



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Water Communion Ingathering

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Rev. Petrie's Homily – Water Communion

Whenever my parents come to visit and I'm in the pulpit, I can't help but think of them as I write the homily. You see, my love and infatuation with water begins with them. I associate my upbringing with various bodies of water. I suppose it's all connected, from the water of my mother's womb, to swimming lessons at the Y when I was three, and my memories of showering with mom at the Y – that incomparable comfort of warmth after being chilly in the pool, pressed close to my mother's body. Then the annual association of a Kentucky lake summer vacation – 45 summers and running. Finally, there's great affection for two Midwestern bodies of water – a pond where my parents own property in rural Wisconsin, and the lake of my beloved YMCA Camp Echo in northern Michigan.

In college I wrote poems about water, about skinny-dipping in Lake Michigan, and how the sacred headwaters of my being flow through my understanding of all that is holy. Not only because, macro-wise, it is THE element of life, unique to planet Earth in our solar system and perhaps other distant exo-planets, but micro-wise, too, in terms of sexuality and the sacredness of each of our bodies – comprised mostly of water. And finally, because of the connection to family time, to quality time spent with family – in proximity to oceans, lakes, and streams.

In today's world we take clean air, clean soil, clean water for granted. All the elements we must care for if the earth is to care for us and make life possible. It's a sorry state of affairs, so a ritual that acknowledges the sacredness of water is powerful in a number of ways, as it connects us to the sacredness of the everyday, to the ontological, to the stuff we can see and touch. We acknowledge it's the basis of our being, of our blood, and at the same time we honor our ties to our loved ones, to our blood relatives, as is often the case.

Greg mentioned soon after he got here that he doesn't care for how it gets chilly at night once the sun goes down – although that's not really the case at the moment, is it? I mention this because I don't like it either – I know I'm weird, but I miss those sultry Midwestern summer nights, when you don't have to remember a sweater. The other thing I miss is natural bodies of water, big enough to submerge in. Where I grew up, there were lakes everywhere, big ones and little ones. Being in one, swimming about, meant summer was happening, the most joyous time of year. Has anyone seen those drought awareness public posters about Pasadena? "There is no River on Colorado Blvd." "There is no lake on Lake Ave." Indeed. What we do have are mountain streams that become arroyo trickles. This is where we take our children when we head to the mountains. Because the best family time occurs near water.

As soon as our 6 year old son Pender could toddle we set him loose on a stream. He would pick up the rocks, the mud, which we did our best to keep out of his mouth. One bend we became particularly fond of because it was clean and shaded we called Pender's crossing – just north of the west end of Altadena. But we only got to enjoy it for one season . . . when summer came, it disappeared and it never came back, just like his baby curls when he got his first big

boy haircut. It's disorienting, the ebbs of time. Just when you get into a routine, a ritual of elements and place, and it vanishes, you realize how precious, how ephemeral, a small stream of water can be. It's disorienting.

It reminds me a little bit of how disorienting it can be when our ministerial leadership changes. Same place, new element. It's disorienting, perhaps, but also exciting. It's as though we've shed the skin of the retiring minister, and now its new life gleams beneath - powerful with potential, with possibilities. Ready to go!

"For life goes not backwards nor carries with yesterday," Kahlil Gibran sagely states. True for our children, and true for our churches.

The waters are alive, for water is forever flowing and shifting, making change happen, as our lives flow on in endless song.

When my family went to collect water for this ritual last week, once again we were disoriented. It had been a while since we'd hiked to a stream as a family - normally we'd go once a week, but as the kids get older, we get busier with other things. There had been a mudslide through the kids' favorite stream bed, where Pender has a secret hiding place upstream in a nest of towering boulders. What happened? Where are we? This doesn't look right . . . the mud had raised us up by a good two feet, to the height of the old log that crossed it. That shimmering, clean sandy bottom we played in several years ago is gone, the newts and frogs displaced but adapting - kind of like us.

Water symbolizes the ebb and flow of life, the cycles of life and death, of endless regeneration. It describes our lives and the life of this church. I experienced the ebb during transition, and I think those of us who stayed present all did - but we had faith, as we witnessed the winter between Senior Ministers. We knew the wellspring of Neighborhood Church would flow again, and indeed it has - today we rejoice in all the new life of religious leadership we welcome in today - in waters that are creative and free-flowing, eager to be received. For the regeneration of our wellspring, in our personal lives and the life of this church, we give thanks.

Rev. Gundlach's Homily - Drought Tolerant Church

Each week, we gather in this sanctuary to refresh and renew ourselves. We are blessed by times like these when we can be together as a full community with our children and youth. Worship is for us the healing water that can wash us clean and deeply touch our soul. It is the river that runs through our life together as a congregation, gathering our separate streams of belief, thought and life experience together in a common spiritual practice. Each week we have an opportunity to be nourished by wisdom stories and ancient truths, to grieve our losses and celebrate our joys, to sing and to pray, to connect with our deepest life purpose, to give of our resources and continually discover how we may be of service.

These waters we gather today in worship are healing and challenging. They come from sacred places where we restore our souls, ordinary and remote. With drought and climate change, many of these waters may be in danger. The blessing of our water today reminds us just how rare and precious this water is, just as is this beloved community. We are living in a time of global climate extremes, which we experience locally as drought locally. Likewise, on the religious landscape, we are living in a time of low religious affiliation, when the “nones” or people of no religious affiliation abound. Churches struggle to fund their ministries and programs, but people thirst more than ever for communities to explore meaning and purpose in their lives.

There are many ways to respond in these times of drought. We can face the future with fear, or we can adapt to change. I wonder how if we were to begin to think of ourselves as a drought-tolerant church, one who can thrive in the current spiritual and environmental landscape with ease and creativity. What if we thought of adapting to the drought as if it were a reality that will not change? What if we began to think of drought as the new normal, a place of challenge and possibility? So . . . what might it look like to be a drought-tolerant church?

1. We need to do more with less resources. Conventional wisdom says we need more resources to do more, but can we think of focusing our resources, time, energy and money, towards the unique difference we can make in the world, as individuals and as a community. This may mean partnering with existing organizations and interfaith groups to do more, or simply relying less on scarce resources, maybe even discovering new “wells” of resources we have not yet explored.
2. We must teach and practice the habits of drought-tolerant sustainability and conservation: in our homes, on our campus and in our city. For some of us, this may mean using water sparingly at home in our showers and lawns. For some it may mean learning the tools and skills to create entirely new systems. Remembering our seventh principle, the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, we need to befriend rivers, lakes, and streams, seeing them as an extension of our sanctuary, just as they are the lush riparian habitat for birds, fish and wildlife. The Arroyo and Los Angeles River are places we might think of to start these connections.
3. Like those incredible redwoods on our campus, our roots will need some deep watering on occasion. We will need to immerse ourselves in knowing our history and recommitting to our institutional health, safety and mission. We may need to take time out for retreat as a congregation for deep replenishment and play, going to places like Camp de Benneville that restore our soul as a church.
4. Be mindful of the others who walk with us in our world who are suffering the most, who are thirsty and in need of the kind of refreshment and nourishment we can provide. A drought-tolerant church focuses on getting the word out about the preciousness of our healing water – who might benefit from our message, community and service? How will we expand our hospitality to welcome these newcomers into our midst?

5. Understand the human cost of drought and protect those most vulnerable. I don't think I really understood the human cost of the drought until I made the long journey on I5 from Pasadena to San Francisco several weeks ago. I saw the acres of empty straw colored fields, dusty and dry where they once were green. I saw the California aqueduct, laying low in its concrete channel. I saw the dozens of handmade signs flanking the highway "No water: no work." Here's one family's story, as told by Atlantic magazine this week:

Ten years ago, Ubalda and Andres Lopez migrated to Five Points, a little town in the Central Valley from Toluca, Mexico. He works on irrigating fields, she on harvesting and processing onions. Over the past four years of the drought, availability of farm work has dwindled. Ubalda and Andres have had to work longer and harder to support themselves. Now, their days start at 3:30 am.

They have two sons, one in high school, one in kindergarten, and their daughter in community college. For the Lopez family, the drought has not only threatened their work but threatened their children's education. Westside Elementary school has shrunk in its enrollment over the past four years as a result of the drought. As parents lose their farm work, they have faced eviction and have had to quickly remove their kids from school. When school enrollment goes down, state funding for the school goes down too. As Ubalda and Andres worry about their jobs and home, they hold the added worry that their son's school may need to close as well. They worry about their children's future.

"I hope that my children can do better in life," said Ubalda. "That they do not settle and stop where they are. It is sad to come to this country and not improve. One comes here looking for a better future, a better life for their children."

6. Finally, our last charge for a drought tolerant church. Focus on our children, youth and families. Consider the seventh generation. Oren Lyons, Chief of the Onondaga Nation of the Iroquois people articulated this concept as: "We are looking ahead . . . to make sure and to make every decision that we make relate to the welfare and well-being of the seventh generation to come . . . What about the seventh generation? Where are you taking them? What will they have?"

In the beginning of our ministry, we are making our own creation stories. We are, like the creator, shaping our life together as a congregation in a unique time in history. We are gathering our stories, our wisdom. We are blessing this moment of creation anew. As the water we gather today has refreshed us, we will return some of it to the earth to sustain the beauty of our campus, deep down to the roots. We will use it to bless those who come into our community as newcomers.

Each of us, child and elder, newcomer and seasoned member, is called to care for our life together as a congregation, bringing our gifts to this worthy and wonderful church and to the world. Like the future of our planet's rivers, streams and seas, we don't know exactly what we

will face. We do know that we will face it together, with love, creativity and faith, knowing that our best days are yet to come.

Amen and Blessed Be.

The Forgotten Students of California's Drought

<http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/09/the-students-of-the-california-drought/404572/>