

“Drinking and Walking” A sermon preached by W. Dale Osborne

March 27, 2011, Binkley Baptist Church

Lectionary Texts: Exodus 17: 1-7; Psalm 95; John 4:5-15

As a young boy growing up in Virginia, I remember trips with my family to my grandparent’s farm in Spotsylvania County. The drive from Richmond in the hot summer sun was just over an hour, but the patience of three young brothers wears thin after about fifteen minutes of travel. My parents, the leaders of our tribe seated in the front of our non air conditioned station wagon, had to suffer through a number of choruses of “Are we there yet?” during the journey. We Osborne boys knew the fine art of grumbling. Arriving at the farm sent us scurrying out of the car to chase feral cats, give hugs to relatives and find water. The water most accessible to us came from a pump well about 25 yards from the farmhouse front door. One brother would pump while another took his turn with hands under the flowing water or kneeling with neck turned to receive gushes of water straight down the throat. It was a fun, refreshing and necessary experience. There was no indoor plumbing at Grandmother Marion’s farmhouse. Most everything related to water took place outside. If you had no bucket to catch the water from the well, you had better enlist a partner to get the refreshing liquid. Sibling teamwork at its best relieved our supposedly parched throats and gave us reason to be grateful.

In this third Sunday of the season of Lent, many of us are walking through a forty day journey toward Easter. Some of you have given up meat in your diet as part of the discipline of Lent. Others have made a promise to write a portion of a story throughout these forty days. Someone told me at the Ash Wednesday service that they were committed to spending more time in pray and reflection as part of their Lenten promise. Three seventh graders are walking through our Discipleship Class as part of this season of fasting and prayer. If you have done nothing different with your life during this season, do not fret or worry. God is present with you still. The early church set up this seasonal ritual but it is not a requirement for true Christian faith. Regardless of anyone’s Lenten practices, I do think we can all appreciate and learn from the words of the prayer found in our bulletin that point us to God in this season. They read softly, “Artist of souls, you sculpted a people for yourself out of the rocks of wilderness and fasting. Help us as we take up your invitation to prayer and simplicity, that the discipline of these forty days may sharpen our hunger for the feast of your holy friendship, and whet our thirst for the living water you offer through Jesus Christ.”

Today’s sermon is entitled “Drinking and Walking”. It is a bit of a play on the warning phrase found in most of our vocabularies. I think most of us have heard the warning, “Drinking and driving are dangerous and illegal.” The drink referred to in this warning is alcohol. Getting behind the wheel of a car or truck after drinking alcohol can be extremely dangerous and deadly. Let me say boldly from this pulpit “Don’t drink and drive.” This public service announcement comes free of charge and with no underwriting by the liquor industry: “Don’t drink and drive.”

But what about drinking water and walking? They can certainly be joined together in societal and religious harmony. Drinking and walking, walking and drinking, what could be more natural and healthy? The wandering Israelites in today’s lesson from the book of Exodus are perfect examples for the positive concept of drinking while walking. Remember in verse one we heard, “From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.” No water to drink in the Sinai Desert. No water to drink after walking in the hot sun for days. No water to drink and no water in sight as these formerly enslaved Hebrews walked toward a promised land that they had never even seen. This was truly an incredible and taxing journey. Yahweh has led the people of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt and into a wilderness beyond their imaginations. Moses, their reluctant leader has dealt with their fearfulness in the desert before. When they were in danger of starvation, he called on Yahweh to sustain the people. In that time of crisis and fear manna appeared on the ground and quails were provided as protein for the hungry Israelites. Now the people are thirsty and there is seemingly nothing to satisfy their bodily longing. What can they do? They do what almost any child would do, whether they are riding in a hot car or walking across a hot desert – they grumble and complain. “The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” A very difficult question for Moses to answer: but one that he must answer well or possibly face death. Moses doesn’t answer hurriedly without thinking. Instead, Moses relies on the same God who called him into service as a leader. He relies on the same God who pressed him into service at a barefooted encounter with the burning bush.

I like this example by Moses very much. People in trouble, followers at the brink of violence, where shall I turn for help? I shall turn to the source of my being and the author of my life's existence. I shall turn to God and seek counsel and support. The passage reads, So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." Some might see this reliance on God as a cowardly cop-out. Moses should simply figure out a way to get some water or turn over leadership to someone who can. But Moses is not copping out, heavens no, he is bringing God in. He is making wide and deep the path to safety and success for himself and his people. You see, Moses is in real peril as far as he is concerned. Stoning is not the way he wants his story to end. But like all courageous leaders who take risks, he knows that a violent death is a very real possibility. Leading a group of hungry, thirsty and tired homeless people to a promised land is rarely an easy process. It takes thoughtful planning, community involvement, use of available resources and open communication. Yahweh's message and plan for Moses and the Israelites involves many of these factors. Hear the words from Exodus again. The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

The Lord is with you wandering, homeless people. God is with you as you search for a new and safe home where you may be productive and educated as you put your lives back together. The God of Moses and Miriam is with you as you walk toward wholeness and rebirth. Your former home, where you were often oppressed and felt like you were living in a city jail is no longer your resting place. A new home of dignity and greater personal responsibility awaits you at the end of your walking. God will show you the place to quench your thirst. God will reward your walking with life giving water. Quarrel and complain if you need to brothers and sisters. Sometimes that is the best way to turn a difficult situation into one that God can bless. Just remember to be grateful when you reach the water, remember to be thankful when your home is found. Remember to offer a prayer of thanksgiving when your grumbling turns to positive action and blessed results.

There is another beautiful story of walking and drinking in our gospel lesson for today. Jesus and his disciples walk. A woman walks to the well where her people have drawn water for centuries and all who hear the story are encouraged to drink in a life-giving water that has no end. John is a poetic and philosophical gospel full of beautiful imagery. Remember how in our story from today Jesus asks for water because he is thirsty and tired from all his walking. Remember how he gets a puzzled response from a woman whose people are not considered worthy to share a drink of water from the same well as the Jews. Remember how Jesus talks with her about access to water that denies thirst any power. Remember how the woman seemingly laughs at Jesus because he doesn't even have bucket to hold any life giving water. Remember that Jesus assures her that God's water, found in Jesus will spring forth eternally. Think about these things the next time you are walking in an event like the CROP walk and someone from the men's homeless shelter at the corner of Rosemary and Columbia offers you a drink of water after you have walked a couple of miles. Think about this Gospel message the next time you are walking in the NAMI walk at Dorothea Dix hospital and someone living with a brain disorder offers you a drink of water for your journey. Think about this gospel message the next time someone complains to you because they are thirsty. Think deeply as God encourages you to offer them a drink.

Walking and drinking, Drinking and walking. We need to find a way to experience both in our shared journey to a promised land where eternal life flows freely from one soul to the next. Thanks be to God who stands on the rock.