

“I thirst.” John 19:28

A Good Friday sermon by Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
Senior Minister, First Congregational UCC of Colorado Springs
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“Man is what he eats.” With these words, the German materialist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach sought to expose the lie of religion. Belief in God, Feuerbach asserted, is merely the outward projection of man’s inner nature. We are what we eat and nothing more. The idea of God does not nourish. Only food does that.

Despite Feuerbach’s confidence in his own argument, some think he unwittingly expressed the most religious idea of humanity: That is, humans hunger. We hunger for food, for well-being. We hunger for love, to be in relationship. We hunger for justice and for peace. And we hunger for the One who encompasses all these other things - for God, and our hunger for God may be sated by God alone.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus captures this truth, but he speaks less of hunger and more of thirst. In doing so, he gets even closer to describing the nature of what it means to be human. After all, we can live a lot longer without food than we can without water. It is no exaggeration to say that water is life. Our bodies not only need water, they are water. Most of learned somewhere that about 60% of the human body is water. The brain itself is 70% water. Water is not something other than who we are. It is who we are.

And this is true both biologically and spiritually. Jesus’ reference to human thirst and to the ability of water to slake that thirst is not accidental. We as humans thirst for water, for that which makes us who we are. But our thirst for water is the beginning of our thirst as humans. We thirst for the One who makes us who we are, who grants us life, biological and eternal.

“I thirst” is the fifth of Jesus’ last words. To begin to understand this short phrase, let us take into account the role of thirst and of water as they are portrayed by Jesus in the Fourth Gospel.

Consider Jesus’ first miracle, the changing of water into wine at the wedding in Cana. It began with a massive amount of water, clearly a literary exaggeration on the part of the gospel writer. Six stone water jars for the Jewish purification rite, each holding 20 or 30 gallons. That’s 120 - 150 gallons of water. That’s a lot of wine. Too much wine, frankly, for a village wedding, and it was good wine.

The message? To my interpretive ear, there are several: God saves the best for last. That's one. Another: the religious need for purification of sin has been transformed into a celebration of the abundance of God's love. A third: the nature of Jesus' ministry and message shall be that God's kingdom is marked by scandal, surprise, and joy. Finally, at the wedding celebration, that which was most needed was provided in excess. The thirst for God's joy was satisfied.

Speaking of scandal, surprise, and joy, two chapters later, Jesus is traveling through Samaria, the last place on earth a good Jew would want to be found, and he exchanges a lengthy conversation - his longest with any individual in any of the gospels - with a Samaritan woman at a well. In order to hear the scandal in this interaction, we need to imagine a modern equivalent of "Samaritan" - something like jihadist, atheist, or just liberal or conservative, depending upon your own political bias. The point is, someone with a very different ideological framework. And we also need to find an equivalent for "woman," since it was seriously inappropriate for a man and a woman who were not married to be alone, speaking to each other. Depending upon your own situation, substitute for "woman," gay person, red neck, secular humanist, fundamentalist, or the like. The point is, someone with whom your friends and family would not approve of your speaking.

The Samaritan woman was at the well to collect water, a common, daily task in her day and in our day in countless corners of the world. Consider a place like southern Sudan where village women must travel four hours or more each day to collect water for basic family needs. In the heat of the day, Jesus and this woman talk about thirst. At first, the woman thinks he is talking literally, offering her some magical way of easing her daily chores, but he guides her deeper. "Those who drink of the water that I will give them," Jesus tells her, "will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Of course, when she begins to understand what he's talking about, she wants it. To be human is to thirst. To thirst for water that comes from a well, yes. And to be human is to thirst for the Living Water that comes from God alone. Water from a well that never runs dry.

Years later, in Jerusalem, Jesus gathers with his disciples on the eve of his death, and there he enacts rituals, employs symbols to express the love he has for his friends and the meaning of suffering he is about to undergo. In John's gospel, the sacrament that is instituted at the Last Supper is not Communion, but the washing of feet. The Maundy of Maundy Thursday comes from the Latin *Mandatum*, in English, *Mandate*. In verse 14 of chapter 13, Jesus gives his disciples a mandate, "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

Water becomes, for Jesus, the sign of servanthood and humility. Normal water in a basin is used for the sacramental purpose of acknowledging that we belong to one another and are called by a loving God to serve one another. Keep in mind that in that mostly sandal-clad culture, feet were uglier and dirtier than they are now. They were the ultimate symbol of human filth. Stoop down, our Lord and Teacher tells us, and take into your hands the filthiest part of your sister and brother, serving them with loving care.

The final mention of water in the gospels is verse 34 of John's 19th chapter. After he had died, instead of breaking his legs, "One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out." Jesus died like any human, 60% blood, sweat, and tears, just like the rest of us. The man who claimed "I and the Father are one," did not die an extraordinary, divinely-ordained death. It was certainly not a natural death. He was executed as a common criminal in a terrifyingly mundane way, crucifixion. This is the way others in his day who challenged or defied the state also died.

On the surface of things, Jesus died a relatively normal death, but was he a normal person? Early Christians struggled with this question, and the orthodox formulations that came out of their struggle suggest a paradox, that is, the answer is both "yes" and "no." Yes, he was a human being and lived an earthly life. He cried, struggled, laughed, joked, sang, bathed, used the toilet, got tired, angry, and excited. Yet, he was also divine, wholly different from that which is merely human, one with the creator of heaven and earth. The 5th century Chalcedonian Creed articulates the paradox, calling Jesus "fully God and fully human."

If this is so, how then must we interpret the fifth word? In what sense did Jesus thirst? If we deny him his divinity, then Jesus thirsted like the rest of us and Feuerbach was right - our thirst is merely biological and any spiritual thirst is a projection of our bodily need for water.

But if we deny him his humanity, we are in just as much trouble - the Incarnation is a lie, God never really committed to becoming human, the idea that God loves humanity enough to experience human suffering is a ruse.

But if the paradox - the inexplicable mystery - is true, if the answer is both “yes” and “no,” then human thirst for God and God’s thirst for humanity find communion in our Lord and Teacher, and through him, find a chance to commune in our own life. In other words, God’s thirst for us and our thirst for God are one in the same, shown forth in the person of Jesus, and made manifest in our own living and striving. Is Jesus normal? Yes, he is the “norm” of what it means to be human, the true human who thirsts for well water and for God’s Living Water. This is what makes him extraordinary.

While we may be able to describe what it means to thirst for well water, we have a much harder time naming our thirst for the Living Water that God provides. But let us not pretend that these two sorts of thirst are entirely different one from the other. That is why Jesus uses the metaphors of thirst and water. There is something in one that is also in the other.

Our bodies’ thirst for water may not be separated from our Spirit’s thirst for God, and our thirst for God may not be separated from God’s thirst for humanity. Jesus deliberately uses earthly symbols to speak about heavenly truths because Jesus knows God’s purpose is to engage humanity in the world God loves - remember John 3:16, for God so *loved* the world? God’s thirst is a thirst for justice in the here and now. God created a world with enough resources for all and charged humans with the responsibility to care for the earth and for one another.

Consider this: water is at a premium in our world, friends. While the earth is covered mostly with water, less than 1% of it is safe to drink. The clean tap water we take for granted is the water for which our bodies thirst. It is the same water for which our human kindred throughout the world thirst. When you hear Jesus’ say “I thirst,” if you’re listening closely, you’ll hear a whole chorus of voices:
The voice of your own spirit, thirsting for God.
The voice of God, thirsting for justice in creation and among God’s people.
And the voices of people throughout the earth thirsting for well water and the Living Water of God, both of which bring health and cleanliness and vitality and life.

Before I close, I ask you to consider the meaning of this important detail. Jesus, on the cross, says, "I thirst." Someone standing there soaks a sponge in some sour wine, or vinegar, which is there in a bowl, puts it on a hyssop branch and holds it up to Jesus' mouth. He drinks. What we know from the time is that a bowl of sour wine mixed with myrrh would be provided at a crucifixion. It served as a narcotic, a palliative. Was this what Jesus was hoping for when he said, "I thirst" and when he drank? The man Jesus, who spoke of a divine thirst and the Living Water of God which would well up within us to eternal life, now settled for a pain killer? Perhaps as a human, he, like we, given the choice, chose to dull his pain, but I think the detail exposes a painful truth: we thirst for clean, clear, life-giving water, and the world so often gives us sour wine instead. The abundant jars of water into wine, here, at the foot of the cross, are reduced to a bowl of vinegar.

"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me," Jesus once cried out, "and let the one who believes in me drink... 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Are you thirsty? Come. Will you trust in Jesus? Do you dream his dream of the kingdom? Come and drink. Do you dare to proclaim that Jesus' vision of a just world is not just a great idea, but the only concrete possibility worth giving your life to? Come, drink, and thirst no more. Come, drink, but know this - once your thirst is satisfied, God's going to use you in scandalous, surprising, and yes, joy-filled ways, for, as Jesus says, "out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of Living Water." Your heart becomes the well from which others may drink and thirst no more.

Will you pray with me?

God, you who emptied yourself in the person of Jesus, throughout his life and through his death on a cross, thank You for gathering us in as Your people. We pray your blessing upon us as we drink of the fellowship we share, an expression of Your care for all people.

May we be mindful, O Lover of Your Creation, that while most in this sanctuary can easily access clean water every day, the majority of your beloved humanity has no such access. We pray for those who will go thirsty today, for children who die as a result of draught and pollution, for people who become sick from contaminated water sources. Let us acknowledge that such suffering is not your plan and that we have often been complicit or complacent with regard to the lack of clean water on this earth.

Enable and embolden us, by your Mercy, O God, to speak on behalf those who are sick from thirst, to act on their behalf, and in the words of Jesus, “to give a cup of water to these little ones.” We thirst for you, O God. May we not settle for sour wine, but for the Living Water Christ offers, water that springs up to eternal life. May our thirst for eternal life not distract us from praying and working for abundant life in this world you and we so love.

I pray this in the name of the Thirsty One, in whom human and divine thirst find their communion. Amen.