

October 28, 2007

Pentecost 22

Proper 25

The Rev. David W. Lovelace

One of my favorite pictures was taken thirty, maybe forty years, ago when we were first able to travel into space and look back at the earth. As one looked at the amazing images of this place we call "home" it was evident that what we call "earth" might better be called "water." Our planet home is a cloud wrapped ball of blue oceans with a string of continents like jewels on a necklace. The waters of the oceans, rivers and streams rise in vapors that condense into clouds swept along the face of the earth by winds. These clouds send down their moisture in varying amounts as rain, snow or sleet, which in turn soak into the ground to trickle back eventually to the oceans. We are surrounded by water.

All of our lives depend on water. We are told that ninety five percent of our body is water. Water is truly where we live and have our being.

Today we are understanding the importance of water. We have been faced with a bit of a drought in York but nothing like other areas of our country. The lake that serves as a reservoir for the Atlanta, Georgia area has dried up this summer. The Rio Grande and Colorado Rivers have no running water in them. Despite these dry conditions we have enough water available to dull our senses to the fact that water is the next crisis we human beings are going to face and we are totally dependent on water for our very lives.

The people of Jeremiah's time understood the importance of water. The Israelites even after they stopped wandering in the wilderness depended on water for their crops, their livestock and their lives. Jeremiah describes for us the effect of a drought. Because there is no water, people lament and the cry goes up. Judah "covers her head" as one would do in mourning. The rains have not come, the land is parched, crops will not grow, and there is no grass for the animals. Thus the people acknowledge their iniquities and call upon God not to forsake them. The people were sure that God was both angry and to blame for their plight.

"Why should you be a stranger in the land," the people demanded of God. "You, O Lord, are in the midst of us and we are called by your name." Dry land, dry throats, laid bare dry souls. The people repent and beg God for mercy. They lay claim to the

covenant asking God to revive the land in the form of rain that will revive their souls. They know their only hope is in the Lord.

In the conclusion of Paul's second letter to Timothy he expresses his own trust in the Lord. Paul knows his days are drawing to a close and he claims with confidence that he has "fought the good fight" and "kept the faith." Though others have not stood with Paul in his time of trial he is sure "the Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the message fully." Paul trusts that God will save him for the heavenly kingdom.

The problem with the Pharisee in the parable told by Jesus is that he does not know the importance of water. He does not trust that it is God who gives him life and God who sustains his life. He has this idea that life is all about him. His prayer is a prayer of drought.

There is this preacher on television who makes me embarrassed to be called a Christian. He is so self righteous. He quotes from the Bible as if he is an authority handing out judgment on everyone who is not like him. He preaches that the problems we face in America are because of nonbelievers and homosexuals. He says things will not improve until we return to prayer in schools. If we would just do as our money says and trust in the God he preaches then we would all be wealthy beyond our wildest dreams.

"God, I thank you that I am not like that preacher." I work for justice for all of your people and believe that you love all people. I work in this church to make all people feel welcome and accepted. I believe that people should be allowed to exercise their faith without interference from the government, I have real problems with the Gospel of prosperity. I thought Jesus invited us to be aware of the least among us and give all we have so we might be blessed. Thank you God, I am not like that preacher, that tax collector.

There is a young man that hangs around downtown. He seems to be wandering aimlessly through life. He smells like he has not bathed in weeks and wears the same clothes day after day. He does not seem to be very bright. I am not sure where he lives but he does not seem to have any friends. I doubt his parents even know or care that he is hanging on the streets.

Thank you, God, that my children are not like that young man. My children finished school and did well for themselves. They all have good jobs, nice homes and the desire to make something of their lives. They seem to have lots of friends and people

around them who care. I thank you, God, they are not like that young man, that tax collector.

Unfortunately, it is all too easy to adopt the attitude of the Pharisee in the parable told by Jesus. The Pharisee trusted in himself and his actions. This Pharisee is a man of elite status in the society of his day. He is educated and holds a position of respect in the community. On the other hand, the tax collector was counted amongst the worse of sinners. Devout Jews considered paying taxes to any foreign power treason against God and did not include tax collectors in polite company. Tax collectors could charge any rate they chose as long as the government got what was due. So, most tax collectors made out quite well.

Jesus says these two men went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee gives thanks "he is not like other people.....especially that tax collector over there." He follows the practices of fasting and gives double his tithe. Surely he is superior to other people. Although his prayer is offered in the form of a thanksgiving it is a prayer of self recognition without the realization of reliance on God.

In contrast, the tax collector prays, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." He realizes his need for God's forgiveness and grace. He lowers his head and asks for mercy.

How dry I am. How dry we are. Drier than we recognize. We have turned a vast store of water into an endangered resource by overuse and pollution, while others struggle for water to live. It is as if we refuse to admit the spiritual drought within. We grab, guzzle and waste as fast as possible striving to satisfy the unquenchable thirst within. As a result we render water in the words of theologian Thomas Berry, "unfit either for drinking or for baptism."

As with any over consumption, our water wasting has a spiritual thirst at its core. We are indeed dry and we long for the water of the spirit. We are like grass that for too long has been denied rain, we are like kindling in the California desert. We rustle and scrape together, are easily broken. We need new water, we long for new life. Unfortunately spiritual dryness is not as easy to detect as physical drought. We fill up, like the Pharisee, with ten thousand things never stopping to ask God for rain or believing that God can satisfy our thirst.

The good news is that God's mercy overflows like a fountain. All about us is what the Eastern orthodox call "uncreated energies" and others the grace of God.

This parable is a sobering reminder that all we have and all we are is a gift from God. We are all in need of God's grace and forgiveness no matter how great we think we are or how small we might seem. We are all loved and accepted by God. We are all children of God with the ability to be good stewards of the gift of life and the gift of this wonderful planet our island home where there is more than enough for everyone.

Merciful God, forgive us when we misuse the gifts you have bestowed upon us. Humble us, so that all we receive and all we become might be used in service to you and others for the building up of your kingdom where all are loved and all accepted.

Amen