

**“A spring of water” a sermon based on John 4:5-42 preached at Knox Church
Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 15 March 2020.**

These few weeks we read from the gospel of John three long stories. This gospel feels different to the other three gospels, and it is carefully crafted. When we come to a long story like today’s, the flow and the detail matter. There’s more here than we can attend to on a Sunday morning. Which is why people are drawn towards our Lenten home groups or praying through the texts at home. To pay attention to the details. One way of reading the gospel is to read it again and again, until an image or a saying invites our attention. And so for me this week.

In the middle of today’s reading Jesus says – “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” All week I have been wondering what that is like, to have a spring of water gushing up. New Zealanders know a lot about springs. Among the most magnificent is what are popularly called Pupu Springs near Takaka. Te Waikoropupū Springs are the largest freshwater springs in New Zealand, the largest cold water springs in the Southern Hemisphere and contain some of the clearest water ever measured. Constantly bubbling up, and flowing out, fresh and pure and clear, striking to see, mesmerising almost. The springs in Israel are precious sources of life.

A spring of water gushing up ... When do we experience that? A year ago today a person killed 51 people in two mosques in Christchurch. We were confronted with religious hatred and racial violence. We knew terror and fear and a broken community. Not least because the person who did it lived here in Dunedin and initially thought of attacking the mosque down the road. Amid the horror, people began to name a deeper humanity - “This is not who we are.” People gathered together to express grief and to name hope. We reached across divides, including the divide between Islam and Christianity. In Dunedin people tried to offer support to people at the local mosque. And in so doing, we listened, and we heard stories that had been told many times but not heard, like women wearing hijabs having been abused here in Dunedin. Connections were made. Friendships developed. Stories were heard.

A couple of weeks ago, I walked into a café across the road, upstairs where you can look out over this church. As I went into the upstairs room, there seated at one of the tables was one of the local Muslim leaders. He looked up and smiled and greeted me by name and introduced me to his colleague. I sat at the next table and as there

were only three of us in the room, we conversed for some time. I am still affected by the gracious response of the Muslim community to small gestures of support. Relationships were built that continue to be very important. Another Muslim leader gave me his scarf. As I thought about a spring of water bubbling up to eternal life, I thought of these encounters, these conversations.

We live from these. A man, a Jew, a teacher, conversing with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in broad daylight. A grace, a welcome, a deep conversation across what has been and what is so easily a deep divide. A conversation that went to the heart of the divide and to what disempowered the woman. Through death or by divorce, she had had five husbands. And in the conversation, Jesus invites her story in such a way that her heart is filled, her life affirmed, her spirit enlivened, and his nature is revealed. She had carried an empty water jar to Jacob's well, to fetch water. Jesus had engaged here there, thoughtfully, respectfully, carefully. So overwhelming, that she left the water jar beside the well and ran off to speak of the experience. From an empty water jar to a gushing spring, from the silence of disempowerment to the confidence to tell her story.

Ruby Sales is recognised as one of the leaders of the civil rights movement in USA, a public theologian. In an interview she speaks of what that spring of water was for her ... "I grew up in the South. I was bred on black folk religion ... It was a religion that said that people who were considered property and disposable were essential in the eyes of God and even essential in a democracy, although we were enslaved. And it was a religion where the language and the symbols were accessible, that the God talk was accessible to even 7-year-olds. As a 7-year-old, I could sing 50 songs without missing a line, and everybody in the community had access to the theological microphone. So as a little black girl growing up in the South, I was deeply influenced by this black folk religion. I grew up in the heart of Southern apartheid. And I'm not saying that I didn't realize that it existed, but our parents were spiritual geniuses who created a world and a language where the notion that I was inadequate or inferior or less-than, never touched my consciousness. I grew up believing that I was a first-class human being and a first-class person, and our parents were spiritual geniuses who were able to shape a counterculture of black folk religion that raised us from disposability to being essential players in society. And it also taught us something serene about love. "I love everybody. I love everybody. I love everybody in my heart." And so "hate" was not anything in our vocabulary. We live in a very diverse world, and to talk about what it means to be humans is to talk with the simultaneous tongue of universality and particularities. So, as a black person, to talk about what it means is to talk about my experience as an African-American person, but also to talk

about my experience that transcends being an African American, to the universal experience. We've got to wrap our consciousness around a world where people bring to the world vastly different histories and experiences, but at the same time, a world where we experience grief and love in some of the same ways." Ruby told how in her youthful protest years she forgot her religion. She was embarrassed when demonstrations began with a prayer. How pointless. How useless compared with what they were about to do. And then, she said, she found herself in the middle of a protest with police horses and batons and tear gas, with people shouting abuse, and people tempted towards violence, and she realised how much she needed what had nourished her, the black folk religion, the singing and the praying and the community.

The divide Jesus bridged then needs bridging still, the racial and economic and class and religious divide. Perhaps covid 19 might help us rediscover the resources of faith. Here is what Lynn Ungar wrote:

Pandemic

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
the most sacred of times?

Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.

Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.
And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.

Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)

Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)

Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love--
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.
--Lynn Ungar 3/11/20

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