

Water Works

Matthew 3:13-17 [Baptism of the Lord]

There are a few things in life that we treasure more than any other. People quickly come to mind. Family and good friends always stand at the top of our list of things that matter most to us. But setting people aside for the sake of discussion let me ask you this question: What tangible thing is there in your life that is priceless to you? It would be something you would not, no could not, do without. Perhaps it is an heirloom piece of jewelry, or something else of value passed down to you, or that you have purchased. Maybe it is so valuable that you keep it in a bank security box. I want you to have this object firmly fixed in your mind. There may be other valuable items, but this one is the most important for you.

Now I am going to make a bold assertion – not one of you has identified water as the most valuable, tangible thing in your life. Don't feel bad. I would not have done so either. But I don't think you would argue with me as to the vital, life sustaining importance of water to us. So, let's talk about water for a moment. Here are two important facts that you may have heard before: 71% of the earth's surface is covered by water and 97% of that surface water is salt water.

I would maintain that water is the single most precious commodity in the world. It is far more valuable than oil, gas, minerals, or timber. Simply put, without water we die. All living things need water to survive. The problem is that we give water scant attention, although Coloradoans are probably more in tune with water issues than most states. I have heard that Colorado has more attorneys specializing in water legislation and litigation than any other state in the Union.

Let me share something else with you that deeply troubles me. While access to safe drinking water has improved over the last decades in almost every part of the world, observers have estimated that by 2025 more than half of the world population will be facing water-based vulnerability. A recent report suggests that by 2030, in some developing regions of the world, water demand will exceed supply by 50%. Water also plays an important role in the world economy, as it functions as a solvent for a wide variety of chemical substances and facilitates industrial cooling and transportation.

There is a great deal of talk these days about alternative energy sources. The discussion generally revolves around our over dependence on foreign oil for our fuel supplies, that we need to develop our own rich resources of oil and gas, that we need to build bio-fuel cars, invest more heavily in solar and wind power energy sources, and pursue safe nuclear energy options. I agree and we are moving in those directions. But I have not heard or read of any national or global discussion about water shortages and what to do about it. Our attitude is that water is a limitless resource. It is not.

When I first began my academy studies in marine engineering, one of the first pieces of shipboard equipment to which I was exposed was the evaporator. Ships need fresh water not just for the crew, but for steam boilers to power older ships and to cool reactors in nuclear powered ships. Ships cannot carry enough fresh water for all their purposes, so they have evaporators that take sea water in, distill the salt out, thereby producing fresh water. Fresh water is critical to the existence of a ship – therefore fully operational evaporators are essential.

The land version of a ship's evaporator is the desalinization plant. They are huge evaporators taking sea water and producing fresh water for people living on the land. But there are very few of them. One of the ways to solve fresh water shortages, particularly in third world nations, is to build desalinization plants on the coasts and pipe the resulting fresh water to where it is needed. Remember that I said 97% of the earth's surface water is saline. The resource is available. We need to begin an international program to tap into it. Without trying to be melodramatic, the world's survival depends on it. If nothing else, call it a social justice of the highest order.

At this point you might well be thinking, "OK, this is interesting, but what does it have to do with anything biblical?" I'm glad you asked. Water played a prominent role in the Creation. Listen to the very first biblical words in Genesis 1:1-2: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The

earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the *face of the waters* [emphasis added].” It is after this introduction that Genesis then begins the account of Creation. Before God created light on the first day, *the waters were already there!* At the start of the third day of Creation God then created the land masses. But, only 29% of the earth’s surface is land. Why didn’t God give us more land? Because God knew that we would need much more water than land to survive. Finally, on the sixth day God created the human species and gave us dominion over all that he had created. That means we are to care for the Creation, including its resources and we are to care for each other. We aren’t really doing a very good job of that. In my opinion, it is an abomination that people are starving and dehydrated because of a lack of water when we have the capability to solve the problem. What we lack is the resolve to solve!

Water is the single most precious tangible commodity in our lives. To not protect and produce it for the benefit of all God’s people is not wielding dominion over the Creation, is it wielding destruction.

There is another water that is essential for life. It is the living water offered by Jesus Christ. It is the water of baptism. Unlike natural water, this water is plentiful. It takes very little of it to claim a life for Christ, to welcome a child or adult into the fellowship of Christianity, to meld a family together in raising children in Christian ways.

Just as water is mentioned as being present before the Creation, the very first act by Jesus as an adult was to go to his cousin John and be baptized with water. Why? John preached baptism for the repentance of sins. Jesus was sinless. Water connected Jesus with the Creation. Verse 16 from our reading says, “When he had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.” Remember it was the same Spirit of God that also hovered over the waters at the beginning of the Creation. At the conclusion of creating all things, God pronounced that it was good. At the conclusion of Jesus’ baptism, God’s voice pronounced his pleasure with his Son. Following his baptism, Jesus endured temptations in the wilderness and then began his ministry that would end three years later at his death and resurrection.

There is only one way to become a Christian. It happens when a person says honestly from the heart, “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior, and I pledge my life to his Kingdom.” Once that happens, then the person cannot be the same. Something must change when one acclaims the Christian faith. One has new attitudes of love and forgiveness, of caring and compassion, of tolerance and understanding. Baptism is the symbol of our acceptance of Jesus Christ into our life. For infants it is the profession of faith of the parents who promise to raise the child to a point of awareness of Jesus in his or her own life. All of it binds us together as family and community.

Jesus’ baptism tells us that when we are baptized and live accordingly, then we die to sin and rise to new life. Our baptism links us irrevocably to God in Christ. In the middle of the 16th century, Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic monk, priest, and professor, began what came to be called the Protestant Reformation. The Church persecuted him for it, eventually excommunicating him. At the height of his trials and tribulations for trying to do reform the Catholic Church, Luther was observed sitting at his desk and pounding it with his fist, saying out loud, “I am baptized. I am baptized. I am baptized.” He was drawing strength from that profound event in his life.

Baptisms can have beautiful ripple effects on others. When I was pastor of a church in Lakewood, there was a family who worshiped with us. The wife was a member of the church, for she had been baptized. Her husband came to a faith relationship with Christ late in life. He was not a member because he had never been baptized. Their ten year old son had also never been baptized. The day came when they asked me to baptize their son. I visited them in their home to counsel them about what baptism is and what it is not. I talked directly to the boy who was old enough to understand. When I had answered all their questions I turned to the husband and said, “Bob, what about you? Are you ready to consider

baptism, to be baptized alongside your son?" He looked at me, then at his wife, then at his son and replied, "Yes, I am. It's been a long time coming, but I am ready."

The next Sunday this family came forward for the sacrament. Bob and his son stood directly in front of me. The wife stood beside them. I asked Bob to kneel and I baptized him with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Then I did the same with their son, having the parents place a hand on each of his shoulders as I baptized him. I had been totally focused on the two baptisms and quite honestly had not paid much attention to the mother. As the boy stood, I then looked at all three of them together. The wife-mother had a palpable glow on her face. Her aura was actually radiating. Suddenly I knew that this moment had to have been something she had been praying would happen for years. This family was now fully united in Christ and his love.

I said before that water is the single most precious tangible commodity in our lives. Without it we physically die. Now I will say to you that the salvation of Christ is the single most precious intangible commodity in our lives and baptism is its sign. Without it we spiritually die. For both our physical and spiritual needs, water works. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 9 January 2011