay even the subsidized lunch money was so great that so far this year that debt owed to the school system was over \$21,000. This became public knowledge when a concerned parent who with his wife was eating lunch with his son and overheard a mother speaking with a teacher about her child's situation. She was unable to completely pay for her child's meals so her child's debt had reached the point where she had to receive an "alternative lunch" until the debt was paid. I happen to know him and the business he runs, he is about the same age as my children. His response was to create a "go fund me type page and that total debt has now been cleared...but even so...how did it get that far out of hand before someone became concerned for those among us....And it seems to me that this situation speaks to more than one type issue...more than the physical that has now been remedied...at least for the moment. How did we get into this situation where our communications are so instantaneous...where we can find out about anything and everything...where distance is no longer a barrier...where we are now being asked to "socially distance" ourselves...yet obviously to me, we have already socially distanced ourselves too far. Because I think in the texts we have before us this morning there are two types of thirsts which are being addressed. The Israelites as they began their journey complained about frequently and loudly about their physical hungers and thirsts. In today's Exodus passage from the Hebrew text, that text about that prolonged stay of those freed slaves in the wilderness, this particular passage is still relatively early in their journey. This passage comes from chapter 17. It was only at chapter 14 that they crossed the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army in pursuit. They then go into the wilderness for three days until they come to water which tastes bitter. They complain to Moses before the Lord makes the water sweet. A little further along the way, at chapter 16 they again find cause to complain of hunger and then are supplied with manna and quail. So when they arrive at this new camp where again there is no water, their response repeats their pattern...they are thirsty and in anger they quarrel with Moses, complaining: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" It seems that no matter how often the Lord has provided for them, each time they doubt. For them the question remains: "Is the Lord among us or not?" They are in a constant state of anxiety, of anticipating a lack, a constant state of thirsty for something. When we turn to the

gospel passage we encounter another of those passages which is unique to the gospel of John, and one that is quite unusual in John's context. In this very prolonged conversation that Jesus has he seems vulnerable, tired and alone. In some sense, it seems a foreshadowing of the passion which is to come. Here and on the cross just before he breathes his last, Jesus thirsts. In most of John's account of Jesus' life, Jesus seems totally in control, invincible, turning water into wine, calling quick to follow disciples, cleansing the temple, schooling the Pharisee Nicodemus in the middle of the night. But here, he is tired, resting by the well in the heat of the day, finally alone. He looks up, and he sees a double outsider—a woman and a Samaritan—someone he should not have contact with—and he asks her to give him a drink. This passage is extraordinary in many ways. One of the most obvious is the boundaries Jesus crosses in opening the conversation. The rift between the Samaritans and Jews is long standing and bitter; and both Jesus and the woman are very aware of them. Some of the differences which separate them despite some common roots are mentioned in the passage. The wider spread common cultural prohibition of contact across gender in both groups is also present. Yet this is the longest conversation Jesus is recorded as having with anyone. And it contains so many twists and turns within these 30 some verses that it is easy to get lost and confused. There is physical thirst and water to quench it which begins the conversation. But then there is living water which becomes a spring of water which gushes up to eternal life. Physical water only quenches thirst temporarily, so the living water which Jesus describes obviously sounds more appealing. But the woman doesn't see a bucket, and the well that is there is the one she knows, the one of her ancestor Jacob. So she wants the water from the well that Jesus is offering. Then Jesus tells her things about herself and convinces her that he is a prophet, and then proclaims to her that he is the Messiah. At this point the disciples return with food, and although they are surprised to see Jesus in conversation with the woman, they evidently don't question him. She leaves her water jar and goes back into the city where she relates her experiences to those there. The newly returned disciples try to get Jesus to eat, but Jesus informs them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." The disciples are puzzled by this, saying, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" To which Jesus replied, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work." It seems that although the woman had been coming to the well at such an unusual time because she was marginalized because of her five husbands and irregular private life, when she went back to the village after her conversation with Jesus, her testimony caused many to believe in him. Verse 40: So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word." Within this passage we again have examples of the disciples' obtuseness, the perception of an outsider. We have the description of the role of experience, testimony, and witness in conversion and belief. We have worship taking place at the well in a conversation where living water is offered and received. Where the following and doing of God's will is nourishing. There are a great many things happening in this

passage, but as I was considering it this week, I kept returning to the idea of the concept that we seem to be constantly thirsty. Our whole society seems to be constantly thirsty...restless...and searching for something to quench a thirst...to satisfy a thirst that hasn't even been clearly defined. At least not in this day and age. Biblically...theologically...I think that it was defined long ago...there is a place within each of us that is not satisfied until we have that source of living water within. I think that is why so many are constantly dissatisfied...discontent. Given our current propensity to categorize, exclude and even demonize those not like us, taking to heart Jesus' radical boundary crossing example in this story would be timely. He did not talk down to the woman...just engaged in conversation. Letting go of the need to shame and judge and instead sharing that which is life giving would be a faithful practice for this Lenten journey and beyond. Taking the time to talk and listen to those we encounter at the well or laundry mat, the local store or on the corner won't be a bad place to start...at least when things return to be able to get within 6 feet of each other. Considering the extent of thirstiness in our lives and world, we would do well to imagine what Jesus' life-giving water might truly look like...especially if we consider that the life-giving water might also include the justice that rolls down like a river and the never-ending stream and cups of cold water given to the little ones in the gospel accounts? That the life giving water we receive which quenches a deep seated thirst within is also meant to provide ways to quench more physical thirsts, thirsts for other things which give meaning to life and witness to the life giving spiritual waters. There are literal and metaphorical thirsts which Jesus' living water can quench and we are called to be ones who enter the fields in service to our Lord which Jesus points out to his disciples that are there and in need of workers to labor as this woman has done by witness. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.