

“Water Is Life”

John 4:7-15

Part II of VI in the sermon series, “God’s Good Earth”

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From the Pulpit

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I dedicate this sermon in memory of my mentor Rev. Marlene Whiterabbit-Helgemo who recently passed on July 22, 2022. She was the pastor of All Nations Indian Church, UCC in Minneapolis but also the director of CAM, the Council for American Indian Ministries, a ministry of neighbors in need in the United Church of Christ. On the Sunday of my ordination in 2016 she preached a sermon from this pulpit.

I give this sermon in gratitude for the people whose land we are standing and sitting on, the Delaware and the ancient Hopewell Nation.

A bewildered Samaritan woman has come to her usual well to find, of all people, a Jewish man. A person she would never associate with. He calls himself Jesus and tells her of a “living water”.

She says to Jesus, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Within this context ‘living water’ is everlasting life through Jesus Christ.

As followers of Jesus we know that he was not only concerned with the water of everlasting life but the water that comes from our faucet. So Jesus knew that this water that we live and breathe and have was powerful as well.

For generation after generation this same water that comes from our faucet that we drink everyday has endured extractive and destructive practices for the sake of power and profit. Yet Jesus also knew the power of water and that it has the power to move mountains, transform landscapes and separate land mass.

Water here is a sacred and powerful element featured in both Hebrew and New Testament texts, beginning with the first story of creation in Genesis, moving on to Noah and the flood, Moses parting the Red Sea, the Baptism of Jesus, our story today of the Samaritan at the well.

Water is central and sacred. It is part of every aspect of who we are mentally, physically, spiritually, and literally as much as 60% of the human body is water.

Last week Rev. Dr. Tim began this series with the assertion that humans and creation are inseparable.

Indigenous worldviews expand this notion and deepen this concept to say that we are interdependent with creation.

Another way of describing this concept is the image of all of creation as part of a web of life. If one strand is broken, it breaks the connection to other strands. For example, on the endangered species list if sharks die off it would set off a chain reaction of destruction of other species, of habitat, and even the balance of the ocean.

Lakota/Dakota/Nakota tradition calls this concept “Mitakwe Osyin”, or “We are All Related”. The water would be considered and addressed as a “relative.” This meant literally. We are taught to respect and to regard our relative that we are in relationship with.

This deep and intimate connection and centering of the earth is in many ways the opposite of what our western culture has taught us. (Which I will add is also a misinterpretation of scripture.) The earth is not made up of a hierarchy with humans at the top for us to dominate and subdue the earth at our pleasure. This way of thinking has separated us from what God has created.

Now we are at a point of crisis, \neg desperately thirsty for a new way to live in relationship with the earth.

In this church, every Sunday we are reminded that we “Enter to Worship, and Depart to Serve”

Growing up in this church I have been taught through worship, education, and action. To be a disciple of Christ means to live our faith, to help the poor, the hungry, and those who are oppressed, who are ignored, living on the margins of society, just as Jesus did.

An indigenous Christian would also include creation. That we are called to be Christ-like to creation. To live out one’s faith or spirituality means to pray with, to lift up and protect the creation that has long been oppressed and ignored by our world today. That is why I feel such a kinship here whenever I am part of Sacred Earth meetings. It is so deep within our bones here.

One of the best examples of following and living out this worldview was when I met Sharon Day, a friend of All Nations Indian Church, UCC, the church I started attending in seminary and still actively participate in online in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In 2014 I joined one of her Water Walks, or what is known in the Ojibwe language, Nibi Walks, when she was walking the Ohio River.

As an elder woman, a grandmother in the Ojibwe culture, it is up to women to care for the water. With the help from many all over the country, Sharon has walked the length of the Mississippi River, Missouri River, Colorado River, Ohio River, Chicago River, Cuyahoga River and countless lakes. These Nibi Walks are based on Ojibwe ceremonial water teachings.

She chose the Ohio River because it was and still is to this day declared the most polluted river in the United States according to the EPA. I will say that again. The Ohio River because it was and still is to this day declared the most polluted river in the United States today.

For this ceremony we wear long skirts in respect, we are helped by walking in a relay, each walking a mile at a time, carrying a copper bucket covered in red cloth. This bucket is full of water from the body of water that we are walking. We carry this bucket and we are constantly moving.

After walking a mile, we pass the bucket to the next person. When we pass it as we are moving like the river we are saying the prayer:

Ngah izitchigay nibi ohnjay - the Anishinabe language for “I will do it for the water.”

Along with the ceremony, a feeling for each of these bodies of water, she also advocates for the water and speaks to groups along the way about what they can do for the water. Often in her advocacy work, she asks the question: What will you do for the water?

My walk with Sharon led me to follow one of the most well-known Indigenous Environmentalist, Winona LaDuke, an Anishinaabekwe (Ojibwe) enrolled member of the Mississippi Band who lives and works on the White Earth Reservation in Northern Minnesota.

The goal of Winona and her organization, Honor the Earth, is to create awareness and support, and to develop needed financial and political resources for Native environmental issues and for the survival of sustainable Native communities.

My personal experience and witness to her work has been her advocacy work in supporting Indigenous resistance in protecting the water against the building of oil pipelines. Most notably against Endbridge, DAPL and Line 3. I had the honor of taking part of an interfaith witness in 2016 that came in support of the Standing Rock water protectors in resistance to the DAPL pipeline.

The United States currently has 2 million miles of pipelines (*To Be A Water Protector*, Pg. 137). As Winona would say, the pipes leak, they just do, oil is corrosive, not only to the pipes that try to carry it but corrosive to the ground, to the water, and all of our way of life.

This interfaith witness gave me hope. Standing Rock still has hope for the future of the water. For the first time at Standing Rock indigenous nations came together to speak for the water. To stand together against colonial powers of these multi-national companies that want to put a pipeline through their sacred land, through the cemeteries, through the places where their children play.

It was the first time we came together with so many people of many faiths to support this one phase this one call, to say that water is life. Water is life. Sounds pretty close to living water. It's a simple phrase, water is life. We need only to look at our own body

We are thirsty for this living water. We are thirsty for a new relationship with creation, with God because we know that water is life. We know in our head that God has created this water and

therefore we are in relationship with it just as we are in relationship with God. Because God created all of this and said it was good. It is good.

So I ask you in closing, what will you do for the water?

Amen.

