

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH
Sunday March 12, 2023 – 3rd Sunday in Lent

WORSHIP FOCUS: Service

We inspire and encourage each member to engage in service commensurate with their time and talent to carry out the mission of the church and to deal with its day-to-day operations.

- *Fonthill Strategic Plan*

1st LESSON: Exodus 17: 1-7 (NRSV)

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.”

Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?”

But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.”

Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. [And] He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

2nd LESSON: John 4: 5-42 (NRSV)

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?”

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, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.”

The woman answered him, "I have no husband."

Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?"

Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

They left the city and were on their way to him. Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something."

But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about."

So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?"

Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.'

I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done."

So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word.

They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

REFLECTION: “Words and Water”

Sometimes we need words.

Sometimes we need water.

Sometimes we need both.

At Meribah, the people needed water to live. And they squabbled, and no amount of words would satisfy their thirst. So Moses struck the rock of Horeb, and gave God’s people the water they needed.

Sometimes we don’t just need real water to live. Sometimes we need water and words. One day Jesus and a Samaritan woman both went to a well for water one hot afternoon. They needed that water. But they also needed words. And the life they found in sharing words together, was as cooling and as refreshing as the water they sought at that well. They needed both the work of water, and the work of words.

Today, I will speak to you about work, about service – one of the values here at Fonthill United Church. Our Strategic Plan reminds us that: “We inspire and encourage each member to engage in service commensurate with their time and talent to carry out the mission of the church and to deal with its day-to-day operations.”

What service is to each of you will depend, as our strategic plan suggests, on your time and your talents. But ultimately, what Christians do in terms of service – no matter what exactly we might decide to do – rests on the service of Jesus, the very public service that Jesus engaged in of healing, and restoring Creation.

One way that we do the work, is by following a liturgy.

We are here every Sunday to worship and praise God. To celebrate. And, we are also here to quite literally do the work of what Christians call a liturgy. Liturgy. It is not a word that we use often in the United Church, and yet liturgy is all the little details and remembrances we enact together over the church year with which we fill the church calendar.

And so – it may come as no surprise to you learn that the word itself – liturgy – comes from a technical term used in the Greek, *leitourgia*, in which the New Testament was written, which literally means “work for the people.” It is a literal translation of the two words “*litos ergos*” or “public service”.

And so, although, it may seem that Bill and Patrice, and the Choir and the Readers, and your minister, each Sunday are doing the work, it is what the gathered body of Christ does when it worships together that is considered to be the actual work. When we sing, pray, think, give, respond, consider, and listen, we are working. And when we are working in a Christian context we do so almost always with this sense of service and work. Indeed, the word that most United Church people use that has the theological sense of the word liturgy is what we call what we are doing together today. We are participating in a service. This morning together is a service. Together, we are doing work that is of service to God and to each other.

Some of you ask me questions about the bulletins. And some of you have asked me why, when we have communion, I divide the service in two – into the Service of the Word, and the Service of the Table. We do this, because they are separate liturgies – they are separate pieces of work. In the first, the Service of the Word, we struggle to understand the words of Jesus, and to find in the words of Jesus spoken thousands of years ago the inspiration to go out and do the work we are called to do in the world. That work may be personal, or it may be more

community oriented or global in impact. In the Service of the Table, we don't just grapple with the words of Jesus, but with the presence of Christ in our lives and the healing power of Christ in our midst. When we celebrate the Service of the Table, we commit ourselves to recognizing the work that God is doing with us, and with the world and with all of creation.

You will notice that a church service that includes only the Service of the Word, is usually much more outward focused – calling us to work and acts of justice. In contrast, a service that also includes the Service of the Table is much more meditative – with pauses, and opportunities for God and the Spirit to enter into each of us – and for us to meet God and the Spirit and allow them to do the work.

In the Service of the Table – candles are lit, water is poured, hands and feet are washed, guests are seated, bread is broken, wine is poured, we talk and converse and share a meal – what we call Christ's table. In the Service of the Word – we feast only on the Word. And, we are often surprised at how satisfying just Words can be.

And yet, both Service of the Word, and Service of the Table are both a kind of service. They both do work. They are both liturgy.

We can easily forget this – that what we do – when we meet for a service, and follow liturgies that we are doing important work. Using words, and bread, and wine and water and candles and music, a whole lot can be accomplished. A whole lot more than we might ever imagine. Words and water have power. Words and water can do a whole lot of work. They are the tools with which Christians perform their liturgy – their work – their public work -- of being followers of Christ.

Think about our story today about the woman at the well – easily one of the most beloved stories in all the gospels. A whole bunch of work gets done in that story. A change takes place in that story as the result of the service of word and water that the Jesus and the Samaritan woman perform to each other that result in a transformative work of reconciliation. Using just words and water.

The woman needs spiritual healing, and Jesus needs water. Ostensibly she gives Jesus water, and Jesus gives the woman healing words. But both are life giving. Both are important.

Sometimes people say to me that we have nothing to do. That we are too old, too young, too tired. That we are having trouble thinking about things that we might do to help people. We want to do the grand thing. We want to fix the world.

And yet, we can pour water and we can speak words. We can serve with words and water. And although they may seem to be the least of actions, the least of works, they are liturgy. They are the work of the church. They were the work of Jesus. And they be powerful!