

sermon: Water for the Desert

ingathering and water communion, September 7, 2008

homily 1:

Every time my mother and I talk poetry it eventually boils down to meaning. "What does it *mean?*" she'll ask, "I don't understand." Try as I might I cannot explain how the words wash over me, give me shapes and pictures and feelings for meanings I cannot articulate in plain English. If I could say it in ordinary language, I tell her, I probably would. Poetry is for things that are too big and complicated for grammar and logic, that have too many layers and too many feelings for which we don't have names.

Ritual is the same way. It is poetry made physical; it is psalms made flesh. We pour our waters together here because no matter what I do, I cannot convey what it means to see our water mixed by molecule with other waters. Knowing that we can be both the same and different, intimately mingled and unique; knowing that we each bring something to a richly laden table but that once we have mixed we can never be separated cleanly, that this time and this place leave an indelible mark on us--the symbols are rich and varied and I will try to explain a little, but when we watch our water go into the common bowl our hearts speak the wisdom we need if we let them.

We are the water.

This is us.

You are invited, after the service, to take a little piece of *us* home with you, to fill your vial with the mingled waters of your community and keep it, or boil it or freeze it or water your garden with it; you are invited to offer it as holy water on Samhain or Beltane; to bless your visitors, to cleanse your home. Make with it symbol and ritual that means something to you, with deep roots in your heart and your theology.

And when you take the water, what does it mean? Early communion was potluck, celebration of abundance, about combining the resources of community to find richness among us. Later in Christian history the focus shifted from the loaves and fishes miracle to the Last Supper, where

Jesus said, this is my body, and this is my blood; remember me when you eat and drink. (from *Saving Grace*, Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock)

(What does it mean to take that of others and make it our own?)

We call this communion.

Remember me. Absorb me. Integrate me. Transform me.

To immerse ourselves in the change that other people will bring into our lives we have to trust them, or we have to trust ourselves, or we have to trust the process. By knowing each other we offer ourselves up--we will never be the same again. By loving another we take a tremendous risk--we become vulnerable to loss and gain, joy and pain beyond measure. By joining ourselves to this community--however brief the union--we open the possibility of connection with all these people. All of them. Flawed and funny and smart and serious and hopeful and grieving and just like us and nothing like us, all of them. And our communion together today says yes, we are here, yes, we are present, yes, we make of ourselves what we can, yes we offer ourselves as we can, yes we will take the chance, yes, we will be open, yes, we will transform, yes we will be transformed.

If we only give, we come up empty. It is when we complete the cycle that we are once again filled.

homily 2:

The world is a desert right now. In the way that the tribes in the desert needed water and manna from heaven, we are starving, thirsty, wandering souls. Our hearts and our spirits cry out for some relief as our minds despair, and what can we do?

These, friends, are the days of religion. These are the days of faith. If religion in this country is declining, then we *people* of religion are failing not just ourselves, but the whole world. I don't mean that we should have an unthinking faith or a false hope. We do not have that to offer. But

we are the water in the desert. We are not empty-handed supplicants, and we are not a mirage. We are water for a thirsty world, and we can no more stop our flow than we can stop a rising tide.

We *are* the water.

We are intellectual rigor and critical thinking.

We are creativity, we are compassion,

We are religious diversity,

We are strong community.

We are the many and the one

And we *know* that the power is not without but within; that we cannot wait for someone else to change the world. We know that paradise is in our own hands and feet, in our mouths on our lips and teeth and tongues; We know the air is changed when we breathe, and it's up to us to in-spire this sacred world in which we live. We are no more exempt than the birds and the bees and the trees and the flowers; we are not off the hook or outside the cycle of life. Our mandate is to everyone and everything from everyone and everything and that which connects us all. If this is our only gift--our only teaching; if power and responsibility are all that ever fall from our lips, we will have done something. But there is more than understanding who we are; there is more than learning in what we bring. If we were only to teach, we would be a school. If we were to administrate we would be a government. If we were to give alms we would be a social service agency. We are more. We are so much more. We are a house of faith and worship, and we have *ourselves* to give. Our spirits and our lives, our bones, down to the very marrow are ours to give, that the world might drink. If we did this without each other and without practice of the spirit, we would be consumed.

It is this place and these people who make this deep giving possible and sustainable. This living tradition is engaged in the processes of life--cells are grown, tissues are healed, reserves are replenished. Because we are *here*, we can be *there*. We can get our hands dirty, our spirits tired; we can speak until we are hoarse; we can hold people quiet in our arms until the tears end and they sleep.

And we can know that every minute of it matters, that when we pray our prayers are heard; that when we beg our bowls are filled; that when we sit we are never alone.

We draw on such a diversity of sources that they will *never* run dry. We come from Hinduism and Buddhism and six generations of Unitarianism and Universalism; we come from Islam and from Judaism and from Christianity, from Taoist and Shinto and consumerist and communal sources; we rise up from the earth and fall from the sky; we are dryads and faerie folk and that which we cannot name and the truths that well up in our hearts are so strong that they will change us, they will cut new channels in our souls before they will stop running.

We need only to open our mouths, our arms, our hearts, and the water that is within us, that *is* us, will spill forth and it will be a flood, and it will change the landscape forever.

These waters that we offer today are a tiny part of what is here; they are a drop of what is coming. It has always been. It has already begun.