

SEASON OF CREATION: WATER

9/9/18 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 18 (B): Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

Come, Holy Spirit. Take our lips, and speak through them; take our minds and think with them; take our hearts and set them on fire, in the name of the Holy Trinity. Amen.

Welcome to the "Season of Creation." Did you know about this? It's a real thing, but I hadn't heard about it until this past summer, when I was at General Convention with Bishop Katharine, and she encouraged us to bring it to our parishes.

What I've learned is that this season is an annual celebration of prayer and action to protect creation, and it's celebrated by Christians of all traditions around the world. Many years ago, September 1st was designated as the "Day of Prayer for Creation", so the season begins there and runs through October 4th, which is the Feast of St. Francis.

Besides being known for his peace-making efforts, and love of animals, Francis has come to be known in many traditions as the "Patron Saint of Ecology". The theme of this year's season is "walking together," which means, as siblings in Christ, we commit these five weeks to learning about caring for all of God's creation. And we focus on a different aspect each week: planet earth, sky, mountains, etc., and this week our subject is water.

You'll notice that everything from our 9am Great Conversation discussion to our hymn selections, reflect the weekly theme. We start with water today, because water is an integral part of our liturgy. Water is a symbol of purity, cleansing, and refreshment. Water is also a source of sustenance. In so many ways, and on so many levels, water is essential to who we are—both as human beings and as Christians.

We hold that knowledge in one hand. And, at the same time, over in this hand, we all know that around the world, many rivers, lakes and oceans are brimming with pollutants. In many places around the world, there is still a shortage of safe drinking water. Since 1990, 2.6 billion people have gained access to an "improved" drinking water source, but in 2015, 663 million people—that's one person in 10—spread out over 41 countries, still drank water from unprotected sources.

And, then, in other places like Cape Town, South Africa, there's a shortage of water. We've had to deal with our own draught here, but there are places around the globe where people have to prioritize bathing, doing laundry...even brushing their teeth, because they're literally restricted to 10 minutes of water use per day.

So contrast the idea of water as purifying, cleansing, refreshing, and nourishing with the realities of our water supply across the earth. What if the issues of pollution, contamination and shortage were so in our face that the flagon of water on our altar looked like this dirty water?

Although...according to the story of the deaf mute in this morning's reading from Mark...there can apparently be a lot of healing power in some good, old-fashioned mud, with the right proportions of spit and dirt, of course!

Joking aside, our God-given directive to care for all of creation demands that we also be good stewards of water. And, yet, I'm betting there are those among you who are sitting here wondering what we're doing talking about the ecology of the sea, when we have hungry people right here in our neighborhood! Do the needs of sea life outweigh the needs of humanity?

I believe that's where the passage, also found in Mark, enlightens us. The story of the Syrophenician woman serves to hold up the idea of "What's fair?". She represents that age-old conundrum of who "deserves" what. In her setting, she is considered a foreigner; she doesn't matter to the people around her; her children don't matter; and the treatment of any of them certainly doesn't matter. So even Jesus—a good practicing Jew—refused to give her—a non-important Gentile—any attention at all...that is...at first.

By saying "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," Jesus implies that there are chosen ones in God's kingdom, who are considered God's children, and that those outside the circle are comparable to grungy dogs, hanging around, begging for scraps of food.

But much like the Samaritan woman at the well, the Syrophenician woman challenges Jesus's logic. She says, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She implies, one way or another, there is more than enough to go around...even if the nourishment is found in the form of leftovers.

I don't know about you, but I can relate to Jesus's faux pas. You know those times when you're bustling around trying to take care of everything on your "To Do" list, and someone says something important to you, but you're so busy you don't really listen, and so you say something you haven't really thought through, and as soon as it comes out of your mouth, you think: "Dang it! Why did I say that? That's not really what I mean. That's not really what I believe!" But it's already out there, and now you have to deal with it. I think that's what happened to Jesus.

So by the time the Syrophenician woman has responded, Jesus has slowed down enough to realize, of course, he's going to heal her daughter. Jesus doesn't believe there is an inner circle of chosen children in God's kingdom. Jesus teaches that we all belong, so he says to her: "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." He heals her from afar, not willing to risk one more second of the child's life.

That's because in the kingdom of God, it's never an "either/or" answer, it's always a "both/and" answer. There may be people who seem to be in the inner circle, but that doesn't mean a choice has to be made between healing them and healing others. So it is that the water needs our attention, as do the people around us.

Our reading from the book of James uses the setting of a royal banquet to point out that we should consider the ways in which we welcome the most vulnerable. That they should be given preferential treatment at the table; not the wealthiest and best-dressed. Under God's royal law it isn't either a party for the marginalized, or a party for the privileged. God's party is for everyone!

A few weeks ago, I shared the report about the female Orca that was refusing to let her deceased calf sink to the bottom of the ocean. But what I didn't mention is the other part of that story which is that the reason the calf died is most likely because the orcas are poisoning themselves by eating contaminated fish. The poison, of course, is passed on to the fetus in utero, and usually results in a still-born birth, or very short life-span.

Although there have been many laws passed around the world, and we don't imagine companies dumping toxic chemicals by the barrel into the environment anymore, things like micro beads in cosmetics and toiletries are being flushed down toilets, out to sewage systems, and ending up in the ocean. As I understand it, the micro beads then attract harmful chemicals floating in the ocean, which fish, in turn, eat, because the micro beads look like food.

So it's not just the orcas who are at risk of consuming harmful chemicals...it's us. It's not an either/or, it's a both/and situation. If we don't take better care of our water, we will be poisoning ourselves. New research indicates that those ingested chemicals could then interfere with our body's natural "defense system".

One of the ways we can help is by better understanding our own "water footprint". Our water footprint is the amount of water we consume in our daily lives, including the water used for growing the food we eat, to produce the energy we use, and for all of the products in our daily lives—for our homes, cars, furniture and clothes.

On average, through the production of all those goods our water consumption is about 1,300 gallons per person every day. But making just a few changes can significantly reduce your water footprint. For example, the water footprint of seven ounces of beef is the equivalent to 47, eight-minute showers and uses four times more water than the same amount of chicken.

If a couple were to eat chicken instead of beef, they would reduce their water footprint by as much as 12,000 gallons per year. Vegetables have an even smaller water footprint, as does tea compared to coffee. We don't have to become vegetarians—or give up eating beef completely—but, by varying our diet and being mindful of our food choices, we can reduce our water footprint.

We can also be like those who witnessed the healing of the deaf mute in Mark's Gospel. Even though Jesus asked them to keep quiet, they "zealously proclaimed" the miracle to everyone they saw. We, in our every day lives, can zealously proclaim that caring for the water of God's creation is not pointless, but an important part of our health, the health of the planet and the health of God's kingdom.

-AMEN

Collect of the Day:

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favour is better than silver or gold.

The rich and the poor have this in common:
the LORD is the maker of them all.

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.

Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.

Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;

for the LORD pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them.

Psalm 125

1 Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, *
which cannot be moved, but stands fast for ever.

2 The hills stand about Jerusalem; *
so does the LORD stand round about his people,
from this time forth for evermore.

3 The scepter of the wicked shall not hold sway over the land allotted to the just, *
so that the just shall not put their hands to evil.

4 Show your goodness, O LORD, to those who are good *
and to those who are true of heart.

5 As for those who turn aside to crooked ways,
the LORD will lead them away with the evildoers; *
but peace be upon Israel.

James 2:1-10, 14-17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Mark 7:24-37

Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go-- the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."