

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Watershed Discipleship

Jesus said: “I offer water that will become a wellspring within you that gives life throughout eternity. You will never be thirsty again.” – John 4:5-14

A few years ago, my brothers and I hiked up a pass in the Rockies. We hiked along a small stream that trickled through a bog in a shallow valley. The higher we went, the smaller the stream grew, until it disappeared altogether. And then, a few dozen yards further, we noticed the stream had reappeared, but was flowing in the other direction. We had crossed a high point in the path, and into a different watershed. I don't remember the name of the pass or the name of the creek, but I do remember that sense of something subtle but important changing, of things moving in a quite different direction.

I have had a number of other experiences in which I encountered the same kind of subtle but profound shift in the way things were moving: there was the six months I spent in South America in my twenties; that time when Therese and I decided to get married; the night Sara was born, my first visit to Guatemala, and the time I moved here to Central Alberta. Up until those points, my life had been going in one direction, and now it was going another. Those kind of profound shifts in our lives are called “Watershed Moments,” because they are like that experience of crossing a ridge. Things have started to flow in a different direction; it might take us a while to even notice the change, but it is real, and it is irresistible.

The story of the Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well is such a watershed moment. In speaking to her, Jesus broke through all kinds of social taboos. He was a Jewish man, speaking with a Samaritan woman, in a time when Jews and Samaritans did not speak, and for a man to speak to a woman was scandalous. Plus, this particular woman had not come to the well with a group of other women, but had come by herself, a sign that she was isolated within her own community, an outcast. As the



story develops, we learn that she had been married five times and was living with a man not her husband. You can imagine the things people said about her behind her back, or whispered loudly as she was walking by, the judgmental, hurtful things that people said; the things that I've heard said about other women.

And yet, in Jesus, she encountered someone who seemed to know all about her, all the choices she had made and had been made for her, all the half-truths and gossip and slander that often pass for real understanding. Jesus seemed to know all that, and loved her just as she was. The respect and dignity that she experienced from Jesus changed her utterly. He not only asks her to help him, but offers her, in return, living water. It took her a while to realize it, but her life would never be the same. It is a watershed moment.

It is striking that this encounter happens at a well, Jacob's well, a well that was so ancient even in Jesus' time, that it was believed to have been dug by Jacob, two thousand odd years before. That well is still in existence today. A church has been built around it, perhaps in recognition that not just that well, but all water is sacred.

In a dry country, wells are places of life, where clean, fresh water nourish the people, the animals the land. They are gathering places, where the community gathers every day. And they are sacred places, spiritual places, where people are reminded who they are and whose they are. It is no accident that the watershed moment of this Samaritan woman happens at a water source.



In recent years those who are working on the interface of Christian theology, social justice and environmental concern have coined the term “Watershed Discipleship.” That phrase reflects three key insights about what it means to be disciples in our time:

- First, this is a watershed time for this world , as we either take action to protect our climate and our waters, or we miss the chance.
- Second, in order to really be global citizens we must learn to love the specific places, the specific watersheds we inhabit. Just as Jesus was a resident of the Jordan River watershed, so we are people of specific watersheds, and we exercise our discipleship in those places.

- Finally, in order to be disciples of Jesus in our time, we must also be disciples of the watersheds we inhabit. Disciples are students, and watershed disciples are students of place. Someone once pointed out that *“We won’t save a place we don’t love; we can’t love a place we don’t know; and we can’t know a place we haven’t learned.”* To be watershed disciples means to learn the places we live, and in many places that also means learning the people who are indigenous to that place.



Canada has 32,000 “major lakes” and 2.25 million rivers and flowing streams, all part of 594 local watersheds, like the Red Deer River watershed that we live in. Those local watersheds are almost all part of four major watersheds which flow into the Pacific Ocean, the Arctic Ocean, the Hudson’s Bay, and the Atlantic Ocean. And through those oceans, and through the atmosphere, all of those watersheds are connected to each other. Water, like God, connects us

all. Canada is, of all the places on earth, the most blessed with abundant fresh water, and that can lead us to take it for granted, to forget that it, like Jacob’s well, is a sacred inheritance on which we and all life depend.

We are facing a watershed moment with regard to water in Canada right now:

- The threats to fresh water from tailings ponds, fertilizer run-off, industrial contamination, fracking, oil sands development and the like are growing more numerous and complex.
- Most of the watersheds in Canada, and most of these contaminants, affect aboriginal people disproportionately, which is why many of the protests connected with the Idle no More movement have focused on water issues.
- In the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission we have to think about how to really live into a new relationship with aboriginal peoples. Reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples must include reconciliation with the land and waters. And in the same way reconciliation with the land and waters – living with respect in creation – needs to include reconciliation with aboriginal peoples. The two cannot be separated.

This is a watershed moment, for many reasons. The choices we are making today will make history run in one direction or another, in ways that once made will be much harder to undo.

Today, Jesus is meeting us beside the springs and streams and lakes of our watersheds just as he met the Samaritan woman beside Jacob's well. Will we recognize the moment? Will we respond as faithfully, as did that outcast woman from long ago?