

"I AM THIRSTY."

From the sermon series "The Seven Last Words of Christ"

BY ADAM H. FRONCZEK

APRIL 2, 2017

I saw a picture in the newspaper this week, taken at a roadside camp in Niger ("Fleeing Boko Haram, Thousands Cling to a Road to Nowhere," *New York Times*, March 30, 2017). The camp is occupied by thousands of people who have fled their homes in fear of the Boko Haram terrorist group. They're stuck in the camp because it is one of the few places in the region where the military is able to patrol regularly and keep people safe. The people want to leave, they want to return to their jobs and for their children to return to school, but it's not safe to go, and when that might change is one of the many uncertainties in the camp.

Water is an uncertainty in the camp, and that's what was in the photo. It was two long lines of jerry cans—those are the large plastic bins that look a lot like a lawnmower gas can—that are ubiquitous in parts of the world where people still have to walk to a well to get water and then carry the water home in the cans. In the camp in Niger, there is no well to fill the cans, so some days a truck comes carrying water; other days the truck doesn't make it, and the cans sit lined up as they were in the picture—this picture that caught my attention here two weeks before Easter because the two long lines of cans were arranged in the shape of a cross, as if to ask, what should Christians be doing about this?

Not just in Niger, but many places in the world, the availability of water is a major problem. Water is scarce in many parts of Africa and in parts of India. In high elevation cities in South America, global warming has made water supplies extremely limited. In our own country, you've heard about the water supply woes in California, and you've heard about Flint, Michigan, where most people are still drinking and cooking with bottled water.

There are other places where water is safe and plentiful and people don't think about it much. According to *Popular Science* magazine (see March-April 2017), the average American, when you include showering, flushing, and tooth brushing, goes through the equivalent of 757 bottles of water per day. From one place to another around the

globe, we have such different habits about water. I'll never forget a houseguest I had once, a young man from Honduras who stayed with us for a month in Indianapolis before starting his medical residency. Ruben would get up every morning, I'd hear the shower turn on, and less than 60 seconds later it would be off again. He was accustomed to getting completely bathed and rinsed in less time than I usually spend waiting for the water to heat up to the perfect temperature. By the time I get in the shower, I've usually sent down the drain enough perfectly clean, potable water to fill at least a couple of those empty jerry cans on the side of the road in Niger.

But what exactly am I supposed to do? The water is available here in Cincinnati. Will stranded families in Niger get more water if I decide to take a cold shower? I don't know. And sometimes it makes me feel helpless and guilty.

The feelings of helplessness and guilt could be applied to any number of difficult challenges besides water—hunger, poverty, gun violence. But today I'm talking about water because water is a symbol that is absolutely central to the message of the Bible.

The world is created in Genesis when God separates the water from the dry land. The Israelites escape slavery and become God's people by passing through the parted waters of the Red Sea. Baptism by water is the primary sacramental act that identifies a follower of Jesus. 2000 years later, it is still the primary act that shows our commitment to God, and God's to us. It involves water for the same reason Communion involves bread: these are common things that everyone needs, so through them God reaches out to us all.

In the Gospel of John, where we found today's Scripture lesson, water is an especially important symbol. In the second chapter, Jesus' first miracle is when he turns water into wine. Water keeps coming up in the stories that tell of his teaching and preaching; in one of the best known stories, he meets a woman at a well and tells her that he is the one who has living water.

And then there's this series of events that happen on the Cross. Just before Jesus dies, one of his very last words is the statement, "I am thirsty." This leads the soldiers at the foot of the Cross to offer him a drink. And after he has died, to be sure that his life is over, the soldiers pierce his side with a spear, and recalling that first miracle back in chapter 2, it says out of the wound pour blood...and water.

Why does all of this happen? Why does Jesus say he is thirsty? No one is exactly sure, but when you look at the expansive importance of water and food, hunger and thirst, throughout the Bible, it's obvious that water and thirst has some kind of spiritual significance.

My hunch is that this is similar to something else Jesus says on the Cross. A few weeks ago, I spoke about another one of Jesus' Seven Last Words: "...today, I will be with you

in paradise...” In that sermon, the main idea was that in this life we have on earth, paradise, if defined as complete wholeness or fulfillment is impossible. While many messages in our culture might lead you to believe that wholeness can be bought or achieved, God never promises it, nothing in the Bible says wholeness is achievable. This is an important message to hear, because people who think wholeness is possible will likely spend their lives endlessly frustrated that they haven’t achieved it, and confused or hurt about what they must have done wrong. On the other hand, when we realize that we shouldn’t expect wholeness, we can come to a sense of peace and gratitude for the life we have.

Another way of saying this is that in human life, we’re always going to be hungry and thirsty—human beings are not made to feel full and quenched, the thirst keeps coming back—and that might not be such a bad thing. It’s important for people to struggle and yearn for a world that is better than the one we have. A hunger and thirst for something better is vital to human flourishing. Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.” One day, they shall be filled—if they are people who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Thirsting for a better life, particularly for other people—may not get us to wholeness, but for most of us, it’s the stuff that a fuller, richer life is made of—the kind of life most of us so greatly desire. We’re supposed to be people who thirst, people who strive, people who yearn for a better world.

The world doesn’t look so good when you see a picture of a group of people halfway around the world who need water, and feel unsure what to do about it. But then I thought of another picture I have, you can see it next door in the entrance to Knox Commons, it’s a picture to which we’re a bit more connected: this is a group of us from Knox, one year ago in Uganda, carrying water in those jerry cans I was talking about. On that day, we were carrying water so that it could be used to make mortar and hold together the bricks of a school being built in a community called Sakabusolo. The people in that village are some of the countless people the world-round who carry water every single day in order to cook for their families and clean their homes. These people are not strangers to us—we met the members of the schoolboard that day and played games with the students. And because of the inspiration of that trip and the generosity of all of you during the Campaign for Tomorrow, this week I received more pictures in my email, pictures we’ll be sending to all of you. This set was of the foundation of the school that is being built by funding from Knox Church, in the village of Kigarama.

Another picture was of the community leaders who helped recruit the local construction volunteers and the students for the school. When the school is finished, just a few months from now, 308 young children who had no school before will have one. And along the way, we’ll keep showing you pictures like these, not pictures that cause us to feel helpless, but one of lives that are changing for the better through

Christian generosity. And these communities in Uganda will stay ever more resistant to the extremism and violence of terrorist groups like Boko Haram, because of the gift of education.

Thinking back to the original picture from Niger: it's not that the lives of people we don't know don't matter; quite to the contrary—it probably takes even more faith to reach out and help people we do not know. I've shown this illustration this morning to suggest that when we are willing, in a variety of ways, to make ourselves aware of needs in the world, we develop our thirst, and thirst is good—it causes us to do something. You may not be able to fill the jerry cans in Niger by taking a cold shower, but by engaging in the ways that we can, we're resisting the temptation to pretend there's nothing we can do while the water keeps running down the drain.

Water is an important symbol in the Bible; it carries spiritual significance. And the reason it works as a symbol of spiritual things in the first place is because it is also the most practical of things. Everyone needs water; everyone can relate to it. There's a spiritual component to water that connects us to God; and water has a practical component because we all need it.

The jerry cans are in the shape of a Cross. Have you ever noticed that the Cross works in the same way that I'm describing water? There is practical meaning and spiritual meaning; earthly meaning and transcendent meaning. It has a horizontal plank, the human plane on which we all exist, where we're called to love and serve one another. And a vertical plane where the earth connects to the heavens, where Jesus reaches down from the Cross and shares his love and wisdom with us. It is one of the last lessons he teaches us, one of his very last words. I am thirsty. May we be thirsty too.

Amen.