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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Third Sunday in Lent
March 11, 2007

Isaiah 55.1-9
Luke 13.1-9

The Gift Of Thirst

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters...”
—Isaiah 55.1

During the season of Lent, we are accustomed to themes of hunger and nourishment. The season begins with Jesus fasting in the wilderness. The high point of the Lenten drama is Jesus sharing the Last Supper with his disciples. These themes, in some mysterious way, relate to our own experience of Lent and Easter. We hunger. We develop an appetite for something new in our lives. We acquire a taste for the Kingdom of God. And then, on Easter Sunday, we are served the most lavish banquet of the Christian year. In the good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, our hungers are fully satisfied.

This morning, in our Old Testament lesson, we hear a related theme—a secondary variation on the major Lenten theme of hunger and nourishment. It comes from Isaiah, the greatest of the Old Testament prophets:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
(Isaiah 55.1)

In a way, this invitation could serve as a general invitation to Lent, or even to the entire Christian spiritual life. Thirst. That’s what brings us back here week after week. Thirst. That’s a name for the general dis-ease that pervades our lives. Thirst. That is the fundamental human condition in the absence of God. Jesus himself, when his full humanity was exacting its final cost, knew this bedrock truth. Hanging on the cross, he said, “I am thirsty.” (John 19.28)

Most of us, in these modern times, have learned a little something about nutrition and exercise. Even if we have a hard time following the guidelines in this arena, our health-conscious culture provides a great deal of information. One of the truths that we know is this:

when you feel yourself to be thirsty, you are *already* dehydrated. Thirst is not a leading-edge indicator of dehydration. It is, rather, an indicator that an emergency isn't too far off. It is intended to alert us, to get our attention. If you think of the dashboard of a car, then thirst is not a gauge that has crept up a little bit. It is a red light that is flashing. It is trying to tell us something important.

As so, well-trained athletes don't wait until they are thirsty to drink some water. They carry a supply and consume it on a regular schedule. More and more people seem to understand this truth. Not just athletes, but people from all walks of life can be seen carrying sporty water bottles wherever they go. It wouldn't surprise me if there were one or two in here this morning.

If we ignore our thirst, we don't perform well and we run the risk of serious consequences—perhaps illness or even permanent damage to our bodies. The same holds true for spiritual thirst. The thirst that we feel is not a mild hint that we might need to be a little closer to God. It is a strong warning that we have grown accustomed to being much, much too far away.

But, somehow, we're not very good at reading the earlier signs. A skilled athlete is so in touch with her body that she can feel the first hint of dehydration. But, when it comes to spiritual thirst, most of us are not nearly so tuned-in. We go through our daily lives engrossed in other pursuits that distract us from God. We pour ourselves into our work. We accumulate possessions that we think will make us happy. We pursue exciting and dangerous human relationships. We escape to fantasy worlds provided (for a fee) by Hollywood film studios or New York publishing houses. And—all the while—we forget about God because, well, we don't really feel that thirsty. "There will be time for a drink later," we say to ourselves.

As usual, the Bible can say in a single verse what it takes a preacher several minutes to attempt to express. Isaiah doesn't need to mention workaholism, or consumerism, or escapism. He just says this:

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. (Isaiah 55.2)

We think of thirst as an annoyance, but really, it is a gift. It tells us something that we need to know. It gives us a chance to address a problem before it becomes a true crisis. It should not be ignored.

If you are driving along in your car and a red warning light comes on, what do you do? You pay attention to it. You take your car in for service. If you ignore a warning light for a long time, you become a danger to yourself—and to other people on the road with you.

But how often we ignore the warning lights of our spiritual lives. There we are driving down the highway, red lights flashing, oblivious to the unnecessary pain we might bear, clueless to the risk that we pose to our passengers in the car and to our neighbors on the road.

I can think of no better time than the season of Lent for each of us to get more intentional about checking our lights and gauges, more diligent about paying attention to our spiritual thirst. When all of our frantic worldly pursuits fail to satisfy us, God is trying to tell us something. When work does not provide the meaning we expect of it, God is trying to get through to us. When our expensive quests for excitement seem merely boring, God is trying to speak—or rather, God *is speaking*...and trying to be *heard*.

Spiritual thirst is a natural part of the human condition. Even Jesus experienced it. Because we live at a distance from God, we get the false impression that we are self-sufficient. It is as though we were to take a big drink of water and say, “That was great. Now I’m not thirsty. I’ll never need to drink water again. I think I’ll call the water company and have my service disconnected.” When it comes to physical thirst, we know that this logic is silly. But when it comes to spiritual thirst, people do it all the time.

In our spiritual thirst—however vague and ill defined—we have a gift from God. It is a gracious gift that comes from God’s desire not to see us dry up and wither away. In this season of spiritual growth, let us receive the gift of thirst and honor it together:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. (Isaiah 55.1)