

“RIVERS OF LIVING WATER - Sacraments 1 (Baptism)”

Robin E. Lostetter

First Presbyterian Church, Bordentown NJ

June 27, 2010 (5/9 lection ~ Sixth Sunday of Easter, which was Mother’s Day)

Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29

*“..the river of the water of life, bright as crystal,
flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb
through the middle of the street of the city.
On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit,
producing its fruit each month;
and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations”
–Revelation 22:1-2*

General Assembly 2010 theme: “Rivers of Living Water” –John 7:38

I love this passage from Revelation. I’m particularly intrigued by the images of the water of life and the leaves of the tree of life.

Today we experienced the baptism of an infant, and in that liturgy we marked the many times that water is an important element in scripture . . . it is the womb of life in the first two verses of Genesis: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” Such poetry in the first book of the Bible bookends the creative vision in the last book, where “the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, [flows] from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city.”

Later in Genesis, water is the destroyer of life in the Noah story. And there are likewise horrifying visions of destruction in parts of Revelation.

But there are also words of hope. And today’s passage is vivid in the imagery of hope. In a way, the hope is very earthy and concrete, imagining heaven on earth, and not in some distant realm. “The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. . . . People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.” And what is the mechanism for healing the nations and bringing them to the light? — The leaves of the tree of life — they are for the healing of the nations.

There is a plant that has offered hope to many nations — nations with widely differing climates and soils. The kids may have heard of it in church school, and we adults may see it referenced in essays on world hunger. It’s called the Moringa Tree, and it grows in just about any soil, any climate, and any amount of rainfall. Every part of it is useful. One source says this about it:

Imagine a tree in your backyard that will meet all your nutritional needs, take care of you medicinally, and purify your water for you. This tree actually exists. For centuries, the natives of northern India and many parts of Africa have known of the many benefits of *Moringa oleifera*. Its uses are as unique as the names it is known by, such as clarifier tree, horseradish tree and drumstick tree (referring to the large drumstick shaped pods) and in East Africa it is called "mother's best friend". Virtually every part of the tree can be used. Native only to the foothills of the Himalayas, it is now widely cultivated in Africa, Central and South America, Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia and the Philippines. This tree, though little known in the Western world, is nutritional dynamite. There are literally hundreds of uses for this tree.

The immature pods are the most valued and widely used of all the tree parts. The pods are extremely nutritious, containing all the essential amino acids along with many vitamins and other nutrients. The immature pod can be eaten raw or prepared like green peas or green beans, while the mature pods are usually fried and possess a peanut-like flavor. The pods also yield 38 - 40% of non-drying, edible oil known as Ben Oil. This oil is clear, sweet and odorless, and never becomes rancid. Overall, its nutritional value most closely resembles olive oil. The thickened root is used as a substitute for horseradish although this is now discouraged as it contains alkaloids, especially moriginine, and a bacteriocide, spirochin, both of which can prove fatal following ingestion. The leaves are eaten as greens, in salads, in vegetable curries, as pickles and for seasoning. They can be pounded up and used for scrubbing utensils and for cleaning walls. Leaves and young branches are relished by livestock. The Bark can be used for tanning and also yields a coarse fiber. The flowers, which must be cooked, are eaten either mixed with other foods or fried in batter and have been shown to be rich in potassium and calcium.

In developing tropical countries, Moringa trees have been used to combat malnutrition, especially among infants and nursing mothers. Three non-governmental organizations in particular - Trees for Life, Church World Service and Educational Concerns for Hunger Organization - advocate Moringa as “natural nutrition for the tropics.” Leaves can be eaten fresh, cooked, or stored as dried powder for many months without refrigeration, and without loss of nutritional value. Moringa is especially promising as a food source in the tropics because the tree is in full leaf at the end of the dry season when other foods are typically scarce.¹

You may have noticed that Church World Service, the organization for which we’ve collected items for the Gifts of the Heart, is also employing the moringa to combat hunger in developing countries. Church World Service partners with our church and many other denominations through the One Great Hour of Sharing. So in that sense, we participate in providing hope, and even — one might think — by providing the leaves of the tree that are for the healing of the nations.

I just read a quote by a philosopher of Jesus’ time, Seneca the Younger. He said “A hungry people listens not to reason, nor cares for justice, nor is bent by any prayers.” Two centuries later, we are just beginning to learn that before there can be peace with justice among the nations, there must be full bellies and improved health.

Poet Fred Kaan wrote a prayerful hymn, “For the Healing of the Nations”, inspired by verses from today’s passage. In keeping with the poetry of our readings from John and Revelation, I’d like Robert Joe to read verses from today’s scripture, as well as a statistic that should give us pause. In that context, I’ll share with you Fred Kaan’s hymn:

(Robert Joe) On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations”

*For the healing of the nations,
Lord, we pray with one accord,
for a just and equal sharing
of the things that earth affords.
To a life of love in action
help us rise and pledge our word.*

*Lead us forward into freedom,
from despair your world release,
that, redeemed from war and hatred,
all may come and go in peace.
Show us how through care and goodness
fear will die and hope increase.*

(Robert Joe) “...the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and
 of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city.”
 In our world today, unsafe drinking water kills 8 million people each year.²

*All that kills abundant living,
let it from the earth be banned:
pride of status, race or schooling,
dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice
may we hallow brief life's span.*

(Robert Joe) Then God said,
 “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness....”
 So God created humankind in his image,
 in the image of God he created them;
 male and female he created them.

*You, Creator God, have written
your great name on humankind;
for our growing in your likeness
bring the life of Christ to mind;
that by our response and service
earth its destiny may find.*

Well, we've treated the “leaves of the tree” image pretty thoroughly. And we've seen hope in a simple plant that is easy to grow and can contribute to nutrition and health around the globe.

But what about that water imagery?

In baptism, we make hope visible. We hear the words assuring us that we are adopted into God's covenant, that our sins have been washed away by the water, that we have been sealed by God's Spirit. But mostly, we see a tiny child, in whom we've invested hope. Hope for the future. Hope for health and safety. Hope for justice and peace on earth. In a way, we've seen a little bit of heaven on earth. Baptism is a witness “to the truth that God's love claims us before we are able to respond in faith.”³ That is the Good News. And we are called to share it.

One of my favorite poets is Thom Shuman, and here is something he wrote, prompted by the story of Jesus taking a child in his arms. You may need to take a flight of fancy to link this with the sermon, but it does concern children — and living water — and the means of hope.

and taking a child . . . (by Thom M. Shuman)

conventional wisdom tells us
we should always
stand our ground
until the other person gives in;
God's wisdom from on high
recommends a willingness to yield
so that the other might be served.

the consensus
among tv's talking heads
is that strength
remains the only choice
in confronting the world;
God's strange insight
is that weakness can be
the way to welcome others.

popular belief holds
that we should sit
in our easy chairs,
cynically commenting on
the rottenness of everyone around us;
God's radical response
beckons us to stand by living waters,
handing everyone a drink.

the prevailing sentiment is simple:
if you want to win the race,
use any (and every) means possible
to win the blue ribbon;
God's unorthodox belief
calls us to come in last,
carrying all who have fallen
across the finish line
with us.

sounds awfully child-like to me!⁴

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ENDNOTES

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1. <http://www.naturalnews.com/022272.html>.
 2. From the video, "Water Talks", by *La Boite Concept* at <http://vimeo.com/10756110>, and several news reports, easily Googled.
 3. *Directory for Worship*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), section W-2.3000.
 4. © 2009 Thom M. Shuman.