

Ingathering Sunday: Water Ceremony

“Filling Your Well”

Homily preached by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

September 9, 2018

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Reading

“Water Table” by Billy Collins

Homily

The theologian and former Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, tells a story of the time her well ran out of water.

It was Thanksgiving. And they had fifteen guests in the house.

She had taken great care in letting everyone know that they did not have an endless supply of water and so each person needed to be mindful of only using the necessary amount of water for things like brushing their teeth, taking a shower, and washing the dishes, and only flushing the toilet when necessary.

Despite their careful rationing, the moment still arrived after they had concluded Thanksgiving dinner, when the tap was turned on to fill the coffee pot, and all that came out was a long airy gasp.

Now, I have never lived off well water and had to deal with this particular risk. I have had the water shut off in places I’ve lived or worked - fortunately only for repairs.

And, I have experienced that feeling of wanting so desperately for fresh water to emerge out of the faucet. That feeling of want can contrast so starkly with the easy feeling of unthinking reliance that comes with taking this precious resource for granted.

Indeed, water is so elemental, so basic, so necessary that until our supply of water is threatened in some way, we often don’t think about where it comes from.

We know, however, that we want and need there to be enough water. We need our sources of water to be abundant and clean whether that is a lake or a reservoir, a publicly available supply piped into our homes, or our own private well.

In artist circles, people talk of filling the well. They're really talking about the well of creativity. This metaphorical well is the place within yourself from which you draw inspiration to write or paint or create music.

But, this metaphor doesn't apply to artists only. We all can understand ourselves to have this kind of inner well that helps us to keep going. An inner wellspring of strength when we face difficult times. An inner wellspring of patience when our nerves are a bit frayed. An inner wellspring of peace when things around us start to fall apart.

Usually, it can be fairly easy to recognize when that inner well starts to run dry if we're staying attuned to our spirits. I think we all reach that point at different times in our life when we feel like we've just got nothing left. And, depending on what's going on in our lives, this may happen multiple times a week or multiple times in a day.

You try to give of yourself in some way - patiently listening to a friend, considering whether to say yes to a request for help, deciding whether to go to that rally or march - and all that comes out is a long, airy gasp.

Barbara Brown Taylor's story got me thinking about what we do when our own metaphorical well runs dry.

Taylor and her fifteen house guests, of course, had to immediately make adjustments when they discovered that the water had run out. They worked together to compensate for the lack of water in the well. Someone went to the grocery store to buy some plastic jugs of water. Someone else helped her spouse go down to the creek to fetch water to use to flush the toilets and to give the animals a drink. And, by the evening, those house guests who had stuck around had learned how to brush their teeth with just four tablespoons of water.

We are in a time now when it can be easy for our inner wells, our reservoirs of hope and of resilience to become quickly emptied out.

I believe that one of the most important roles any religious or spiritual community can play is to be there for one another when the waters are running dry, to give one another a way to re-fill our well.

We create together our time of worship to sustain one another's spirits with our presence and our open hearts. We sip from the fount of love, of empathy, of peace.

We fill up this inner well outside of our worship time, too. When you really pay attention to someone else in coffee hour or in a small group, you offer them a rare chance to be truly and fully seen and heard. Or, you may fill your well by giving back with your time, putting your hands to work, or taking to the street alongside a church companion.

Eventually, Taylor's well did refill. Rains came and the sixty inches of water they had left on Thanksgiving day grew. In the meantime, they had to learn a different kind of reliance on community. And, this took a change of practice.

This month, as we begin another church year, we reflect on the theme of covenant and what it means to be people of covenant. In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, this word is foundational to who we understand ourselves to be as religious people and how we take part in the practice of our faith. Unitarian Universalism is not a faith of creeds but of covenant. We do not ask anyone to sign onto a particular set of beliefs to be a part of this community or faith tradition but we do ask one another to make commitments to how we practice being together as a community.

One of the most important things we can practice is tending to that inner well and making a commitment to engage in the practices that can replenish those wellsprings for ourselves and for others.

We come together in community because ultimately we cannot do this alone. We need to lean on someone or something beyond ourselves. Just like Barbara Brown Taylor and her house guests, we can face together the emptiness that sometimes arises in life and practice new ways of replenishing our spirits.

As we endeavor to do this together, I take much heart in the words in Billy Collins' poem and his allusion to the water table, the cool, unseen reservoir underneath us.

And, I was astonished to learn that even farther down than the water table, deep, deep down below the ground on which this church building stands, way below any of the wells or reservoirs from which our own drinking water might come from, deep within the earth there is another source of water.

Recent scientific discoveries reveal that between the Earth's lower and upper mantles, about 400-500 kilometers below the surface of the Earth, in a region known as the transition zone, there are minerals rich with the elements of water. And, in March of this

year, in fact, scientists announced that they had discovered actual water encased inside diamonds found in the Earth's mantle. Now, some scientists argue that there could be a huge reservoir of water far beneath our feet - a reservoir that could contain several times the water of the Earth's oceans.

In his poem, Billy Collins says, "...my thoughts flow underground trying to imagine the cavernous scene."

This transition zone full of water is almost beyond my imagination and yet it brings me comfort and amazement to know that water, the water that sustains life, is in this innermost place here on our blue planet.

These deep reservoirs - perhaps untapped and undiscovered - lie within each of us.

And, here, in this community, we get to practice.

We practice coming to the well,
we practice sipping of the waters that can refresh our spirits and nourish our souls,
we practice hauling buckets when the water runs dry,
rationing what we must so others can also partake of what we share,
we practice digging deep as we engaged in the messy art of love,
we practice generosity and forgiveness.

We fill the communal well with our own gifts receiving in turn the gifts that can sustain us on our way.