

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
August 28, 2016

***“Keep it Flowing”***  
*by Mary Anne Biggs*

Jeremiah 2:4-13 ~ Luke 14:1. 7-14

There's a lot that separates us from the world of the Bible. They didn't worry with keeping their car engines tuned and their tires at the right pressure ... or rush to read the stock reports and the sports scores online each day. They didn't post pictures of themselves or chat with friends on Facebook. They didn't keep track of their steps with Fitbits. They never lost their cell phones or jumped up to answer them wherever they were. We live in a very different world. But the deep human issues of relationship, community, society, and spirituality are the same. Those basic dynamics never change. And neither does our common need for water.

You might be surprised that I know a little bit about water. When I was attending the University of Arizona, one of John's fraternity brothers suggested that I register for a class in watershed management. “Easy “A” he said, “all you have to do is show up ... all the football players take it.” So I took it ... needless to say, that semester a new professor was teaching it and I have never worked harder in any class just to stay afloat. None of it ever came in handy until I came to this church and met Sandy Gillum. For about 45 seconds she was impressed with my vast knowledge ... until my source of vast knowledge ran bone dry!

But I did learn one thing that I've never forgotten ... the need for water is timeless.

Issues about water ... accessibility, purity, storage ... are something that we and the ancient Hebrews do have in common. We have to protect our access to good water. It was the same in ancient Israel. Water was a precious commodity. It was a serious challenge in a semi-arid land to find reliable sources of water. A walled city could hold out for weeks on slight food rations ... but it could barely last a few days without water. Battles were fought and treaties signed to guarantee access to the stuff of life.

A spring was the best because it was living water ... fresh, clear, cool. In a few places wells were dug which could supply a whole area with good water as long as the water table held. The land had few reliable streams and only one real river. Because of the scarcity of water some communities dug out cisterns ... open pits lined with impervious clay ... to hold the runoff from the occasional rain. But this water was of poor quality ... carrying dirt and bugs and sticks and leaves from the land it drained. It easily became brackish, even polluted.

This is the image Jeremiah uses in our scripture today. Like Israel's other classical prophets, Jeremiah sees the widespread idolatry in the land ... their worship of the popular gods ... their driving greed ... the oppression of the poor by the rich ... the casual disregard of their fellow Israelites who are suffering ... their misplaced trust in the strength of their arms and alliances. The prophets don't shrug off these problems as normal ... the way the real world always is. They see them as a spiritual tragedy of the first order. In our text today God complains through the prophet, calling on creation itself to see the foolishness of Israel:

*"Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water" (Jer 2:12-13).*

Like Israel's other prophets, Jeremiah likes to use vivid visual images to get his point across. He doesn't have a digital camera or a video recorder, so he paints these pictures with words. Look how stupid these people are, he says. I offer the cool, refreshing, healing waters of a spring ... but they have preferred the brackish, polluted, and finally failing waters of their cracked cisterns. I have offered them Evian and Perrier, but they prefer to drink from the cattle trough. They have turned away from God, their true source of life, and turned towards the idols and values and lifestyles that will only bring them death. What kind of fools would do such a thing?

Disaster fell on Israel when they lost focus ... when they abandoned the core values that made them the strong people of God ... when they trusted in politics and wealth and war to save them ... instead of trusting in God. Now I ask you, what would Jeremiah see if he looked at our land today? What would he say to us, about us?

Every summer I have the privilege of attending our Conference meeting in Green Lake ... this summer along with Joy Turpin, Nancy Diepenbrock and Doug Malinsky. It was my eleventh time to attend this annual event, and each one has been special in its own way. I'll never forget my first one when I was invited to go out with a group of clergy colleagues after the meeting ended on Friday night. I assumed of course that we were going to a little chapel in the woods for an hour or two of contemplative prayer. Imagine my surprise when they took me to a bar!

It turned out that David Moyer, our Conference minister at that time, was also present so I guess that sanctified the occasion. In the course of conversation, I met a colleague whose husband had been serving as an army chaplain in Iraq. He had phoned her recently and told her how they put big 50 gallon drums half filled with sand at the gates of their camps which they call "clearing barrels." For everyone's protection at the end of a mission, before they safety their weapons and come into camp, each soldier removes the clip and fires his or her weapon into the clearing barrel just in case a live round might still be caught in the chamber. Usually you hear a click-click-click as the soldier fires an empty rifle into the barrel, but occasionally you hear the loud crack of a live round.

On the day he phoned her he shared that they were coming back from a mission ... hot, tired, frustrated, everybody on their last nerve. Dressed in full armor like everyone else, it was hard to tell he was a chaplain, except chaplains are not allowed to carry any weapons. Nevertheless, when the convoy of jeeps and trucks pulled up by the gate ... and they were all ordered to get out and fire their weapons into the clearing barrels ... the commanding officer was not happy at how slowly her husband was moving. Not recognizing the chaplain, he told him in so many words what a slacker he was ... that his hindquarters better obey headquarters posthaste ... that he better get out of the truck right now and clear his weapon. Whereupon the chaplain got out of the truck, took out his Bible, pointed it into the clearing barrel and yelled "Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Everybody laughed, even the commanding officer, and the tension was broken. Not only the chambered rounds ... but the pent up frustrations had been released into the clearing barrel. Wouldn't it be great if every family had a clearing barrel outside the door so all the frustrations and irritations and hostilities of the day could be released before they come in?

We do have a way of dumping the trash on the people who are closest to us ... or of keeping it all pent up inside until it pollutes our own spirit like a clogged well. Nothing good can get through, and everyone who comes into contact with us is affected negatively by our rancor ... or our cynicism ... or our depression. If we don't tend the well to keep the good water flowing ... the trash will choke out everything that depends on it.

What is the trash that clogs our wells? The news can do it most days ... other people, the kind who never have anything good to say ... the things people say to us, not thinking ... or those who intentionally wound us with their words. Ordinary frustrations, too ... a flat tire ... a computer crash ... trying to make a left turn onto Wall Street in the summer. Most days we are resilient enough to deal with these unexpected interruptions ... but there are times when we are vulnerable and the least little thing feels like a total disaster. But the trash we choke on is more than life's little irritations. We are bombarded by messages that run counter to everything the gospel tells us about loving other people ... about building a society with compassion for all people ... about what gives our lives value and meaning. We are told we are only worth what wealth we control ... what jobs we have. We are told that might makes right ... and that violence is the best way to stake our place in the world. We are barraged with words intended to humiliate and damage people ... with hate speech and tough talk in a variety of forms. We are shown that profits are more important than people ... that the comfort of a few is more important than the health of the many. We are marinated in the racism, sexism, and classism of our culture ... every single day.

Of course, I'm not saying our American culture is totally evil. I'm not saying we are worse than any other nation. But it seems to me at this moment we aren't striving with our best ideals of all people created equal ... of liberty and justice for all ... of mutual dignity and respect ... of people being more important than things ... of caring for one another. And all these other idolatries and self-centered values and abuses of power are not the stuff of life that they are advertised to be ... rather they are soul-killing substitutes for life. They fill us with trash and clog our wellsprings of joy. That's not who we are. As followers of the Christ, those aren't our values. And maybe we lack the power to change our whole culture. Maybe we can't do much to make the world different. But we can keep ourselves from believing the lies. We can remember our source and our values and our way as followers of Christ in the world.

That's why we come here ... to remember ... to renew ... to come together at the source of life and clean out the spring. Here we listen to a scripture from Hebrews that tells us:

*Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Humm? Do you think that might be a hint from God about volunteering at Caritas?) Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God (Hebrews 13:1-8, 16)*

Here we listen to a gospel story where Jesus says,

*When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:12-14).*

Could anything be more countercultural to the values of our day? Can you imagine hearing such things from our political candidates or the nightly news? Who cares about the poor, about strangers, or prisoners these days? Where are you going to hear that money's not all that important but sexual fidelity is and trusting in the Lord is the most important thing of all? That's why we come here. To remember who we are. To remember where real life is found.

We take this time ... this appointed hour with God ... this good gathering with God's family, for granted. It's easier to sleep in. But this time with God in worship is so important to our mental and emotional and spiritual health. Because maybe we can't change the world. But we can keep the world from changing us ... from killing our souls with its words and its ways.

I want to encourage you to join us here every week ... to make it a habit of your heart. We all need to gather with God's people regularly and rake out the trash that's been dumped on us all week ... to clear the spring of living water from the loving Christ alive in our heart of hearts. We all need to remember who we are ... and why we are here ... and that we are included and beloved and worthy of the love of God. We all need to remember our mission to embody God's love in whatever we do ... and for whomever we meet in the new week ahead. We all need to refresh our souls at the wellspring of life through the experience of worship.

May we pray?

Renew our souls, O Lord. Clear away the anxieties and animosities, the confusions and sorrows we've picked up this week. Remind us you are God and we are your children, that Christ is with us and we are not alone. Refresh the joy we knew when we first followed you and help us to stay connected with you each day, to listen to your voice within over the many voices without who offer us sorry substitutes and soul killing poisons they peddle as real life. Lead us through this week ahead to be carriers of your grace that we might model and proclaim a better way, a love that leaves no one out, a compassion that cares for all, a confidence that knows where real riches lie. And bring us back again to this place where we might sing your praise and worship you in the name of Jesus, our savior and sovereign and source. Amen.