

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost
October 21, 2018
The Rev. Denise Trogdon

The Parched Places

“The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.”

I have another story to tell you of my adventures this summer in Colorado. With temperatures soaring close to 100 degrees, wildfires had been rampant throughout the area. A thin layer of smoke created a haze in an otherwise perfectly sunny day. We were about to embark upon a hike that would take us from an elevation of 6800 to 8600 feet. Our guide instructed us that everyone should be in good health and properly hydrated. About a quarter of the way up, one friend who struggled with steep heights, turned back. When we reached the summit, I took the last sips of my first water bottle, knowing I could ration my other bottle to get me back. As I reached in my pack on the downward climb, I realized that I had consumed the other bottle of water on the trip to the mountain. My two other companions were also out of water.

Since the trail was well marked our guide had left us at the summit to enjoy a leisurely view. One of my travel partners began to suffer symptoms of dehydration and we stopped at the next shade to develop a plan. It wasn't long before other fellow sojourners were passing us. One kind soul noticed and stopped to ask if we were ok. He gave us his last bottle of water. Between the three of us we each had enough to finish the journey. With a half mile left, coming from the other direction was our friend who had turned back. She serendipitously had brought us three bottles of cold Gatorade.

I have read that by the time you actually feel thirst, you are well on your way to dehydration. We were completely parched and through the kindness of strangers were refreshed. It was a humbling example of our human frailty and a teachable moment about the importance of sharing our resources. Later in reflection I wondered, do we recognize how parched we are in life? How often do we stop to notice the needs of others? Would we give away our last bottle?

The first lesson today is taken from the book of Isaiah, which scholars believe was written in three different time periods. This passage from the third part of Isaiah was composed years after the Israelites return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. The excitement of the homecoming had worn off. The promises of a new kingdom, not yet realized contributed to discouragement and quarreling among the people. Times were hard and resources were few. So far removed from the history of God's deliverance, the hard work of rebuilding left some feeling disillusioned and without hope.

The prophet came to challenge the Israelites to remember the faithfulness of their God, to recall how God provided for them in the wilderness and to inspire devotion that would bear witness in their actions.. He confronted empty worship practices that did not culminate in care for one another. His words reframed fasting and worship as a grateful response to a present and faithful God, who would equip them to do God's work in the world.

Likewise we are challenged to consider if our worship and prayer culminates in care for those who are in need. Do we humble ourselves but then do not notice those around us who may be

parched? These are the words that must convict us today, “Is not this the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”

A few days ago I was at the clergy and lay staff conference at Shrine Mont and had the opportunity to go to a workshop about becoming a neighborhood church. The leader asked a very compelling question that made my gut clench a bit as I considered my answer. She said, “if your church doors closed tomorrow, what difference would it make in your neighborhood?” I had to think really hard about the tangible ways we serve those around us.

The workshop leader showed us a hilarious video about our big buts! The clip described the buts in church life that keep us from reaching out beyond our walls: But we don’t want to impose, but there is not enough time, but we don’t have the budget, but we don’t have enough volunteers, but we’ve never done that!” These big buts keep us from sharing our well watered garden with those who might be parched. We come each week to be fed and refreshed in God’s love, and God’s resources within us will always be enough, even when we give our last bottle of water.

We must examine both our identity and purpose in this place and time, and how we might better share our resources with our neighbors. If the church focuses on its own survival and not on its mission, like the Israelites, our worship will be empty and we will become irrelevant to those around us. We hear about the Church being in decline, and I wonder if our priorities changed. We have good news to share with a hurting world.

This week our verb of the week is share. The true measure of our spiritual maturity is not how often we pray, read the Bible or go to church. It is about the attitude of our hearts and whether God’s Spirit flows within us to share with a world that is often discouraged. God’s compassion works through our hands and feet and we are called to share God’s compassion in tangible ways.

Many of you can remember times in the history of this parish where we have been parched and discouraged. The prophet’s words contain a challenge and a promise. We are challenged to look beyond our fears and hesitations to notice those in need and to share what we have. We are promised that God’s light will shine through us and we too, will be healed. “If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom will be like the noonday.” Help us Lord to remember how our parched places have been refreshed and inspire us to be kind souls who notice and share all we have. Amen.