

SERMON TITLE: The Seven Last Words of Christ: "I am thirsty."
SERMON TEXT: John 19: 25b-30
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 26, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Over 30 years of ministry and visiting many, many people in the hospital, one of the things I have often seen is folks who desperately want a drink of water. Due to surgeries that are scheduled or might suddenly be scheduled, and the risk of stomach upsets from anesthesia, patients are sometimes forbidden to take any liquids by mouth. They are limited to intravenous fluids. When they're lucky, those patients get to suck on some ice chips or dampen their mouths with one of those pink spongy swabs. But, when they're not so lucky, those patients are very uncomfortable with their dried-out mouths and cracked and peeling lips.

I'm wondering if that's how Jesus felt when he was hanging on the cross and uttered the fifth of his seven last statements. In previous weeks, we've heard Jesus pray, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." We've heard him promise the thief, "Today you'll be with me in paradise." We've witnessed Jesus connect two people he loved with the words, "Here is your son . . . Here is your mother." Then last Sunday, we heard Jesus express his sense of abandonment, when he questioned, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And now, as the beatings, humiliation, and crucifixion are taking their toll even further, we hear Jesus utter a basic concern of the human body. If we listen carefully, we can just barely hear him pry his tongue loose from the roof of his parched mouth to speak the words, "I am thirsty."

1—PHYSICAL NEED

Jesus' thirst was, first of all, a physical need. His body was dried out. Jesus had had nothing to drink since Thursday night's Last Supper. If that Passover dinner followed the standard Jewish ritual, it would have included four cups of wine. Once that dinner was over, Jesus went to the Garden of

Gethsemane to pray. From there, he was arrested, put on trial, beaten, mocked, marched, and crucified without any regard for his physical needs. It wasn't 24 hours yet, but, by Friday afternoon, Jesus' body would have been weakened by hunger, and—even more—he was thirsty.

The Gospel of John mentions thirst, or the need for drink, a number of times. You may recall that Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, when the host ran out of wine to serve his guests. That's in John chapter 2. Then, in John chapter 4, Jesus was thirsty and asked the Samaritan woman to give him a drink from the well. And, now, here in John 19:28, we see Jesus on the cross, needing a drink.

Thirst is a real human need. Jesus understood it, because he experienced it. Jesus lived in a dry land, where people had to haul water long distances in jugs and jars. When I was a kid, my grandmother had to haul water from a creek some miles from her house, but she eventually got a well and later indoor plumbing. Even in recent years, my brother-in-law in Oregon had to buy and haul big bottles of water because of some kind of water rights dispute he was having with his neighbor. And we all know about the lead poisoning problem in Flint, Michigan, that has required the residents of that city to use only bottled water. Fortunately, those situations are exceptions to the rule. Generally, we who live in the United States hardly know anything about thirst. All we have to do is turn on the tap to get clean, safe, cheap, and reliable water.

Not everyone in the world is so fortunate, however. One of the most common causes of childhood death around the world is dehydration caused by unclean water and consequent diarrhea. According to the World Health Organization, 842,000 people die every year from unsafe water and sanitation-related illnesses.¹ That very large number includes 1000 children who die every day from water-related sickness.²

Hearing statistics like that makes us squirm because we feel bad and don't think we can do anything about it. But we're in luck. Today's special offering for UMCOR, the United Methodist

Committee on Relief, will allow us to help undergird our denominational work with projects related to WASH—Water and Sanitation-Hygiene. Not only do these on-going projects help lower the death toll, but UMCOR tells us that every \$1.00 spent on water and sanitation-hygiene projects results in \$4.30 worth of “increased productivity and decreased health care costs.”² It’s amazing what the availability of clean water and sanitation can do for an individual, a family, and a community. When we donate to UMCOR, we make a significant difference to the well-being of our world.

While Jesus was hanging on the cross feeling great thirst, the best anyone did for him was to give him a sponge soaked in sour wine vinegar. That seems pretty sad. But you may recall that, in another gospel, Jesus said that whenever we give a drink to a thirsty person, it’s the same as giving a drink to Jesus himself.³ We can’t undo the suffering Jesus experienced in his crucifixion some 2000 years ago. But we can ease Jesus’ suffering today whenever we help anyone who is thirsty. So let’s do all we can to ease this basic physical need.

2—SPIRITUAL NEED

In the Gospel of John, whenever Jesus spoke about thirst, his words always had a double meaning. So, when Jesus said, “I am thirsty,” he was also speaking about a spiritual need. Hanging on the cross in excruciating pain, Jesus needed to know that God cared about him and that God would give him the ability to cope. Jesus was thirsting for God’s spiritual strength and salvation.

We too have a spiritual need for God’s strength and salvation. In John chapter 4, Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well, “If you knew who it is who asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” Jesus told her that whoever drinks water from the well will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks from the water of Christ will never thirst again. Indeed, the water of Christ becomes in us like “a spring . . . welling up to eternal life.”⁴

And, in John chapter 6, after Jesus miraculously multiplied the bread and fish and fed the 5000, Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Those who believe in me will never go hungry, and those who

believe in me will never be thirsty.”⁵ Many of those who had witnessed Jesus feed the multitude interpreted Jesus’ words literally. They thought Jesus was talking about a lifetime supply of food and beverages. Some of them liked that idea very much, and others of them thought Jesus was making absurd promises that he could never fulfill. That’s why Jesus clarified his statement by saying, “Whoever drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise that one up at the last day.”⁶ We who have been part of the Christian tradition clearly understand that Jesus was talking about drinking his spirit into our hearts. We do this symbolically whenever we drink the cup of holy communion. We do this spiritually whenever we slurp up Christ’s words of teaching, whenever we soak in his forgiveness, whenever we gulp in the joy of Christ’s salvation.

In Matthew 5:6, Jesus had said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Jesus knew the truth of this statement for himself and for us. Whenever we thirst for God’s strength, whenever we long for God’s hope, whenever we cry out desperately for God’s salvation, we will be heard. Our souls will be satisfied. Our cups will be filled.

There’s a joke you’ve probably heard before, in one form or another. The way I know it goes like this. When you take your boat out on the lake to go fishing, do you know why you never take just one Baptist with you? Because if you take just one Baptist, he’ll drink all your beer. But if you take two Baptists, they’ll make each other feel guilty, so neither one of them will drink any of your beer.

Personally, I don’t know much about fishing with Baptists or drinking beer. But I do know that my spiritual thirsts have been well satisfied through my relationship with Jesus, who showed me in his life and in his death what it means to thirst for God and find relief for my spiritual need.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this sermon, I’m going to read to you two verses of a song, and then have all of you sing the chorus twice. While you’re singing, I invite you to lift up your hands like a cup. Join Jesus in saying, “I am thirsty,” and allow God to fill you up.

Like the woman at the well, I was seeking
 For things that could not satisfy;
 But then I heard the Savior speaking:
 "Draw from the well that never shall run dry."

There are millions in this world who are craving
 The pleasures earthly things afford;
 But none can match the wondrous treasure
 That I find in Jesus Christ my Lord.

Sing this prayer with me:

***Fill my cup, Lord. I lift it up, Lord!
 Come and quench this thirsting of my soul;
 Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more—
 Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole!***⁷

(sing 2x)

¹ <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs391/en/>

² <https://www.umcor.org/UMCOR/Programs/Global-Health/Water-and-Sanitation>

³ Matthew 25:37-40.

⁴ John 4:1-14.

⁵ Verse 35.

⁶ John 6:54.

⁷Lyrics by Richard Blanchard, 1959.