

The Fruit Jar

EXODUS 17:1-6 (NRSV) *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. ²The 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?" ⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people?*

They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵The 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. ⁶I 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.

JOHN 4:5-14 (NRSV) *So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. ⁷When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ... ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew*

the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." ¹¹"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? ¹²Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?" ¹³Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst..."

When I was nine, I went with my cousin's family to spend a couple of days on my uncle Miley's farm, out past Ranger, Texas. It was cotton pickin' season, and my uncle offered my cousin and me, I think it was, a nickel a sack if we'd join in the pickin'. A nickel a sack: I figured twenty, twenty-five bags a day for two days... That ought to keep me in candy bars and chewing gum for the rest of the trip.

Do you know how heavy a cotton sack can get? It's just cotton. It ought to be like pullin' a big pillow behind you, right? Well, that white fluff can pack pretty tight! A full sack of cotton can get really heavy! And filling one up was like filling a 55-gallon oil drum with water—using a teaspoon. In two days, I think I picked enough cotton—maybe—to fill a bag-and-a-half!

My shoulders and back ached, my hands were cut and bleeding; but the thing I remember most about picking cotton was the thirst.

We took water in quart fruit jars. There was no ice, but the water came from a deep well, and was cool—and we left the fruit jars with our lunches in the shade of the cotton wagon, so the water would stay as cool as possible, and we'd walk out several rows from the wagon and start. The rows were 25 miles long—uphill, both ways. It was hot! And dry! And dusty! And the cotton fuzz flew around my face and got in my nose... The thirst hit about half-way out the first row.

My mouth was dry from the dust and the cotton fuzz; I needed to swallow, but

my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth; the heat radiated up for the earth, and the sun beat down on my back, and it wasn't seven o'clock!

Finally, we reached the end of that first row and turned back toward the wagon. It was barley visible on the horizon.

My tongue began to swell inside my mouth, and all I could think about was that fruit jar under the wagon. The wagon seemed to move with us: we'd walk and pick and walk and pick, and I'd look up and the wagon seemed no closer than before.

We finally returned to the wagon, and I let the strap fall from my shoulder and I headed for the wagon, and my fruit jar. I fell to my knees and picked it up. It was still cool to the touch. My hands trembled as I unscrewed the lid; and, thirsty as I was, I was careful to put down the lid so as not to get dirt in it. And, finally, I lifted the fruit jar to my parched lips and felt the cool wetness slide down my dehydrated tongue; my hot throat "sizzled" as the water hit it, and I could hear the "Sons of the Pioneers" singing in the background: "Cool, clear water."

Coke at one time called itself "the real thing"; but when you're really thirsty—really thirsty—nothing satisfies like a fruit jar full of "cool, clear, water."

If you've ever been thirsty—really thirsty—you'll understand the stories from today's scripture: a tribe of people in the desert; days since the last water hole; they're thirsty. A man walking down a hot, dusty road; stops to talk to a woman at a well, and asks her for a drink. It becomes a matter of empathy.

If you *have* ever been really thirsty, you can begin to understand why water is such a central theme in the Bible—a dry and arid land; water is a premium. And Jesus frequently used water as a metaphor for the relationship between God and humanity. In today's text from John: "...*whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst.*"

Kinda' gives a whole deeper meaning to the act of baptism, doesn't it? ...and of Jesus walking on the water. And in the first public teaching reported by Matthew — Jesus says, "*Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled*" MATTHEW 5:6 (NRSV).

Have you ever been *really* thirsty—not just for a drink of water? Have you ever been so passionate about something that it just ate at you—wouldn't leave you alone—until, finally, you said to yourself, "I've got to do something about this." ...some noble cause, some occasion of injustice or abuse, some neglected need for mercy or compassion? You just felt, "I've got to get involved in this."

I think that's what Jesus had in mind when he said, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...*"

Righteousness. In the original language, in other contexts, the word is translated, "Justice." Too often, "righteousness" is understood as "piety"—personal devotion. And too often, "justice" is understood as retribution or punishment.

Personal devotion is important in a life of faith, and retribution has relevance in civil law, and there are biblical words for both. But when Jesus said, *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..."* he didn't use any of those words. And the word he used¹ doesn't imply those qualities.

The word Jesus used does relate to relational, rather than personal, contexts—how we relate to people and social structures—and its fundamental meaning is simply "what is right", whether it is translated "justice" or "righteousness."

The greatest moral dilemma facing us today may be the disconnect between human need and some ideologies, both political and religious. Some things simply are more important than any philosophy or dogma—things that simply are "right"—things like the ones Jesus states clearly in MATTHEW 25: *"...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me"* (MATTHEW 25:35-36 NRSV)

When the neglect of those things is justified in favor of any system or philosophy, such neglect becomes unrighteousness. Some things simply are more important than ideological principles!

Jesus reserved his harshest criticism for those who justified their neglect of the poor by cherry picking specific parts of their law, misapplying those parts and then absolutizing them. There was a law called "corban." It meant, "gift," and referred to resources set aside as an offering to God. Jesus said this to the Pharisees: *"Moses gave you this law from God: 'Honor your father and mother,' and 'Anyone who speaks disrespectfully of father or mother must be put to death.'* ¹¹*But you say it is all right to say to your parents, 'Sorry, I can't help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I would have given to you.'* ¹²*By invoking 'corban', you justify your disregard for your needy parents.* ¹³*And so you cancel the word of God..."* (MARK 7:10-13 NLT)

And he didn't mince words when he said, *"...unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"* (MATT 5:20). When ideology trumps human need, neither justice nor righteousness is enacted!

When you're really thirsty, nothing satisfies quite like a fruit jar full of cool, clear water. When your thirst is for righteousness... Maybe it's a matter of empathy.

The late Fred Craddock shared a memory from the first church he served as a student. "They had a fund called the Emergency Fun and had about \$100 in it. They told me I could use it at my discretion provided I dispensed the money according to the conditions. So I said, 'What are the conditions?'

"The chairman of the committee said, 'You are not to give the money to anybody who is in need as a result of laziness, drunkenness, or poor management.'

"I said, 'Well, what else is there?' Far as I know, they still have that money."

Maybe... I don't know. Maybe they'd never been thirsty.

¹ Δικαιοσύνην (*dik-ah-yos-oo'-nay*) Strong's Concordance defines the word thus: (usually if not always in a Jewish atmosphere), justice, justness, righteousness, righteousness of which God is the source or author, but practically: a divine righteousness.