

The Intricate Web of Life that Water Supports
March 21, 2010

For some reason, maybe because I thought it would be a poetic entry, I was wishing I could begin this sermon about women and water by saying I am a swimmer. Then I could tell you about all the different bodies of water in which I've swum, beginning with the Willamette River, which runs through my hometown, then moving to the cold Pacific ocean of the Oregon coast where I spent many a childhood weekend, then on to swimming the warmer Pacific of Hawaii, where I graduated from high school, and swimming in the Aegean, when I lived in Greece for half a year in college. I could tell you about swimming in the Rio Grande of New Mexico, the Connecticut River running past Northampton, or swimming along the western shores of Lake Michigan in Chicago, where I went to

seminary. I'd love to tell you about swimming in all the fabulous spots of Austin, to battle the hot, hot, heat of August.

Alas, I do not float. I am a panicky, weighty, sinking mineral in the water, and the best I can do, for a few yards, is a dog paddle much inferior to my Chocolate Lab's paddling; or I can get along nicely with a knee-high splashing about, within easy reach of dry land. No, though the title of today's sermon is "The Intricate Web of Life that Water Supports," water, when it comes to me and swimming, seems unable to support, or at least buoy, this particular thread of the web standing here before you.

My mother, on the other hand, was a swimmer—an excellent swimmer; a cross between Venus rising from the ocean and Johnny Weismueller. She had that much grace and that much strength. Of course, it doesn't hurt that she was a Pisces—naturally fishy.

I, in contrast, am an Aquarius. Now, people often mistake Aquarius to be a water sign, because, look, *aqua* is the first part of our name, and we are, after all, the water *bearer*. But actually Aquarians are air signs. Grounded on dry land, breathing nothing but air, our job is to *carry* the water, transport it. So, no swimmer, me, I am a water *bearer*—a person, like the women on the cover of today’s order of service, called to transport that miraculous element of life that does—no matter if we swim in it, or it swims in us—that miraculous element of life—two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen—that does support the intricate *web* of life.

How does it do so? To explore that question, in the days leading up to the writing of this sermon, I invited the notion of water to, well, swim around in my mind. I read the poem by Mary Oliver we heard Anna read earlier, which captures the cleansing, cooling, quenching beauty of water:

I dip my cupped hands. I drink
A long time. It tastes
Like stone, leaves, fire. It falls cold
Into my body, waking the bones. I hear them
Deep inside me whispering
Oh what is that beautiful thing
That just happened?

I read stories of women's lives in relation to water, some of which I'll share later, and I've been witnessing water in my own life. I drink tea, lots of tea. I shower. I brush my teeth. I flush. I wash my hands. I wash dishes. I go to Louise Messano's Laundromat and wash my clothes. I drink more tea. I wake up on Saturday morning to it raining and raining and it reminds me of July 2007, when I first moved here, and the rain was Biblical in its relentlessness. It rained and rained and rained and then... it stopped raining. And it continued to not rain. And it kept not raining. For over two years, it seems, we

got nothing, and the ground turned to dust and the lake levels lowered, and Lance Armstrong got fined for obviously keeping his garden pretty while everything else went brown.

Now, it seems, the rain has returned. I try to adjust myself to the rhythms. Central Texas, in its feast or famine ways, is teaching me a thing or two about water. And it's not just the wavering weather that's teaching me. We humans are just as central to central Texan water as are the springs and the clouds. Take, for instance, what's happened at the Plainview Estates, in East Austin. Are you familiar with the Plainview Estates? I first heard about this mostly low-income community when I was familiarizing myself with the work of Austin Interfaith. Austin Interfaith member congregation Santa Barbara Catholic Church, located in East Austin and religious home to many Plainview Estate residents, had been

active in trying to get running water back into these people's homes.

Now, had the families of the Plainview Estates been without water for a couple of days? A couple of weeks? A few months? For *five years*, these Austin residents had been without running water. For five years, they had had to have water delivered by truck at an average monthly rate of \$200, or had had to carry buckets to and from the local fire station. The reason? Though the Plainview Estates had been built in the 1960s, and the people there for decades had had ready access to water through wells, continued, and I'm imagining not very well considered, growth and development in the surrounding areas essentially redirected the water and dried out the wells.

It wasn't until the Plainview Estates residents, with the help of Austin Interfaith, as well as the Environmental Law

Clinic at the UT Law School, amassed enough protest power that the Travis County Commissioners' Court finally voted in the spring of 2007 to allocate \$115,000 for restoring clean, reliable drinking water to these citizens. Unfortunately, to this date, only a fraction of the people of the Plainview Estates have indeed regained access to water in their homes.

What are the possible consequences of such poor water access for these kindred residents of this progressive, liberal, caring city we share? Hauling buckets means time, and backs, spent; paying for trucks to deliver water means money spent; and, if the water and the means of keeping clean are not guaranteed, it means health spent. Poor hygiene means poor health; poor health means school and work missed, and the chain of consequences goes on—all in the microcosmic subdivision of Austin called the Plainview Estates.

And what about the macrocosm? What's happening in the larger world? Or, keeping with the vision of the web, what other strands of the *real* (as opposed to virtual) worldwide web are similarly in struggle for access to water? I'd like to share with you some stories, which I found in a policy brief written by the Interagency Task Force on Gender and Water, a program co-sponsored by United Nations-Water and the Interagency Network on Women and Gender Equality. As you listen to these stories, I invite you to recall the second poem Anna read, and the line that repeats itself in varying forms, "This woman is carrying water on her head."

"In Nigeria," states the policy brief, "the construction of a tourist resort on the Obudu plateau led to deforestation and exacerbated preexisting pressures on water resources and the environment, such as overgrazing and unsustainable agricultural practices. The local Becheve women complained

about wasted time in collecting water, poor water quality and poor family health.”

In Indonesia, the brief states, “a bottled water company opened a plant in the Klaten district... The company extracts a huge quantity of spring water just twenty metres away from the area’s primary water source. Since the opening of the plant, the community, consisting mostly of farmers, has found its access to irrigation water decreasing and its wells starting to run dry.”

In still other parts of the world, the brief notes that “the consequences of privatization of water services in Cochabamba, Bolivia, and Conakry, Guinea, were particularly difficult for the local populations. The increasing water prices have had a serious negative impact on the lives of displaced women, girls, and boys. In Colombia and the Philippines communities started to use contaminated water again when

water service was suspended due to non-payment. Such water put them at risk of serious illness.”

The stories of struggle continue on this way from country to country, continent to continent. But in each of these scenarios, I have only told half the story. So let me present to you one more story, from Pakistan, and listen as it moves local women from disempowerment into empowerment: “In Hoto Village,” the brief says, “where women follow a strict form of purdah [not being seen by men, especially, but not exclusively through the wearing of veils], a participatory action team went to help the village to improve its water management in 1994. For a year the men would not give permission to the action team to meet the women of the village. Eventually, the women were able to participate in a joint meeting, and put up a proposal for a new water tank on unused land.... The *women’s* proposal was adopted.... Moreover, women became active

participants in decision-making, and significant changes have been made in their lives through hygiene education. Most significant has been the demand for education for their daughters. In 1998, a new girls' school was opened in Hoto.”

Returning to one of the stories I shared earlier, there are similarly empowering changes in women's roles in their communities. In Nigeria, where the tourist resort was sapping the water supply on the Obudu plateau, “the Nigerian Conservation Foundation,” says the brief, “started a Watershed management project... and encouraged women to get involved in the project's decision-making process. Women leaders were elected to the management committee, which gave them a source of pride, and became involved in the construction and maintenance of a water reservoir. The reduced time spent collecting water allowed women more time for generating income through farming and marketing....

Moreover, the women's healthcare burden was reduced, with a 45 percent reduction in cases of diarrhea in 2004.”

Considering that nearly 1.8 million people die each year from diarrhea caused by contaminated water, this is an extraordinary accomplishment.

As you might see from these stories, the Interagency Task Force on Gender and Water found that women's involvement in efforts to bring safe water to their communities has led to tremendous improvements. This makes sense, doesn't it, since in most places in the world, women are responsible for fetching the water, keeping their children and their homes clean, and for keeping their families healthy. The policy brief notes, in fact, that “a study by the International Water and Sanitation Centre ... in 88 communities in 15 countries found that projects designed and run with the full participation of

women are *more* sustainable and effective than those that do not.”

Which sends my thoughts to Haiti, where just about all parts of people’s lives are operating at a crisis level, due to the January earthquake. Two weeks after the earthquake, Naela Mohamed Gabr, who runs the United Nation’s Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, made this statement about the situation in Haiti: “Whilst the strength and resilience of women are in high demand following such emergencies, they cannot adequately fulfill these roles if their basic needs are unmet and if decision-makers ignore them.” Ms. Gabr continues, “If women are to look after the needs of others, their own safety, dignity, health, and nutritional concerns must be met as well.”

I hold these words of warning up in contrast to the news piece I watched just a week ago, in which Haitian women were

experiencing increased violence, particularly in the crowded camps. One scene showed a woman bathing at one of the few water fountains in the camp, while a group of men watched and made comments. Women are afraid to move from one place to another. Yet they must because, as Joan Murray's poem says of the one woman in Natal, South Africa, "When one child in three is at risk of death, she returns from a distant well, carrying water on her head..." She, "who carries water on her head,/ trusts her own head to bring to her people/ what they need now/ between life and death:/ she carries water on her head."

With these words of poetry, I am reminded that at the beginning of this sermon, I confessed a wish to be poetic, by supplying memories of myself swimming all over the world. But the poetry is not found there, for, after all, I am not a swimmer, just an Aquarian water bearer. And even then, I only

carry water to you through these stories, through these poems, while out in the world that many of us have traveled, out in the world where many of us have indeed swum in its various rivers, lakes, and oceans, millions of women and their families struggle for that thirst-quenching cup. What can we do? After the service today, at the Food for Thought, Thought for Action discussion, you can hear from Jean Davison, Barbara Dickens, and Carmen Llanes from People Organizing to Defend Earths' Resources about how they have witnessed and worked with people struggling for clean, accessible water.

In the meantime, and in the days to come, let us imagine what it would be like, if the bones of all women, all children, all men, could experience a question as simple and as powerful as the one in Mary Oliver's poem:

I dip my cupped hands. I drink
A long time. It tastes
Like stone, leaves, fire. It falls cold

Into my body, waking the bones. I hear them
Deep inside me whispering
Oh what is that beautiful thing
That just happened?

So may it be. Amen.

This being the third Sunday of the month, we have our second offering, which will once more go to the Austin YWCA Generation YW program, a prevention/intervention program for youth, with a particular focus on adolescent girls. In the spirit of supporting the intricate web of life, please give as generously as you are able.

Thank you.