

“Thirsty” – Luke 16:19-31 (September 25, 2016)
Ned Allyn Parker

The rich man cried, “Sarah and Abraham, have pity on me! Send Lazarus so that he might dip the tip of his finger into water and cool my tongue, because I am suffering...”

||

It was early fall. Sugar maple leaves were just beginning to turn orange at their tips. My best friend, Jeremy Davis, and I climbed into Jeremy’s dad’s eight-foot skiff. No motor; just oars. Jeremy always rowed because he didn’t trust a city slicker – because he didn’t trust *this* city slicker to work hard enough. This was the boat we used to haul our lobster traps set and soaking throughout the harbor in Port Clyde, Maine (the small fishing village where I grew up).

It was a precarious undertaking. Two high school kids out in the early morning hours. A tiny fiberglass boat. Fifty pound traps pulled up out of the water by hand. A bucket filled with thirty pounds of dead, salted and slowly decomposing herring used for bait. Angry lobsters – pinchers snapping wildly – moving critters that had to go somewhere once they were removed from the traps.

I mean really... What could possibly go wrong?

Though a soupy New England fog rested heavily over the port when we set out, it quickly burned off while we worked between traps.

The sun overhead played off of the colors of the turning trees on shore. My dad would say that: “This was the kind of day that fools people into moving to New England.”

After a few hours of hauling traps (and dodging lobster pinchers), Jeremy and I had sweat through the heavy clothes we’d worn to protect us from the earlier crisp damp morning air. Jeremy’s two-liter bottle of Coke Classic was long since consumed; we it tied to a buoy since we didn’t have room for it in the boat.

It was one of the few times in my life that I was so thirsty I could actually feel my tongue drying out and swelling up in my mouth.

We communicated in grunts and huffs – sometimes Jeremy in four letter words I can't repeat in the pulpit. When we did talk, it was through dry caked lips.

We were thirsty.

There we were: floating in the second largest body of water in the entire world with nothing at all to drink.

Eventually we made our way to the dock in front of the Port Clyde General Store and were able to sate our thirst. In a place of unrecognized privilege, at the time, this thirst was an annoyance more than it was anything else.

Real thirst – *sustained* thirst – is more than a minor inconvenience. A lack of fluids eventually causes catastrophic failure to our internal organs; without water, kidneys fail and the body can shut down. Hydration keeps organs functioning and flushes contaminants from our system. When we experience thirst, our body is telling us something. Our body is speaking to us in its own way; it's reminding us to survive. Recognizing and responding to thirst is one way to keep ourselves healthy.

||

My friends, this is a thirsty world we live in. And a deep and sustained thirst for justice and equality causes the internal workings of society to come apart. Racial tensions; gun violence, economic disparity are all signs of a deep and sustained thirst.

After witnessing this last week unfold, we must ask ourselves: “What do our neighbors thirst for?” How do we dip our fingers in the cool waters of compassion and love and touch our fingertips to their lips?

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that “riots are the language of the unheard.”

It’s a language that comes when humanity itself is utterly parched because humanness has gone unappreciated, unrecognized, unnamed. What humanness? What humanity?

What happens if we place the framework of the story about Jeremy and I over the social iniquity of our city and nation and see our friends, neighbors surrounded by an ocean and yet still thirsty?

Surrounded by houses – new and old, big and small, highrises, apodments, duplexes, house boats, single family homes – neighbors surrounded by houses, but still no place to live.

It’s like floating in an ocean with nothing to drink.

Surrounded by money, banks, atm’s, Boeing, Amazon, Starbucks, Microsoft – neighbors surrounded by wealth, but still asking for pocket change on the corner of Pike and Harvard.

It’s like floating in an ocean with nothing to drink.

Surrounded by churches – house churches and mega-churches; village churches and downtown churches; Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Unitarian, Episcopalian, Baptist – neighbors surrounded by churches, but still looking for someone to look them in the eyes, call them by name and treat them like Jesus would have treated them.

It’s like floating in an ocean with nothing to drink.

Thirsty.

||

It’s interesting that the rich man doesn’t say, “I’m thirsty, give me something to drink.” He says, “I’m thirsty, go make Lazarus give me something to drink.”

It is far too infrequently we say, “Let’s help our neighbors experiencing homelessness find a place to live.” It is far too frequently we say, “Let’s sweep them up, dump them out, and make them find something themselves.”

Make *them* move.

Make *them* change.

Make *them* take on the burden of our discomfort.

Make them rest their heads in the shade of a new luxury condominium, until their presence becomes too unsightly.

Surrounded by an ocean with nothing to drink.

Unfortunately for the rich man, we see yet more irony in our scripture passage this morning. The rich man cried, “Sarah and Abraham, have pity on me! Send Lazarus so that he might dip the tip of his finger into water and cool my tongue, because I am suffering...”

The irony was not that he was surrounded by water, as Jeremy and I had been. Instead, here he was in death asking for pity from the very same one that he, himself, had failed to take pity on in life.

There’s a little Charles Dickens’ metaphor happening here. I’m sorry to make the leap to Christmas while we’re still in September (maybe I’m not sorry). Maybe it’s because I’m trying to figure out the theme for the Do-It-Yourself Christmas Pageant already. But this feels like Charles Dicken’s Christmas Carol gone wrong. In Jesus’ parable the rich man finds himself in Hades – which should be a pretty clear indicator you’ve gone awry somewhere along the way – but the rich man hasn’t learned anything at all. There’s no evidence of a Scrooge-like transformation.

And maybe this is the point. With parables, Jesus' unspoken questions always seem to be: "Who do you relate to in this scenario?" And: "Would you act any differently?"

The rich person who refused to give Lazarus anything to eat in life – not even a scrap from the table – now wants *Lazarus* to bring something to him to drink. Jesus' parable suggests that even in death the rich person is surrounded by indicators of a life wrongly lived, and yet nothing was learned at all.

Thirst is overwhelming.

How is it relieved?

Remember that we, friends, we gather here to remember Jesus – Jesus, who knew thirst. Before he died he uttered those very words, "I thirst." Jesus knows our suffering – Jesus stands with all of humanity; Jesus becomes a companion who experiences our most base needs with us.

||

When one enters the chapel of the Missionaries of Charity – the religious order founded by the recently sainted Mother Teresa of Calcutta – you find a cross with those words written beneath it in bold black letters: "I thirst." It was and – I believe – remains the only adornment in the chapel besides a statue of Jesus' mother, Mary.

Mother Teresa used to explain that this cross hung in the chapel with these words to let visitors know that the Missionaries of Charity were founded to "Quench the thirst of Jesus for souls, for love, for kindness, for compassion, for delicate love..."

...To quench the thirst of Jesus for compassion and delicate love...

Jesus, the one who knows the desperate and insidious nature of real thirst.

That same Jesus is the Jesus who says, “If anyone – anyone – is thirsty, let that person come to me and drink.” The same Jesus who proclaims: “Indeed, the water I give will become in you a fount of living water...”

Perhaps Jesus is able to sate our very deepest thirst because he, himself, knew it through experience.

And this is what has led some theologians to ask if Lazarus – the poor man in our story – is Jesus inserting himself into his own parable. Lazarus, who was the only named person in any of Jesus’ parables; Lazarus who knew what suffering was in life; Lazarus who knows what hunger and thirst are, Lazarus who (by the end of the parable) sits on the other side in paradise.

What we learn about Jesus, who knows our thirst and who offers a drink from living waters, is that perhaps his most divine and awesome power is empathy.

Jesus, who said, “I thirst.” *I* thirst.

How many of us have been thirsty? In some way, shape or form?

Thirsty for something to drink; thirsty for justice; thirsty for hope... thirsty for a little empathy – so thirsty we just needed someone to dip the tip of their finger in living waters and touch it to our lips. To remind us we are loved, cherished, noticed, human (for goodness sake).

||

It doesn’t seem like the rich man has learned a thing. But eventually, as he looks out across the abyss, he makes a request. Not for himself, but for others. He asks that Lazarus be sent back to warn his brothers.

Amy Jill-Levine writes, “what the rich man asked Lazarus to do – to warn his brothers of the threat of hell – the parable does for the readers. Will the five brothers, who may hear the

Torah's insistence that they 'love the neighbor' and 'love the stranger' listen? We do not know."

But *we* should be compelled to ask *ourselves*: "Will *we*?"

Jesus said, "I will give living water..." Sometimes that water is actual physical water – hydration; sometimes it's recognition, validation; sometimes it's the moment we stand alongside another in need; sometimes it's empathy ... What we learn from Jesus is that these living waters are always offered in love to anyone who is thirsty.

Shouldn't that be what *we* do?

Shouldn't we practice a little sacred empathy for a world as parched as this one?

||

You know, Jeremy and I were both pretty thirsty as we bobbed up and over the small waves cresting around the skiff.

If memory serves, I think I did a lot more whining than Jeremy did.

I was tired and frustrated and thirsty. I was so thirsty.

Jeremy reminded me we'd be back to shore soon; he even gave me the last few gulps of his Coke classic.

But he gave me more than a few words and some swigs of soda. He gave me what I needed.

Because really: I needed to know, no matter how big the ocean, I needed to know someone was in the boat with me.

Are you thirsty?

What do you need? Living waters?

If (at this moment) you just need to know someone's in the boat with you, then remember: We're all in this together. And, God willing, may it continue to be so.