

“Enough for All” John 4:5-42
Ecumenical Advocacy Days 2009 Interdenominational Worship
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The following sermon is also available [HERE](#) on Church World Service’s website

“How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”

This is such an interesting question. The scripture for this service is long and ranging, and fraught with many topics to discuss and angles to consider in the living out of faith. There is good reason why you might well have heard the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman preached many times over. Today, I want to talk about this, but I don’t want to dissect the whole story.

Oh, I could preach now about the irony of Jesus finding rest at Jacob’s well, in the same city where Jacob constructed an altar dating back to Genesis honoring God’s unwavering accompaniment. This Jacob, who when he sought forgiveness was humbled by Esau telling him, “I have enough, my bother; keep what you have for yourself.” To which Jacob replied, “...to see your face is like seeing the face of God.” I could make the case that it was at this same well centuries later that Jesus in his moment of fatigue saw the face of God; and that we too are invited to come to the well and have our souls revived.

I could preach about the Samaritan woman’s lament about having to keep coming back to the well day after day in order to draw water, and how even today for millions of women in the two-thirds world this unrelenting reality debilitates or exhausts their hopes and dreams of a better life. Yes, I can tell you that this scripture teaches that there isn’t just one or two versions of the creation story, but that the bible is the unfolding truth that always because of the imperfections of the day before, that with the dawning of each new day we are once again drawn to the well hoping that we can finally get it right, that we can lower our bucket far enough and finally, finally draw enough to be satisfied and no longer have to endure the drudgery, and the dehumanizing disappointments of life.

I could preach about the water jar, and tell you that this Samaritan was not the first woman to leave one behind. I could remind you that when Abraham’s servant met Rebekah at a well and asked her for a drink she drew enough to satisfy the servant and even his camels. Like the Samaritan, Rebekah was overcome by the holiness of the moment, and she too ran back home. One woman left the jar empty, and the other left it full; but whether the jar is sometimes full or sometimes empty, the message remains the same - we are never deprived of the astonishing experience of meeting God along the way. Come and see!

No, today, I don’t want to dissect the whole story. Today, I just want us to think about the Samaritan woman’s question, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”

Hear the woman’s astonished response to Jesus request for water. She is flabbergasted; after all, it is a remarkable situation. Scripture can sometimes take us to unexpected places. This passage reminds me that the earth spins on an axis of polar opposites, where one end cannot do without the other, and where harmony is essential if either is to exist. Polarity is the presence or manifestation of two opposite or contrasting principles or tendencies. Day bursts forth from night; and in our world there is good/bad, right/wrong, light/darkness, patience/impatience. You can name so many more polar opposites that touch and help shape: who we are, one’s outlook, priorities, and the things we will literally live and die for. Some people refer to this as paradox, others as dilemma, but it’s all the same – contrasts and contradictions that are part of the daily tension of life.

You, asking me for a drink! Isn't it the likes of you who passes by on the other side of the road rather than help someone attacked and left for dead, because he is lowly like a Samaritan? Now, you ask me for a drink, isn't this interesting! On the surface it seems so absurd that the one would ask this of the other, but that's what polarity does. It says to us, this is the reality, now deal with it. The woman had to deal with it, and so did Jesus. Before they could even get to the holiness of their meeting they first had to overcome the absurdity of the moment, and that meant they had to deal with the necessity of the other. For Jesus, one could say it was rather easy and straightforward, he wanted water and she had the cup. Of course it is far more complicated than that. For the woman, perhaps it was not so apparent at first, but soon enough she would realize that Jesus also held the cup for what she wanted, "Water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming to draw water." We know enough about the Jesus story to understand that this was no accidental meeting. Jesus picked his preaching venues and audiences carefully and artfully. In each encounter there is plot and sub-plot, the conflict of gospel and culture, and the opportunity to make choices.

Jesus speaks of polarities. "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

In an article entitled, *Managing Polarities*, Dr. Barry Johnson commented:

Whenever you focus on one pole to the neglect of the other, you get its downside. Whenever you have a polarity to manage, by focusing on one pole to the neglect of the other, you will first get the downside of the pole where you focused, and then you will get the downside of the neglected pole. You end up over time getting the downside of both poles.¹

In this story we cannot afford to focus only on Jesus' need to the neglect of the woman's need, or the other way around. Life is not conveniently "either/or". Either/or deprives us of that which we so desperately need to know and experience for ourselves – that God comes looking for us, and that found in God is the capacity to satisfy our every need. Likewise, we will never see the face of God unless we are looking for it, and God will not be able to satisfy our needs unless we are willing to let our cup be filled.

By now you may be wondering, what does this have to do with our being here? Your wondering is just in time. Just as the Samaritan woman's question signaled polar opposites, so does Countdown to Copenhagen. For people of faith *Copenhagen*, as it is casually referred to, represents a theological and moral dilemma – a dilemma over carbon emissions; and the unfettered greenhouse gases from power plants, factories and motor vehicles that are causing the earth's temperature to rise, polar caps to melt, and oceans to rise: formula for an unprecedented human and ecological disaster. Does that sound like a doomsday scenario; well then, hear it for what it portends.

Even officials in the former Bush administration that once decried climate change as the concoction of ultra-liberal and environmentalist imagination now admit that global emissions of CO2 are shooting up, the summer sea ice of the Arctic Ocean is melting far more quickly than anyone imagined, and changing climate is now visible.

In a brilliant letter, the United Church of Christ declares:

Our theological sense of place and the natural sciences reveal in startling, magnificent ways a profound relationship among living beings, the elements, and all matter of the universe. The social and the environmental dance together. Each species and habitat, each culture and region,

¹ Rick Mauer, M.A., *Managing Polarities. An Interview with Barry Johnson, PhD.* *Gestalt Review*, 6(3):209–219, 2002.

*each place and people in the world expresses the divine image. Each embodies an inherent worth that is indeed sacred and good, worthy not only of care, but also of celebration and appreciation in the living of our days.*²

The church points to the gravest threat our world has ever faced: global warming; and calls not only for theological discourse, but resolution of the crisis in ways that bring all of creation into harmony with its Creator. The church understands, however, Copenhagen, cannot spin on the basis of a theological pole alone.

Polarity is the presence or manifestation of two opposite or contrasting principles or tendencies. What makes for polarity in this case is the political and ethical pole that is unfolding on the opposite side of the spectrum. Even if every major government accepts global warming as truth, consensus as to how carbon emissions should be addressed remains elusive. The European Union is adamant that, “developed country leadership is...not enough: [that] a significant contribution from developing countries is also required.” But the Chinese, now the world’s biggest carbon emitters, and most prominent amongst the developing countries, so far feel that they have a moral right for their economy to grow unchecked. As a result their carbon emissions continue to spew forth and threaten the biosphere. Talk about plot and sub-plot with the presence of additional polarities, like wealth and poverty.

Poor countries have long been left by wealthier ones to figure out for themselves how to get out of the abyss of a hungered, impoverished, and destabilizing dilemma. Even when the rich have offered assistance to the poor, it often comes at such a steep cost and compromise of dignity as to be indecent. It is only in the prosperity of the last two decades that the two-thirds world has begun to allow itself to imagine the possibility of overcoming poverty. Having been left by the side of the road so long, now they ask, “How is it that you ask a drink of me?”

What is becoming increasingly clear is that a solution must be found within the tension of the presence or manifestation of two opposite or contrasting principles or tendencies, or, two poles pulling in different directions. It is within the tension of these two poles, whether theological and political –or- wealth and poverty where we must find our voice. Listen to the dialogue between the two, “Give me a drink.” “How is it that you ask a drink of me?” But also understand the implications of an unresolved conflict: our neighbors go hungry because of drought and emerging deserts; people’s health deteriorates because agricultural productivity declines and in some cases collapses; families lose their homes because of melting glaciers and expanding oceans; and, entire island nations become displaced. Fifty percent of the world’s population lives in cities, occupying a mere two percent of the land. What happens when seeds no longer reach maturity in the countryside, and when there is no more water in the city?

Britain’s Energy and Climate Change Secretary, Ed Miliband, said that wealthy industrialized countries have to agree to tough new targets for cutting their CO₂, developing countries have to move away from “business as usual”, and rich nations have to agree to a way of financing the developing countries, especially the poorer ones, in the measures they take to adapt to climate change. Miliband points to the necessity of a common world energy policy – of enabling the two poles to spin in harmony, lest everything spin out of control. This is a matter of political will and it is one that the church must be a partner in.

The church cannot be oblivious to the situation, and her people too must engage in responsible behavior. It is not enough for us to lift theological and moral platitudes, we need to also lead by example and put

² The United Church of Christ , [And Indeed It Is Very Good A Pastoral Letter on Faith and Environment: Living in Community with God’s Creation.](#)

our faith into action in order to avert this existential threat to our children and grandchildren – it means that on a personal level I have to do even the simplest of things like driving less, turning off unnecessary lights, unplugging unused appliances, controlling waste, and adjusting thermostats according to season. For many church traditions the season of Lent takes on the peculiar element of personal sacrifice, however symbolic, though often times quite superficial in nature. The Washington, D.C.-based Center for Global Development (CGD) reported, “To avoid a shared global disaster, we... need to cut our [own] emissions quickly and do much more to help developing countries shift to a low-carbon future, while at the same time meeting the just aspirations of their people for a better life.” And Americans need to do more than just confess complicity: when four percent of the global population is responsible for 25 percent greenhouse gas emissions it means they have the power to affect substantive change. Reducing our carbon footprint, making our voices heard and our presence known, sharing the burden of the poor, and offering living water is worthy of the liturgies we profess.

The Samaritan woman asked a critical question, which from her perspective was rooted in justice. So too must the church, but at the same time it must be ever cognizant of the poles that hold the question of justice in tension; and the reminder that if the woman is only talking to herself there is no dialogue, and there is no possibility for justice. Thank God she was talking to Jesus; and we must insist that governments talk to their people as well.

Former President Bill Clinton said, “Yes, we are in the midst of a global economic meltdown, but we have come through what is probably the most profitable time in global history, but at the same time we have been on a speedway towards the gravest crisis and challenge any of us could possibly imagine... [And] in order to lower carbon emissions and reverse the trend of global warming we need the input of, “Good business, good government, and a viable civil society.”

German Chancellor Dr. Angela Merkel, said, “We need a new worldwide consensus on how we can restrict the effects of global warming to a tolerable level.”

Kevin Watkins, editor of the human development report, said that climate change “is about social justice and the human rights of the world’s poor and marginalized... [and the] ...struggle to help the world’s poor build a better life for themselves and their children.”

This not about some of us, it is about all of us, and the choice is not between survival and development (economic growth). It is not just about Jesus or just about the Samaritan woman; it is about both of them. Both theologically and politically, it is about a choice wherein all can feel that something significant is to be gained. For the wealthy and the poor, it is a choice about finding a path where the clash of culture and values is not so great or hurtful as to leave us in an unresolved standoff. For the developed and the underdeveloped nations, it is about overcoming absurdity and polarization of plot and sub-plots, and dealing with the truth that what makes creation good is the sum of its parts, and not just some. And for each and every one of us, it is about the opportunity to make choices – like moving beyond the question, “How is it that you ask a drink of me,” and stretching towards holiness, where seeds are planted and harvested, where water is drawn from wells, and where all of us invited to the feast and to drink without reservation, because we understand in our hearts, in our minds, and in the depths of our souls what it means to be human; and believe that truly, there is enough for all.