

“Drawn from the Waters” by Jill Joseph

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The 10th Sunday After Pentecost

As we use this liturgical season to examine the theme of “catching our breath”, I turn to today’s readings to focus on some fundamental aspects of our shared life of faith. As a runner, I know the importance of catching my breath, the familiar, essential rhythm that sustains me.

In the same way, much of what I found in today’s readings will be familiar as we consider our outer and inner journey, our outer and inner commitments that deeply inform our life of faith. My thoughts about these outer and inner aspects of the readings are not neatly separable, although I will consider them as such. Rather, I believe that my life of faith, and perhaps yours, represents a deep and purposeful entanglement of the outer and inner. I have found my home in this community because there is not only encouragement but accountability that directs us both to the outer and inner life.

There are times that I have tried to successfully describe Seekers Church in response to dialogs that begin something like, "Seekers Church? I haven't heard of it. What is it?" A few adjectives come readily to mind, perhaps best represented in our front window by words like "inclusive". But I find myself remarkably inarticulate and my listeners not infrequently respond with something like, "So....sort of Unitarian then?" Or (worse yet for me), "It sounds pretty intense. Is it evangelical?" I sense the unspoken question only if a few dare to ask is probably, "How is this not a cult?"

Early in my life of faith I experienced what then seemed a perplexing and irreconcilable contradiction between a deep and persistent summons to intimacy with the One Who Called Me and a passion for healing, in whatever small way I could, the wounds inflicted by political systems and poverty and racism. Given to extremes at those early ages, the choices seemed stark: Was I to be a contemplative nun or communist? It took a while before I came to see the cross as representing exactly the intersection of my two ground truths: outer and inner. And were I able to be as articulate as I wish in talking about Seekers Church, I would describe with passion and gratitude how we collectively and individually deeply honor inner encounters with the sacred and outer commitments to a broken world.

It is in this context that I come to today's readings, taking as my theme the words of Pharaoh's daughter concerning her naming of Moses: "I drew him from the waters."

I propose that we have each been drawn from the waters and granted this brief, shimmering moment we call life.

Implausibly alive because a dying star we call our sun on the periphery of a small galaxy lost among countless galaxies grants as light and warmth enough, cradled against the dark void by atmosphere and clouds. Drawn from the waters because in the primordial soup of ancient seas life swelled forth and the dance of twining, twinning DNA began. Drawn from the waters of our mother's womb, lifted from the waters of baptism.

We have each been drawn from the waters and so I propose to ask for what reason I was drawn forth, were you drawn forth. What challenges must be confronted and what lessons await us? How are we invited to engage in the mystery that is God, that is the world?

Put another way, I am, in my own idiom, going to explore questions of call and our shared life of faith. And, as you might suspect by now, I'm going to explore both the outer and inner aspects that may await us after we are drawn from the waters.

I can do so only as what I am, a comparative beginner and as someone who still is exploring and discovering the life of faith. Many here have devoted decades to identifying, naming, and manifesting their call...for themselves, for their brethren in this community, and for the world. Others are new here or find this an occasional home for worship and fellowship. But collectively, it is your commitment to a purposeful faith, your openheartedness and welcome, your support and guidance that inform my understanding of my life and call.

Drawn from the waters

We begin with an all too familiar story of personal paranoia and political oppression. Probably not for the first time, and tragically certainly not for the last, an outsider group was perceived as a threat. If there were a war, if they joined with enemies...however illusionary the concerns of Pharaoh, the response was tangible and awful: oppression, enslavement, and planned annihilation.

Once favored, these non-Egyptians Hebrew foreigners were now suited only for hard manual labor as the next generation was to be systematically destroyed...boys killed at birth or, failing that, thrown into the Nile and drowned.

But oppression invites compassion and resistance, so that across thousands of generations we remember and honor the names of the two midwives who risked, who refused to obey, who lied...and in so doing saved both this infant and our history. We honor the brave but certainly heartbroken mother, casting forth her infant into the hazards of the river where there was at least a chance.

And then the Pharaoh's daughter: She knew this was a Hebrew infant. She knew he was to have been killed. She knew her father ordered this killing. Slipping probably unclothed into the cool of the Nile, described as the "River of Life" in Egypt, certainly not more than a young adolescent, she knew in her own body something about the precious sweetness of life. And who is not moved by the cries of a three month old? As a pediatrician I will tell you that a three month old, unlike a

newborn infant, cries with tears. This evocative human communication of need defies neat political categories and paranoid policies. So, the child was saved by the Pharaoh's daughter, who was, with wonderful irony, herself a foreigner viewed from the perspective of the Hebrews.

And she named him Moses for she drew him from the waters.

I think most of us in this room immediately grasp the outer parallels to our own times and its challenges.

Yesterday morning, as the sun was coming up, I went to U-Haul in Hyattsville as part of arranging my return to California. There, milling around, trying to appear eager but not too eager, trying to appear strong but not threatening, trying to appear available but not treading on private property were 15 or 20 young Latino men hoping for a few hours work. This is, in point of fact, an all too ordinary scene repeated in town after town across this country. Who is that forms our bricks and constructs our buildings? Who is it that cleans our motel rooms and mows our grass? Who is it that has grown, to quote the Pharaoh, "more numerous" than they ought and therefore needs to be dealt with "shrewdly", if not our immigrants.

Even more generally, Gordon Cosby told us years ago it was all the poor who had become the unwelcome and frightening stranger in our midst.

I take very seriously the challenge to attend primarily to those oppressive stories and distressing politics where I will

be engaged and seek solutions. I hear our beloved Kate insisting, "But what will you do about it?" Nonetheless, we need to speak the truth again and again, to name the truth that we are called to participate in the compassion of our God, countering paranoia with fact, opposing injustice with compassion.

This is not the place for developing solutions, but I know that we were not drawn from the waters only to assure that it is others, rather than we, who are cast adrift.

Inner aspects of the story are, predictably more subtle, but equally challenging. I find myself asking regarding my inner life, "Who here is the stranger? Who in my inner life toils every day and yet would have no place in the society of my heart?"

My inner life is a paradox; it is illuminated by brief, precious, and intense glimpses of the holy, yet is dominated by utter silence and darkness and great doubt. I more often recite prayers than I pray. My times of meditation, whether using the Jesus prayer or Buddhist breath focus, are long arid struggles with distraction.

Perhaps most relevantly here, my day-to-day life of intense work and of relationship is both rewarding and, yet I typically regard it a spiritual wasteland. A time not devoted to "God work."

But I now find myself reconsidering my own contempt for so

much of my life. Is it possible that I have developed an attitude to myself the parallels that of the Pharaoh to the Hebrews? Why should I despise the self that rises early and tries to get in a 30 minute jog no matter how tired or distracted, the self that works hard to respond to the needs of colleagues, the self that honors as best she can every day the vows of her marriage? Is my spiritual life really to be something especially devout and apart, characterized by some peculiar zeal and fervor that I don't find in responding to the e-mails that inundate my inbox? Is each day only valuable for 30 minutes of prayer and the scattered moments in which I place myself before God?

Is not everything sacred? With laughter I consider Julian of Norwich who commented on the graciousness of God as manifested by how her body disposed of its waste, opening and closing as though with purse strings which relaxed and then tightened. She was talking about bowel movements and what we would ever so discretely and medically describe as her anus. What a delight this is.

Ought not I, and perhaps you, extend the tenderness of Pharaoh's daughter to our entire life? Our entire life, including the long hours of work, including chopping carrots and watering the garden, including holding JoAnne and listening to her breathing as I drift off to sleep.

Nothing more, just this...Perhaps I was drawn from the waters, perhaps you were drawn from the waters, in order to live fully, knowing all of life is sacred and a gift. Is not part of our call to walk through our days with gratitude for all that is, rather than valuing ourselves only for special experiences or remarkable devotion?

Drawn from the waters

In considering dear Paul's letter to the Romans, I look again for the outer and inner challenges and gifts that await us.

This passage contains, of course, a classic and oft-repeated description the community of faith: "We who are many are one body in Christ... members of one another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us." Perhaps equally important, but less frequently cited, Paul asks that "everyone among you not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but with sober judgment."

In an outer sense, the message is fairly straightforward but unequivocally important: community is defined by humility, diversity, and unity.

As most of us in this gathering know, Seekers Church, the scattered communities of the Church of the Savior, her family, and many others have all been deeply affected by the sudden death of Kate Cudlipp who served on our core Servant Leadership Team here and had been a Steward for over two decades. There are many things that can and will be said about Kate and her gifts and responsibilities. This is also time of deeply considering the "oneness" of our community of faith, diverse though we may be. It is a time, paradoxically for giving thanks.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who profoundly shaped the thinking of many of us regarding Christian community, wrote from his experience of creating the Confessing Church, an underground resistance community in the face of Nazi tyranny. He knew more than I hope I ever have to discover about the demands and gifts of Christian discipleship in the face of oppression. And he paid for these, of course, with his life.

Bonhoeffer wrote that perhaps the greatest enemy of true Christian community was the human desire for perfection in community, for the ideal. He cautioned that when we approach the demanding complexities of Christian community with our own strong ideas about how things ought to be and how people ought to be, we destroy genuine fellowship. Through the distortions of our own subjectivity, we fail to recognize one another as "brethren". We fail to accept the discipline demanded by this relationship, as well as the gifts it offers.

It seems to me that Seekers Church offers a model for participation and for leadership in which we recognize the valued space between friends on one hand and hierarchical pastorship on the other...a space that I characterize as "brethren-ship".

If we were just friends to one another, it would matter more deeply than it ought whether you really like me, whether my taste in clothing or other aesthetic sensibilities is consistent with yours, whether our personalities were congruent, whether we laughed at the same jokes and cried at the same place in the books we read. As friends, we seek one another out and support one another because ultimately, it feels good. The contradictory dimensions of a pastoring relationship are, I think, clear to many here and typically

rejected. As a group, we tend to define pastoring as hierarchical or even as patronizing, a focus on the merits and responsibilities of the individual over the group.

What, then, is the middle ground, the community of brethren? .It is certainly a place in which our ties to one another are not flimsy manifestations of personal preference and "feeling good". It is marked by a healthy commitment to consensus and group work and broad lateral linkages to one another and to our common work. Is a place of warm welcome. It is a community in which disagreement and even dissention can be tolerated in a search for consensus. Yet it also is a place where we dare to say that we love one another and accept the discipline such love implies. You bear with me in hard times, as I do you.

We know that we are precious to one another, not perfect for one another.

Were we not drawn from the waters in order to participate in such a community of brethren, a real community of real people?

It may be, however, easier to affirm and give thanks for this outer summons than to confront the parallel inner challenge implied by Paul's letter to the Romans. What does it mean for us that he suggests we should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought, but exercise sober judgment?

Is this simply a call for breast-beating expressions of humility and contrition, an enumeration of the transgressions and sins (both important and unimportant) that have littered

our lives and probably will continue to do so?

As I have suggested here before, I think not. I think rather that we are called to see ourselves as we are, to go about the demanding psychological and inner work of understanding our own motivations, our own wounds, our own pain.

In common with St. Teresa of Avila and many others, I notice that such hard work comes perhaps more readily during the aridity and silence and darkness that I spoke of earlier. Undistracted by consolations, bereft of devotional faith, I must confront my own pettiness and peevishness. I know that my ability to love will always be hampered by my neediness. I see and accept that I can offer my aging, difficult father many things, but doubt they will ever include the heart-felt unconditional love which he (and I) badly need. This is indeed, "sober judgment", but it is an essential inner challenge to which we are summoned as we are drawn from the waters.

We go about this quest for self-knowledge not to berate ourselves, but that we might fully understand the depth of love in which we are held, knowing our relationship to the holy be deep and real.....as deep and real as our own life. Not the life we wish we were leading, not sometimes comfortable story of who we are that distorts who we know ourselves to be.

There is no need to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. As we are, we are gifted, among the many gifted, and we part of this community that we call the body of Christ.

Drawn from the waters

And so we come, here at the end, to the Gospel of Matthew. And the question echoes across the generations the great challenge to me, and perhaps to you. It sits stark and yet inviting. It is a question only to be answered by each of us however we can alone with the one who asks.

Jesus spoke, asking, "Who do you say I am?"

For this question, for this community in which we ponder it, we were drawn from the waters.....and for this we give thanks.