

April 22, 2007
Earth Day
John 21:1-14
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Living Water

When our daughter Karin was about three, we were living in Phoenix. She and I were in the swimming pool, and she said, “Mommy, what are those white things in the sky?” I looked up and didn’t see anything. “What do you mean?” I asked. She replied, “Those puffy white things.” Then it hit me. They were clouds. It had been so many months since we had seen clouds that she didn’t remember them. I, on the other hand, taking clouds so much for granted, didn’t even notice them. I was struck by how different her childhood was from mine in terms of climate.

As a child, growing up here in Maine, I took rain, and water for that matter, totally for granted. I took swimming lessons in a lake. I went for boat rides on a tidal river. And our drinking water came from the reservoir up the street. The water was cold and tasty. I remember when my grandfather came to visit, he always commented on how good the water was at our house. I thought that was a little strange until we would go to his house, in the city, in Massachusetts, and their water tasted “funny.”

When, as adults, Ron and I moved west – to California and then Arizona - my whole relationship with water changed. I’d never lived in a desert before. We got as much rain in the storm here this last week as we might get in a whole year in Phoenix. When it rains in Phoenix, children want to go out and play in it, because it is such a novelty.

The earth is an amazing planet – with a wide range of environments, terrains, and species. We are aware today in ways that never would have occurred to first century Galileans that really we share one interconnected climate on this planet. Our planetary climate has different manifestations in specific locales, but each sub-climate is affected by and affects the whole. Our planet functions as an organic whole.

Unless you have been on a deserted island for some time, you know that there is a great deal of talk these days about the changes in climate on planet Earth. In fact, I’m amazed how much this conversation has increased just in the last year. I suspect Al Gore’s movie, “An Inconvenient Truth” has had an impact on the conversation. But also the realities of climatic “events” have increased the dialogue. This April has certainly been an unusual one for us here in Maine.

Climate change is not new to planet Earth. The climate changed, and at times rather dramatically, even before there were human beings. The question confronting us today is how much our own activities are affecting climate change and how will we live with the consequences? So, what changes do we need to undertake in our present lifestyles and international activities to be better stewards of our home - planet earth?

Today is Earth Day. This is the thirty-seventh designated Earth Day. In

recognition of this day, I decided to pay attention to one particular character in today's gospel lesson. It is the kind of character we usually give little attention. It is the character St. Francis of Assisi (in his *Canticle to the Sun*) refers to as "Sister Water."

This character is introduced right at the beginning of the story. "Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias." In the gospels this body of water is also known as the Sea of Galilee or Lake Gennesaret. Today it is called Lake Kinneret. This body of water, this character, was the setting for much of Jesus' ministry. Throughout the gospels, we hear stories set in the fishing villages on its shore – such as Capernaum and Bethsaida. We hear about sudden storms on the waters. We hear about empty nets and then overflowing nets. It's hard to imagine the story of Jesus without the Sea of Galilee.

This "sea," more properly a lake, is Israel's largest freshwater lake. It is fed by the Jordan River, rainfall and springs on the northern side. In surface area, it is about twice the size of Sebago Lake, but only half as deep. It holds a special place in the heart and minds of the Jewish tradition. As the rabbis have said, "Although God has created seven seas, yet God has chosen this one as his special delight."

So what is the condition of the Sea of Galilee and water, in general, in Israel today? I went to the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs website to see what I could find. It said, "...*water is probably the one single issue that most people would give first place in the list of priorities..*" of environmental concerns in Israel today. In the beginning decades of

the modern day Israel, the focus was on national security and economic development. As a result, little attention was paid to the consequences for the environment. Now those consequences are a problem for national security and economic development.

Some of the rivers in Israel are so polluted that people have died from falling into the rivers. They didn't die from the fall but from the exposure to the toxic waters of the chemically polluted river.

Israel currently faces the most serious water crisis in its history. There have been several years of drought. The increased demands from the population and industry have led to drastic measures to reduce water consumption. The one body of water which has received particular attention is the Sea of Galilee, Lake Kinneret. There is a Kinneret Management Committee, which seeks to protect the lake from pollutants and misuse. When the level of the Lake begins to drop to the danger point, which it does these days, people sit up and take notice.

The Sea of Galilee, our "Sister Water," is a literal and figurative symbol of the quality of life in Israel. Will it be "living water" for generations to come? Will this water, as St. Francis says, be "useful, and humble, and precious, and pure?"

This character from today's story reminds us of the concerns about fresh water quality and quantity that face all people around the world today. Although 71% of the surface area of this planet is water, only 3% of that is fresh water. And as we well know, a lot of that water isn't very "fresh" these days.

As the world-wide climate shifts, rainfall patterns appear to be shifting, and there are predictions that this will continue. If the rainfall continues to decrease in Israel, will there even be a Sea of Galilee? What happens to the people where the rain doesn't fall anymore? Is drinking water a human right or a commodity? What wars will we face in the future that have to do with access to water? If you have lived in the western part of the United States, you know that "water wars" are not new. However, it appears that as the climate continues to shift, those conflicts will increase throughout the world.

So, what shall we do? First of all, pay attention to what is happening. Give voice to our concerns – locally, nationally, and internationally. Remember that the people have a powerful voice when they choose to express it. Senator Gaylord Nelson, who initiated Earth Day wrote: "Earth Day worked because of the spontaneous response at the grassroots level. We had neither the time nor resources to organize 20 million demonstrators and the thousands of schools and local communities that participated. That was the remarkable thing about Earth Day. It organized itself."

In many respects Earth Day activities have continued to be a grassroots activity. In our own congregation several people who were concerned about these matters formed our Earth Care Team about three years ago. They have since helped us to learn about and pay attention to many environmental concerns right here at First Parish and in our homes. They would be glad to hear from you.

In particular, in honor of "Sister Water", we can pay attention to the ways we exercise stewardship of water on a daily basis. One of those that I have been shifting has to do with bottled water. The other day, when I went bowling with the youth, I bought a water bottle. I'm trying to do that less often. I try to remember to take water with me in a refillable bottle. There are many issues with bottled water that I never thought of until the last few years.

- All the plastic for the bottles.
- The fuel to transport the bottles.
- What happens to the local environment when the aquifers are being depleted for bottled water?
- With bottled water, are we creating a perception that water is a commodity rather than a basic need for a culture's infrastructure?

You might ask, "Does NOT buying a water bottle really make a difference?" Well, one of the differences it is making for me is helping me to keep the concerns of "Sister Water" in my consciousness. It reminds me, regularly, that I'm called to be a faithful steward of creation.

In today's story the Sea of Galilee is "living water" providing an abundant harvest of fish. The harvest comes when the disciples listen to the voice of the one who earlier in John's gospel (John 4), in the encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, is identified as the source of all Living Water.