

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Matthew 25: Something to Drink
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
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2 Kings 2:19-22; Matthew 25:31-40

April 25, 2014 was an ordinary day, just like the days that had come before and days that would come after. The news was filled with stories that never seem to go away. Secretary of State Kerry was warning Russia about its incursion into and activity in Ukraine with pro-Russian separatists. The number of measles cases had hit a nineteen-year high. President Obama was pledging that the United States would support South Korea if the North developed nuclear weapons. And Israel ended Peace talks with the Palestinians. Nothing really old or new. Except there was one event that no one noticed, that did not make the headlines until years later. That was the city of Flint Michigan, at the order of their Emergency Manager, switched its water source from the Detroit Water System to water from the Flint River. The Manager knew that the water was corrosive. He ordered it anyway. He was aware that spending one-hundred dollars a day on chemicals could solve the corrosion problem. But that was not part of the order. Just switch. And that single decision would cause the water for hundreds of thousands of people to become unusable, and cause lead poisoning in thousands of children.

Water is the essence of life. While a person can live three weeks without food, a person can only survive three days without water. And there are two ways in which water has played a key role in scripture and in the world. The first is that without it crops will not grow and people and livestock will die. Civilizations rise and fall because of water or a lack of it. Extended drought during the depression in the great plains caused more than two-million people to flee to California. Drought was probably the cause of the end of the Mayan civilization and the great mega-drought of the 1500s forced several Native American tribes in the southwest to migrate. Drought was at the heart of our Elijah story last week because it was what forced him to leave Israel and go to Zarephath. The second way in which water plays a role is in its being unhealthy to drink. In the world today there are more than seven-hundred and eighty-million people do not have access to clean water. Their water, if they have any, is infected with bacteria and microorganisms that cause a host of diseases that claim the lives of more than eight-hundred-thousand children under the age of five every year. As we know from Flint, many people are still afraid to drink from their taps. This reality of unclean water is also at the center of our Old Testament text. The people have water but evidently it is making people and animals ill and killing crops. So where do they turn?

They turned to Elisha the prophet. They asked him to do something about their water because it was bad both for them and for the land. I have to say that this is an interesting choice

as to who might deal with their water problem. Elisha was a prophet whose task it was to call the people back to faithfulness in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He was supposed to be focused on spiritual, ethical and moral obligations. Yet Elisha healed the waters. No one is sure what he actually did, yet the memory remind that through the man of God, God made the waters wholesome. God once again made the water life-sustaining. And it is that sense that God desires all human beings to be sustained by the waters God created. That is at the heart of Jesus statement that you serve the least of these when you give a cup of life-sustaining water to one who thirsts. It is an affirmation once again that God cares not only for the souls, but for the bodies of God's children. And so, where do people around the world turn for this cup of water; for clean and abundant water? Some of them turn to us, to the Presbytery of Detroit for help. I want to invite Tim Ngare up to tell us about how we participate in giving this cup of water.

East Africa is one of the areas most affected by a lack of available clean water. In Kenya, two of the rural areas most affected are Kwa Mukasa and Kitui. The situation in both locations is that water is scarce most of the year. The rivers and streams dry up soon after the rainy season. This forces the women in the villages to walk up to ten kilometers to obtain water. They must do this several days a week. Because the women are seeking water, it means that the children must look after each other, thus preventing them from going to school. It also means that women are not able to assist in the fields, with the livestock or with creating their own small businesses. In addition, the water that they obtain is often unclean, which causes all the people of the village to become ill. The Presbytery of Detroit decided to do something about this by creating the Thika Water Project within the village of Kwa Mukasa. They raised money from the Presbytery's budget as well as individuals and congregations to build a well. Our First Foundation, created by gifts from members of our congregation, donated \$10,000 or almost 20% of the cost of the well. The well is so expensive because to reach water, the well needs to drill as deep as 300 meters. Once water was struck, a pump house was built, a holding tank put on the roof, solar panels and an electric generator were installed, and the water began flowing. The water has improved the health of the community (as one community leader put it...our children no longer get sick), allowed for community gardens, the expansion of schooling opportunities (a new intermediate school was built, and a high school is planned) and many of the women are starting a home based businesses to bring in money for their families. Currently the Thika team has raised most of the money for the second well at Kitui, again with a \$10,000 donation from First Foundation.

If you would like to assist with this project, which includes not only the well, but many ancillary projects such as piping to the schools and gardens, books for the new schools and assistance with well-upkeep, you can make a check to First Presbyterian Church and simply put Thika Water Project in the memo line. In this way you will be a partner in changing people's lives by offering the thirsty a cup of water.