

Genesis 22:1-14 and Matthew 10:40-42

Picture a dry land. To hear this story today, it helps to think about the land in Israel/Palestine into which Jesus sent his disciples. It was and is dry... there are parts that are rather like the Grand Canyon on a smaller scale, but with miles of desert earth-tones and few trees. Perhaps a stream meanders through but often they only hold water part of the year...They are called a Wadis. You would not want to find yourself thirsty, in this land.

Let us be in prayer: God who quenches our thirst, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In Middle Eastern culture, hospitality was not only a custom, but a dire necessity. If you were traveling through this arid land and became thirsty, you were totally dependent on the hospitality of someone whose home you came upon.

Survival depended on the *sharing* of water. Strict social conventions regarding hospitality still remain in the traditions of the people of this region, this is why the limitation of water for Palestinians today, is so painful.

Not offering hospitality to the traveler or stranger was considered dishonorable...as more than likely at some time, any host might also be in need. One hand washed the other, as the saying goes.

And furthermore, if a servant was sent out into this landscape, they were to be treated with the same amount of hospitality as would be afforded the one who sent them. Jesus said, "Those who welcome you, also welcome me... and welcomes God who sent me!"

Giving and receiving, sharing food and water, created a situation where the host was bound with those they welcomed...and it linked them in a larger sense with those who even sent them. A beautiful image.

How much do our own acts of compassion come from this grounding in faith? Perhaps it is in our subconscious, that we remember that Jesus said, "when you feed the least of these, you also feed me." How do these stories of faith impact the way we live and interact with one another?

Jesus told his disciples to go out and do...not to go out and talk about beliefs...but to go out and show acts of kindness.

It was risky business to go out into that terrain and depend on others to support their needs.... Perhaps it is risky business for us to go out in our own environment...to show compassion and to trust in a larger sense of God. Has it become unpopular to be kind in our nation today? But kindness... is at the root of all faiths.

Right now the United Church of Christ, with whom this church is associated, is having their biennial national meeting in Maryland. They have it in a different city every other year. It is recorded live and I heard the opening worship message by the Rev. Traci Blackman. She is the Acting Executive Minister of Justice & Witness Ministries of The United Church of Christ and Senior Pastor of Christ The King United Church of Christ in Florissant, MO.

She gave a powerful message. She said it was on that same day back in 1859, that Charles "Blondin" walked a tightrope across Niagara Falls! He went back and forth across a rope between Canada and the United States hovering over the tumultuous waterfalls below him. He not only did it once, but also on stilts...also on a bicycle...also stopping in the middle of this hanging rope to cook an omelette...and then finally with a wheelbarrow! It was at this point that he asked the cheering crowd if they would trust him to carry one of *them* in the wheelbarrow across this roaring abyss! Silence befell the crowd and no one volunteered.

Rev. Blackman suggested although we might agree with the challenges that are put before us in our faith; doing them is another matter. Believing in theory is not the same when you know that the dangers are real. She asks if our faith is just about feeling good about ourselves...encouraging others to do what may not have the courage to do ourselves?

Or....can we step out in real trust of God even when the waters are turbulent? And here is a great thing that Blackman said, "We should not step out believing that God is on *our* side...but to know that God is *simultaneously* on everybody's side...and God is WITH US even when we are not with one another..."

I found this profound... God is indeed, simultaneously on everybody's side, yearning for all to come to peace. Jesus asked his disciples to go out to do the work of hospitality and healing; do the work of peace-making and protecting those who are being subjected to injustice. This takes a huge amount of courage...but giving a cup of water in a small way, is also giving a cup of water to God in the largest sense.

Abraham was asked to trust in God in a very strange and seemingly cruel story...and yet he gave of himself totally...and trusted God.

On this Fourth of July we remember our country's willingness to step out...in faith. Frederick Douglass reminded our nation, there was still work to be done in terms of independence for *all* our people, including those who continued to be enslaved in his time. As we remember our independence, we might ask if there is work still to be done as all people pursue a life of liberty and justice.

I am going to close with some of the words from a poem by the great African American poet, Langston Hughes who lived from 1902 to 1967.

*Let America be America again. Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain seeking a home where all are free.
(America never was America to me.)*

*Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed--- Let it be that great strong land
of love where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme that any man be crushed by one
above.*

(It never was America to me.)

*O, let my land be a land where Liberty is crowned with no false patriotic wreath, but
opportunity is real, and life is free, equality is in the air we breathe....*

O my God...be with us all as we live with the ideals of our faith and this nation...
Amen.