



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“Joining the Waters: A Service of Ingathering”

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Rev. Jen Raffensperger

“On the seashore of endless worlds is the great meeting of children.”

It turns out that if you go looking for poems about water, you have an awful lot of poems to go through. Fortunately for me, “going through a lot of poems” is my idea of a good time! I selected today’s reading a few weeks ago, and then by happenstance, on Friday morning it was the daily selection on “The Slowdown” - a weekday-ly podcast from the current Poet Laureate, Ada Limón.

Water is complicated - we have learned that from the news lately. In fact, it’s precisely its complication that makes it such an effective symbol: of life and death, of guilt and innocence, of labor and of rest, of good times and of bad times, of scarcity and of abundance.

Consider this part of the reading again:

“They know not how to swim, they know not how to cast nets. Pearl-fishers dive for pearls, merchants sail in their ships, while children gather pebbles and scatter them again. They seek not for hidden treasures, they know not how to cast nets.

The sea surges up with laughter, and pale gleams the smile of the sea-beach. Death-dealing waves sing meaningless ballads to the children, even like a mother while rocking her baby’s cradle. The sea plays with children, and pale gleams the smile of the sea-beach.”

Children, we are told, play beside the ocean all unaware of its dangers, the places where people labor, where sustenance is hard-fought. And yet the sea itself is called laughing, death-dealing, and playful. The beach is smiling. Beaches everywhere around the world are the play-places of the young and the young at heart.

And that's not the only time water draws us into play! Splashing in a puddle on a rainy day, making rainbows with a garden hose while you water the flowers or wash a car, adding water to paint or clay to change the way you are creating with it... Oh, water invites us to play!

And, water can be terrifying. Floods, tidal waves. The quick burst of a thunderstorm, a stream overflowing its banks, to the millenia-long path of relentless change carving out deep canyons and eroding earth by the ton.

The right to clean drinking water and sanitation are vital to the well-being of every human, and as such were rightly acknowledged as human rights by the United Nations General Assembly. I will note that they took this action on... July 28, 2010. Of course just because that was when a resolution was passed doesn't mean that clean water wasn't a human right before then. But it speaks volumes that it was only formally recognized as such by this esteemed international body so late in our history.

The ubiquity of water may be part of the reason. Water is everywhere, even in places affected by drought. It is in the air, it is in the bodies of living things, it is caught in substrates of rock below the surface of the earth. Maybe for some of us it feels both out of sight and out of mind. Maybe this is because of the happenstance and privilege of where we happen to live, or the color of our skin. Ask the citizens of Flint Michigan about potable water. Ask the citizens of Jackson Mississippi. Ask millions of people living in other countries that do not have the resources that we here in the United States have.

Water is everywhere, and sometimes we can certainly take it for granted...but try to go without it for a single day and see how quickly you recognize its

importance, see how loudly you sing its praises when clean, clear water is given to you when you are thirsty.

Today, we enacted a ceremony that was started by Unitarian Universalists, yes, but specifically two women lay leaders who craved ritual and also craved representation - to see more people who looked like them in the life of worship in their congregation. In the early 1980s, women and femme UU ministers were still in the minority. Over time, with more consideration, more examples, more women felt they could find themselves a place at the table in this faith tradition.

The author of our poem today, Rabindranath Tagore, was a true polymath who not only wrote and translated poetry, but published numerous novels, short stories, plays, letters, essays, memoirs, and criticism. He was also known for his musical compositions, and the Gitanjali poems - one of which we heard today - are also lyric compositions. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature for the Gitanjali compositions in 1913, the first non-European and first lyricist to do so. He often wrote in Bengali and then translated his own work into English, which is the case with the poem we heard today. Tagore spent part of his prodigious talents and much of his life fighting against the rigid caste system in India. He was a powerful figure of inclusion, of widening welcome, of a more broad view of the world.

It felt important to name that element of the water communion, of water as symbol and metaphor, which is tied deeply to identity - to faith identity, to human identity, to the particular social location we each occupy, and the circumstances of our life that affect each of our own relationships to water.

As of this writing, the United States is in the rare position of having a tropical storm near both its East and its West coasts. We are bracketed and defined, liberated and damaged, by water - it is simply part of what makes us human. Sure as children on the shores of endless worlds shall meet - I love the idea of endless worlds, of other beings on other planets needing water as much as we do, of their children also gathering on their own shores - sure as children shall

meet on the shore, that shore will continue to inspire and to shock. The sea will continue to give and to take. And we must continually open our welcome to new ideas, to new ways of being, to no longer simply take water of any kind for granted. Our lives, and the lives of all those on every shore, depend upon it.

Take the blessing of water with you today. Take every gift and every complication. Take with your water a consideration of time and of tide, of justice and of equity, of connection and of challenge. May the waters we name sacred today, may all waters named sacred by all across millenia, bless you and all your own complications. So may it be.