

Holding Water in Your Hands—John 9: 1-34

March 19, 2023- 4th Sunday in Lent

We've all had the experience of holding water in our hands (go to font, invite people to cup hands), whether it's to splash water on our faces or that rare experience of being near water so clean that you scoop it and drink. The thing about holding water in your hands is you need to use it quickly, because the moment you've got it, it starts to leak out all over the place, and pretty soon you're left with nothing.

I think about that image as I reflect on the Pharisees this week. But first a little necessary digression on the Pharisees, because the church has often used them to characterize Judaism as legalistic and thus irrelevant, fostering anti-semitism through Christian teaching. Danya Ruttenberg, a Rabbi and scholar says, a more generous view of the Pharisees is they are lay people committed to the daily living of their faith¹. Ruttenberg sees Jesus as arguing with his fellow Jews, the Pharisees, about how to live this faith they share,² it's a family squabble. The encounters are passionate because they are rooted in love and care for the Jewish family, not animosity and disdain. They are all passionate about how Judaism impacts every part of life, as Ruttenberg says "not in a harsh or limiting way but in a, things matter and have consequence sort of way. In a, here are more opportunities to connect with the holy, sort of way."³ Jesus is engaging the Pharisees about this stuff not in a way that invalidates Jewish practice, but rather engages deeply on the question of how to do it.⁴

1 Steve Mason, Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, David Noel Freedman Ed., William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids Michigan, 2000, p. 1043.

2 Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, <https://twitter.com/TheRaDR/status/1094663893765500930>

3 Ruttenberg, <https://twitter.com/TheRaDR/status/1094596840010461187>

4 Ruttenberg, <https://twitter.com/TheRaDR/status/1094663893765500930>

Jesus and the Pharisees don't interact directly this week but the principles are the same. The Pharisees are dealing with the fall out of Jesus healing a blind man on the Sabbath, a day set aside in Genesis for rest and worship. But isn't healing a good thing? It's a dilemma for the Pharisees who think they've got a pretty good handle on what God does and does not want. What about an act of love and compassion on the Sabbath, is God against that? The more the Pharisees insist on their rightness, the harsher their God becomes, the emptier their religion becomes. Their trying to hold God in their hands, but God is leaking out all over the place.

The more we try to contain God to our certainty, the more likely we'll be left empty-handed. Love is fluid, it's not meant to be contained but followed. God just wants to flow and carry us along toward wholeness. Think of any group that is persecuted under religious pretense and you see a religious arrogance that tries to contain God, only to find that God has leaked out of their container leaving their religion empty of anything redeeming.

You see this in Christianity when power seeks to contain God for its own purposes. Martin Luther King Jr. drew criticism from many of the Christian leaders of his day. These leaders could not see how a religious man could be involved in acts that caused disorder and resulted in violence. In this famous letter from the Birmingham City Jail King responds:

"In your statement you assert that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But is this a logical assertion? Isn't this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Jesus because his unique God consciousness and never ceasing devotion to God's will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? You speak of our activity in Birmingham as extreme...Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you"...⁵

5Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from a Birmingham Jail,
http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

If we want to avoid this kind of religious trap its important to ask, what happens when we have experiences of God, the Sacred, and the Holy that don't fit within our tidy religious categories? I think of 1988 when this very dilemma confronted the United Church on the question of ordaining gay and lesbian people to ministry. Many people struggled with what they'd been taught and raised with, a literal interpretation of scripture that comes up against their experience of the giftedness and faithfulness of gay and lesbian people. How do we test for grace?

Well, there is one line in our story today that sticks out for me, it comes as the Pharisees, confront the blind man and accuse Jesus of being a sinner. The man answers, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." Another way of putting it is, 'Well I don't understand much about all of that religious stuff, but I do know when I see people getting helped and I'll run with that!'⁶

6 William Loader, First thoughts on Year A Gospel Passages from the Lectionary,
<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtLent4.htm>

"One thing I do know...", When love makes itself known it heals others and heals us. The word "heal" comes from the word "whole". To be healed is to be made whole. Whether physical or otherwise, to heal is to take what was diseased or broken and restore it to a functioning role in the body. Whether that be a physical body, a family body, a church body or a societal body. Love heals, love makes us whole. Where we once knew ourselves as separate, we now know ourselves to be a part of something—we've been swept along on a current of love toward a vast ocean of oneness. That's why the Pharisees are so confused, they're being swept along by this act of healing but they're still trying to contain the flow, to hold it, to manage it to something they can manage and understand.

Paul also confronts this dilemma in his letter to the church in Thessalonica, "Do not quench the Spirit...but test everything; hold fast to what is good..."⁷ If we are to follow the current of love and grace, our beliefs and our practices must give way to testing. Otherwise, we risk closing ourselves off to the surprising ways that God, that love can come into our lives. We might just find ourselves empty handed with an empty religion.

7 1 Thessalonians 5: 19 & 21

Here is the test I believe Jesus uses repeatedly—does the practice, the belief or the action lead to wholeness? There are all kinds of questions underneath this one. Does the practice, the belief, or the action result in taking someone that was broken, excluded or marginalized and restoring them back into community? Does the practice, the belief or the action help someone who was feeling unworthy believe that they to are a child of God? Does it help bring different or differing people together in mutual respect? Does it heal physical, emotional or spiritual wounds? Does it restore someone's dignity? The 1988 decision of the church passed all these tests. The church decided not to contain God but to allow itself to be swept along by the flow of love.

That's the way Jesus works throughout his ministry, his Jewish faith is an opening to God, but if the interpretation of the faith gets in the way of restoring people to wholeness it closes God off and he won't have it.. That's why he heals on the Sabbath, that's why he pays no mind when people criticize him for eating with and hanging out with lepers, prostitutes and tax collectors, that's why he drives the moneychangers out of the temple. He does all this because there is one thing he knew, and this one thing guided everything he said and did—God is in the healing business, if you want to know God, get out of God's way, follow the flow of healing, don't try to contain it.

God is flowing in our lives and through all of creation, rivers of love that lead to an ocean of wholeness, to a place where all that separates us gets absorbed into one body. It is a place where we come to know and see our differences not as things that separate us or make us distinct, but rather as essential parts of a body, with a role to play in the healthy functioning of the greater whole. That is the grace, that is the gift, to know that we are not alone, but a part of something beautiful and magnificent. Amen.

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