

## OPENING TO THE SOFT SPOT-6 OVERCOMING OUR FEAR OF TRUSTING

(08/28/16)

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 17:1-7  
John 4:1-42

*Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water. . ."* (John 4:13-15)

This summer we have been exploring what it would mean to set aside the armor that we have consciously or unconsciously constructed to keep us safe, to prevent us from being wounded, and to prepare us to do battle with the outer and inner demons that beset us. We are trying to imagine what it would feel like if we followed Jesus' teachings about being vulnerable, about the redemptive nature of suffering, and about the importance of taking down the walls that separate us from other people, especially people who are different from us in any way.

I suspect that our lives would be different if we took Jesus' teaching about vulnerability to heart as a guide for the way we live our life. However, Jesus offers us more than just his teaching; he offers himself as our guide. He offers to walk with us as we journey through the twisted maze of this earthly life.

Biblical scholars have determined that the word that is commonly translated as "faith," the Greek word *pistis*, should more accurately be translated as "trust." When Jesus tells us that we need to have more faith, he is telling us that we need to be more trusting. But we, at least most of us, are not very trusting. I am not very trusting. We prefer to have everything set up ahead of time. We strive to be in control—of ourselves, of other people, and of life.

This past week I thought back to my two trekking pilgrimages through India, Nepal, and Tibet. On these inner and outer journeys I had several guides.

In 1999 the Nepalese Sherpa Ang Phuri, who is Buddhist, accompanied us in our trek through the foothills of the Himalayas in northwestern Nepal. Ang Phuri took special care of me when I was sick from an intestinal parasite. As we walked along a narrow ledge only two feet away from a considerable drop, Ang Phuri walked behind me and literally stepped into my footprints the minute my foot left the ground. If I lost my balance, he (hopefully) would have

been able to grab me before I went over. Ang Phuri is introverted, a contemplative. He is strong, contained, and has tremendous endurance. I still love the guy.

Sue, our tour guide on this trip, is from Tasmania. Sue is competent, knowledgeable, and was exceptionally well prepared. Of the four or five trekking groups that covered the same route that we did, she was the only leader who had the foresight to bring a Gamow bag.

A Gamow bag is a sturdy canvass body bag. If you are suffering from HAPE, high altitude pulmonary edema, or HACE, high altitude cerebral edema, you lie on your back inside the bag. The bag is then zipped up and secured with canvass straps. There is a little plastic window in front of your face to lessen the feeling of claustrophobia. I know what you're thinking (remember, I can read lips): "That wouldn't be enough for me."

Your companions on the trek take turns pumping air into the bag. Slowly increasing the amount of air inside the bag increases the atmospheric pressure. This has the effect of bringing you down the equivalent of two or three thousand feet. That might not sound like much, but the difference between the atmospheric pressure at 15,000 feet and 12,000 feet is considerable. Your brain and your lungs know the difference. Sometimes all it takes is one six hour session in the bag, including a nap, to reduce the swelling in your brain or help your lungs clear out the fluid that is making it difficult to breathe.

We had to use the bag twice while we were in the vicinity of Lake Manasarovar on the Tibetan plateau. One member of our group was suffering from cerebral edema. Because the bag provided her with only temporary relief, we had to forego our desire to do the *kora*, the thirty-three mile trek around Mt. Kailas, because it involved a stretch where we would reach an altitude of 18,600 feet. We had to get her down to a lower altitude as quickly as possible. Even Sue, who was an experienced climber, developed pulmonary edema and had to be bagged on two different occasions. If she hadn't had the foresight to bring the bag, these two members of our group would have been in serious trouble.

In 2001, our guide through Nepal and Tibet was Thon Drop. Thon Drop short-roped me when, due to a paralyzed diaphragm and collapsed lung, I was having difficulty reaching the top of the Dolma La pass half way around Mt. Kailas. I'll never forget the afternoon we spent under Thon Drop's guidance pulling another group's truck from the middle of a swollen river. He has a wonderful sense of humor, infinite patience, and great inner and outer strength.

Diane, who is from Australia, was our tour guide on the second trip. She has a deep feeling for the Tibetan land and its people. She is free-spirited, upbeat, and enthusiastic. When we ran into difficulties like the massacre of the royal family at their palace in Kathmandu, which was right down the street from where we were staying, we could count on Diane to keep us safe.

If I were to write a book about leadership, I would use these four guides as examples. The traits they brought to the pilgrimages are traits that are also needed by clergy as they guide or accompany parishioners on their journeys and as they guide their church on its journey.

Moses does not choose to be a guide; he experiences a call. God calls Moses out of the fire, the burning bush. Moses is a visionary. He helps his people see that a better life is possible, a life free from bondage, a life in a land of their own. A leader, a guide, needs to be a visionary, especially when his/her people have not traveled this path before.

Moses doesn't just point the way to the Promised Land; he accompanies his people on their journey. He is an integral part of their transformation. Before the pilgrimage through the wilderness, the Israelites were known as the twelve tribes of Israel. When they emerge from the wilderness, the Bible begins to refer to them as the nation of Israel. They become a people during and also because of their forty years in the wilderness.

The wilderness does that to people. It can break us. It can also be the fire that tempers the steel of our will, our faith, and our soul. Whether the experience destroys us or makes us stronger depends on our guide, on the resources we bring to the journey, and the resources we discover as we are on the journey.

The Israelites do not travel through the wilderness alone. They travel with God or, more correctly, God travels with them. When we are going through the difficult times of our lives, we do not travel alone. We journey with God or, more correctly, God journeys with us.

During their sojourn in the wilderness, the Israelites become hungry. The initial supply of food they brought is depleted. This can also happen to us. No matter how well prepared we are, we cannot bring everything we will need as we embark upon a journey into a new dimension of life. We will need to discover new and different resources along the way. We will need to find new ways to feed ourselves, to nourish not only our bodies but also our souls.

On their trek through the wilderness, the Israelites complain about the lack of food. Moses brings their needs before God. God responds by providing them with quail and manna.

After having been miraculously fed by God, you would think that the Israelites would be more trusting when they camp at a place where there is no water. You would think they would take to heart the words of our hymn, “Be not dismayed, what ‘ere betide; God will take care of you.” They don’t. They quarrel with Moses, demanding that he provide them with water.

Moses, who is afraid that his people will turn their anger against him and stone him, realizes that on a deeper level his people are testing God. Moses is concerned about the extent of God’s patience. He is not sure how long God is going to put up with the Israelites’ whining and complaining, with their childish temper tantrums every time the road becomes rough. Moses takes the problem to God, as any good leader should do. Once again, God responds. He welcomes the opportunity to make a point in response to the people’s complaint. The point is made in the way that God directs Moses to provide the people with water.

First, God tells Moses to use the same staff with which he struck the river Nile. This staff symbolizes the connection between liberation from Egypt and sustenance on the journey to the Promised Land. The same staff that ushered in the plagues now opens the rock and enables the people to survive. In effect, God is saying, “I did not liberate you to abandon you. You will not die in the desert unless you abandon me.”

Second, the rock that supplies them with water is a special rock; it is the place where the Israelites encounter God. The people survive by coming into the presence of God. The question “Is the Lord among us or not?” indicates that they have lost contact with the divine presence. God uses their thirst to remind them of the presence of the One who is the source of their life.

Third, to drive these points home God chooses to bring forth water from a rock. One would usually expect water to come from a spring or a well. This water comes from a different source. It is more than just water to quench physical bodily thirst; it is a sign of the new life that God offers to those who trust, to those who have faith.

In today’s gospel lesson Jesus, while travelling through Samaria, becomes thirsty. He unexpectedly asks a Samaritan woman for a drink. Jews and Samaritans of his day would not share a drinking cup for fear of contamination. In response to the woman’s question, Jesus tells her that if she knew to whom she was speaking, she would ask *him* for a drink of living water.

The woman takes Jesus’ words on a literal rather than a symbolic level. This is a common misunderstanding or misreading of scripture. When Jesus tells the woman that those

who drink of the water that he gives them will never thirst, that the water he gives will become a spring gushing up to eternal life, the woman thinks it is a way to avoid having to come to the well every day. It is only after Jesus shows that he knows her in her depths that she begins to understand his teaching on a deeper level.

Jesus, like Moses, is a guide. However, there is a significant difference between them. Moses provides the Israelites with literal bread and water. Jesus not only feeds the five thousand with literal bread, he actually *is* the bread of life. Jesus not only tells the woman about the living water, he *is* the spring welling up to eternal life. The miracle that he offers to the woman he also offers to us. It is the opportunity to encounter him in the midst of our ordinary everyday life.

There are times when we find ourselves undergoing a wilderness experience. During this time, like the Israelites, we may whine and complain. There are days when the best we can do is to put one foot in front of the other. Even that may not be easy. Remember, when we find ourselves hitting the wall it may be because we have been traveling down a dead-end street.

During our sojourn in the wilderness, the hunger and thirst that we feel is not for literal bread and water, but for relief. We may seek relief from anxiety. We may seek relief from depression. We may long for relief from the stress we feel or the weight of the burdens we carry. We may hunger and thirst for something as simple as a good night's sleep, for peace of mind, for a human connection, for a sense of joy, for the love which has dimmed or become lost.

When we find ourselves in the wilderness, Moses would tell us to trust. He would tell us that even though we may *feel* abandoned by God, God has not abandoned us. Whether we know it or not, we are travelling with God, or God is travelling with us. In fact, God may have led us into the wilderness to help bring about an important change in our life. Like the Israelites, we need to trust that the Lord will provide, sometimes in miraculous ways. The water of life will once again flow through us; it will bring new life to the desert experiences of our lives. As absurd as it sounds, with God's help we can actually draw water from the rock.

When we find ourselves on a journey through the wilderness, Jesus would tell us to open our eyes to the resources that are already present to us, the resources that are present in our religious faith, in our religious community, the resources that are present in people who care. Though we may think we need a miracle to save us, we may not need a miracle. We can get water from a rock, but we can also get it from a well. We can get it from our church. Jesus also

reminds us that the bread and water, the spiritual resources that we discover on our wilderness journey are not meant for us alone. We are meant to share them with others.

Jesus is a guide to the water that can quench our deeper thirst, the living water, the spring of water that wells up within us to eternal life. This water is closer to us than we are to ourselves. This is because Jesus is more than a guide to the living water; as the eternal Christ who dwells within us, he *is* this living water.

We have many guides in the course of our lives. I have had many, not only the four people who accompanied me on my pilgrimages through the Tibetan plateau. Each guide that enters our life has something different to share with us, some important trait or quality that we need to realize and develop within ourselves. When we do this, we can become a guide for others as we journey through this mysterious and often difficult pilgrimage of life.

Moses tells the Israelites to trust. Then he draws water from the rock. Jesus tells the Samaritan woman to trust, that he will give to her living water, the water of eternal life. The woman responds, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never thirst.”

As we journey through the varied seasons of our lives, let us set aside our armor, the delusion of self-sufficiency, our more than marginal propensity to be in control, and open our hearts to trust. Let us be courageous enough to trust just as the woman trusted.

In this service of worship and in the days to come, let us open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to the One who can not only bring water from a rock, but who actually is this living water.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
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