

March 19, 2017
Holy Trinity
Exodus 17: 1-7
John 4: 5-42



I'm sharing this image today by Issac Murdoch¹ on the pulpit in gratitude and respect to all the water keepers who are currently on the front lines of the struggle to protect sacred water. I made a small handout on the 2017 Water Walk with Josephine Mandarin if you would like to know more.

Water is primal

If you think about it, this planet should really be called **water**, not earth, since more than 70% of the surface is water, not land. Water – there there can be no life without it. Our bodies are 60% water - we are **made** of it. It's the building block of our cells, the body's transport system, a shock-absorber, it helps to regulate our temperature. Just give your hands a squeeze together and remind yourself that we are **full** of water - hopefully this doesn't cause a mass exodus to the bathroom. Here's the cool part, or the scary part, depending on which way it goes, not only are we full of water, but we are full of **the water that's around us**. So if you've lived your life in Toronto, your body is %60 full of Lake Ontario.

Every time I hear it, I also find it quite marvellous to remember that the overall amount of water on the planet has remained the same for the last

¹ <http://onamancollective.com/murdoch-belcourt-banner-downloads/http://onamancollective.com/murdoch-belcourt-banner-downloads/>

billion years. So we are made of the water that dinosaurs sipped. We are connected to this lake that in its ancient form was home to giant beavers, that was known as **Skanadario**, or sparkling water to Haudenosaunee people.

Only recently have I learned of my own family's connection to the history in the watershed where I was born, the Red River. It's a river that was pulled north, following the path of a retreating glacier from North Dakota through to Hudson's Bay. Growing up on the prairies I always felt a connection to the Red River valley. My parents are buried in a cemetery along the riverbed and most of my family lives in its watershed in both Canada and the U.S. But I never realized that through my paternal grandmother I have a history of five generations of Métis people who followed the waterways from James Bay to the Red River settlement, moving with the fur trade. Their history of struggle and resistance is part of my story, although mostly unknown to me until recently. Monica says I have blood memory of the place and it lives in me and I'm teaching myself the names of my Métis and Cree grandmothers. I mourn the loss of their stories and the racism that suppressed this part of my family story.

Why do these stories matter? I lived my whole life without knowing it, what difference does it make now? Well, where I by no means claim an indigenous identity, or even know a cultural heritage, I do have a much deeper sense of place now than I did before. My settler colonial ancestors far outnumber my indigenous ones, so I'm still on the hook for that too.

Ancestry is **one kind of map**. I believe it is a living tie to the past and to who we are. Although it's important to acknowledge it's not the only thing that shapes identity, it can be one way that we belong to what we believe, and to other people and to the Creator. But you can live without knowing who your ancestors are. You can't live without water.

Water is **another kind of map**. From an aerial view of the planet, you can see that the single most defining feature of the map below is the way water flows - **everyone and everything** lives in and is connected to a watershed. Our friend Ched Myers² talks about this as the map that is woven into the design of creation - as if the Creator hoped that it would be so obvious to us that we couldn't miss it, the one most important lesson - that all life is interdependent. This is the way home friends, by following the maps defined by water, but it seems most of us can't read it. We have displaced ourselves from our natural neighbourhoods, lost our bearings of the patterns and pathways of Creation. We fail to see creation as a living map, evidence not only of the Creator's hand, but real presence.

Living Water

The biblical narrative affirms the ecological truth that water is primal. In the second verse of Genesis: "...the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind (or spirit/ruah) from God swept over the face of the waters. (Gen 1:2) God separates it and

² Ched Myers, *Re-inhabiting the River of Life* *Missio Dei: A Journal of Missional Theology and Praxis* 5, no. 2 (August 2014)

sorts it out some, but water is there before the Creator starts creating. All over the bible water is a powerful metaphor and brings both life and death - “the bad guys” are subsumed by it, Pharaoh’s army got drowned in it, deserts turn to gardens in it, and justice rolls, mightily, with it. Today there are some powerful words about water, that it is both gift and life. The water that I will **give** will become in them a spring of water gushing to eternal life (4:14). Let’s have a closer look at the encounter at the well.

Encounter at the well

This encounter is one that is questioned by ‘historical’ Jesus theologians who wonder whether Jesus ever went to Samaria. This story is only in John’s gospel. I leave that to others to sort out if it’s important. I’m curious about the **place** and the **placing** in the story. The well itself is a **place of significance** - Jacob’s well - bequeathed to Joseph and his descendants. So this is a place of ancestors, of blood memory--the people’s story lives here. No doubt the particular memory of Jacob’s encounter at the well with his wife-to-be lives in the minds of the writer and the hearers, which adds a spin to the story. Jesus is there first, tired from his journey, the disciples off in search of food. A woman arrives alone, at noon. Coming in the heat of the day would not be the likely choice of someone who was welcome at the well at the usual time, the beginning of the day. So she has a story as well. As they interact in what can be read as a flirtatious dialogue, you can hear her both locating herself - *a Jew asking me a Samaritan woman for a drink? This is our well, given by our ancestor Jacob, where Joseph’s flocks drank. This is our mountain where our ancestors have worshipped.* And she tries to place him, *are you greater than our ancestor Jacob? You’re one of those*

who would have us worship in Jerusalem. She's locating this encounter here in the bigger story of the people – at the well that bears the name of Mr. Israel himself³, Jacob.

Jesus locates himself, not from somewhere else, which he is, and not by his ancestry, but instead in the present and in this place - I am he, I am the Messiah, the one who is speaking to you. This is the big “I AM” language here in scripture - like the “I AM WHO I AM” burning bush kind of answer. And following that revelation, he locates her - without judgement - but in her place, as one who has lived outside the ‘acceptable’ forms of relationship. Whether it has been her choice or her chance, we don’t know. But she seems to receive his placing of her in a positive way, as something to be so excited about so as to cause her to return to the city and draw the others back.

There are lots of ways to read the significance of this story.

- I don’t really care for the commentaries that take this encounter to be such a great validation of women - big whoopee doo Jesus talks to a woman seriously therefore she must be of value.
- There’s the whole bigger story of the relationship between the communities of Samaria and Judea – not a place where I have a lot of light to shed.
- Perhaps this is a story of the first apostle. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition she is named Photine, the luminous one, and there are stories of her martyrdom after she drew the attention of the Emperor Nero.

Regardless of how you see the woman in the story, there’s an interesting thing going on here about with whom Jesus chooses to be real and

³ <https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2017/03/16/wild-lectionary-love-flows-like-a-river/>

present. The story suggests that what really motivates her is that sense of being known - being located - “he told me everything I have ever done” (4:39). There’s an inclusion here that goes beyond gender. I think it speaks to the essence of the idea of water as gift. “you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water” (4:10) and again “The water that I will give” (4:14). To understand water as gift is to appreciate that it comes from the Creator, the source and it should be received in gratitude not with greed. Lee Maracle says “We do not own the water. The water owns itself.”

This sense of gift--here’s a palpable connection to Indigenous wisdom in this place of the Great Lakes, a teaching reflected in the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant. This territory was the subject of the agreement between the Iroquois and the Ojibwe to share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes -one of the oldest treaties ever made, renewed many times over. Rick Hill from Six Nations describes it this way: “Nature says, ‘Here’s the great dish and inside the dish are all the plants, the animals, the birds, the fish, the bushes, the trees, everything you need’. The three basic rules are: first, only take what you need, second, you always leave something in the dish for everybody else, including the dish, and third, you keep the dish clean...”He says: “that was the treaty between us and nature, and then the treaty between us and everybody else”.⁴

⁴ Rick Hill, a Tuscarora from Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, <http://www.ammsa.com/publications/windspeaker/wampum-holds-power-earliest-agreements>

Within the gift there is a limit, take what you need. There is interdependence, leave something for everybody else, including the dish. There is responsibility, keep the dish clean.

Where I take issue with the gospel today is with the writer's literary play on words--that separates the water in the well and the living water that Jesus is talking about as the source of life. It's a division that I don't think we have to accept. This kind of duality – *this water* makes you thirsty again and *this one* satisfies eternally - has been interpreted historically as a physical thirst and a spiritual thirst. I doubt that desert people separated it like that since they would know more dearly than most about how much their lives depended on a source of fresh moving water. The image of a living spring gushing up to eternal life would be not only the best thing they could imagine in for their souls, but also for their bodies.

Listen to our friend at the well, who knew about the hard work required to draw every drop you use -“give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to come back to this damn well every day to draw water in the heat of the day”. Some scholars say she is missing the significance of what ‘the master is offering here’ but I believe she gets it exactly - as any woman would who spent their life carrying water, knowing that their children's well-being was at stake without it.

Re-placing ourselves

As Christians we also come complicit in stories of domination that have spiritualized the significance of the natural world. As citizens of the North we are responsible for re-engineering nature and geography to benefit few instead of the many, who have bankrupted and privatized

what came as gift and sacred life. The Don River paid the price of this thinking dearly and is only beginning to be revived.

There is a powerful witness today by water-keepers around the globe who testify to the sacredness of water with their very lives. For them water is life, but defense of it can also mean their death...

One such defender is Berta Cáceres of Honduras, who led opposition to the massive Aqua Zarca dam, a dam which the Lenca people saw not only as the destruction of their waters and livelihoods, but also as desecration of that which they held sacred. Berta Cáceres fought a mega project initiated without the without permission of the Lenca, in violation of their Indigenous rights. Berta could see clearly what others could not and sounded the alarm: “Let us wake up! Let us wake up, humankind! We’re out of time. Our Mother Earth, militarized, fenced-in, poisoned, a place where basic rights are systematically violated, demands that we take action...Let us come together and remain hopeful as we defend and care for the blood of this Earth and of its spirits.”⁵

On March 3, 2015, that clarity, and her bold action, cost her life when gunmen burst into her home and shot her. Most believe Berta’s

⁵ Berta Cáceres as quoted in Silvio Carillo and Beverly Bell, “Remembering Berta Cáceres, Assassinated Honduras Indigenous & Environmental Leader,” *Democracy Now* (March 04, 2016) http://www.democracynow.org/2016/3/4/remembering_berta_caceres_assassinated_honduras_indigenous (accessed on July 21, 2016).

murder was directly related to her advocacy, advocacy that opposed economic interests who could see value only in moneyed terms. She became one of at least 109 ecological activists that have been killed in Honduras since 2010, with women at particular threat.⁶ Berta saw the rivers dying, the earth dying, and took courageous action to protect Mother Earth, action so bold it ended in her death. But her memory lives, flows on, in the movement. Today protesters carry the sign in her memory that reads, “she did not die, she multiplied”.

When we seek to defend water, when we live into our treaty responsibilities under the Dish with one Spoon, we are connected to Berta who lives on...

Rita Wong, the poet we heard in our second reading today, also goes back to the map of water that connects to speak to the future. Here’s what she says we need to speak to *“the necessary remedies so terribly simple, so utterly unachieved so far: to kick the oil addiction for love of water, to inhabit the earth with the dignity owed to life-giving dirt, to fulfill our responsibilities chthonic (or under the earth) and cosmic to make a story large enough, generous enough to become better neighbours with the winged, the finned, the four-legged, the stumbling*

⁶ A Global Witness report as cited in Betsy Shirley, “A Martyr of ‘Laudato Si’?” *Sojourners* (March 18, 2016) <https://sojo.net/articles/martyr-laudato-si> (accessed July 21, 2016).

two-leggeds, another world is not only possible she is already here, carrying on underneath our feet reconstituting us with each new sip of ancient water.”⁷

Let me close with blessing of sweet water collected in my back garden...it is the water of life, the Creator’s gift.

As we welcome this blessing, may we express gratitude to the Creator and solidarity with the water defenders all around the globe:

- with Josephine Mandamin and the mother earth water walkers of our Great Lakes
- with Alma Brooks and the women of the Wabanaki confederacy who continue to hold back the watershed threat of fracking
- with Michelle Campos and the Indigenous women defending the clean water of Mindano, Philippines from the impacts of our mining
- with Palestinian women, forced to gather water in cisterns on their roof in Nablus, the site of Jacob’s well

And so many more, like ripples in the water, may we multiply across the surface of the waters of creation.

⁷ <https://books.google.ca/books?id=UrmECgAAQBAJ&lpg=PT28&ots=QrXysuGWq0&dq=carrying%20on%20underneath%20our%20feet%20reconstituting%20us%20with%20each%20new%20sip%20of%20ancient%20water&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q=carrying%20on%20underneath%20our%20feet%20reconstituting%20us%20with%20each%20new%20sip%20of%20ancient%20water&f=false>