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Come Closer

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John 4:46-54

You may have noticed the clean water system display in Westminster Commons. The team of Westminster members who will travel to Cuba in December hope the display helps us understand what they will do on our behalf. Our members will work side-by-side with our Cuban partners to implement two sustainable water purification systems, one at Versailles Church, our partner congregation in Mantanzas, Cuba and a second at a pediatric hospital near the church. Clean water for the children and community around Versailles Church and for children receiving health treatment. With these clean water systems a community is empowered to treat contaminated water. June of this year marked the 10-year anniversary of Living Waters for the World in Cuba; and this year the 54 systems now operating in Cuba passed the 15,000,000-gallon milestone.

Beneath us complex sequences of pipes bring to the faucets of this church the water we drink. The water we use to baptize our children. The journalist Anna Clark described the infrastructure that delivers water as a metaphor for a society that is functioning well. She wrote, “The sprawling pipelines articulate the shape of a community. House by house, [the pipes] are a tangible affirmation that each person belongs.” She continued, “...when we are all connected to the water, and to each other, it is life-giving – holy, even.”¹

In her book, *The Poisoned City: Flint’s Water and the American Urban Tragedy*, Clark described the day in 2014 when Reverend R. Sherman McCathern noticed something was wrong with the water in the Flint neighborhood where he served as a pastor. Someone opened a hydrant on a hot summer day and the children of the neighborhood did what kids know to do – they ran gleefully back and forth through the water. McCathern noticed the water spraying out of the hydrant was dark in color rather than clear. Neighbors near the church shared his concerns about the water. It was brown, smelled foul, tasted of metal and caused skin rashes and hair loss. McCathern and his neighbors in the Civic Park neighborhood took their concerns public and they were assured the water was safe to consume. In fact, the water had toxic amounts of lead and other chemicals and the water was not safe. No one from the city or state tracked what was really happening in Civic Park and neighborhoods like it across the city. Before the bad water started flowing in 2014 and then for some

¹ Clark, Anna *The Poisoned City: Flint’s Water and the American Urban Tragedy*

time after no one from the City of Flint or the State of Michigan would come closer and see the developing threat.

Almost one year ago, standing here at this pulpit Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, who published a book around the same time as Anna Clark, shared her perspective on the water crisis in Flint. She especially keyed in on the children of Flint who played in, consumed and bathed in water contaminated with nineteen times the amount of lead that is acceptable. The children of Flint disproportionately suffered harm. Both Clark and Hanna-Attisha described the ways city and state government institutions failed to function as entrusted. Government leaders wouldn't come close and they told the people of Flint the water was fine.

The title of Hanna-Attisha's book, *What the Eye Doesn't See*, refers to a quote from D. H. Lawrence, "what the eye doesn't see and the mind doesn't know, doesn't exist." Hanna-Attisha confessed even she, a devoted pediatrician and professor of pediatrics, was for a time "blind to what was happening" with Flint's water and its children. When we are unwilling to come closer it is very easy not to see.

Thinking about the children who were in harm's way in Flint and children who are in harm's way around the world points us toward a father from Capernaum. He was overcome with desperation because his son was definitely in harm's way. He had martialled resources and done all he could do to save his son's life. Nothing helped. His son was on the verge of death. So the desperate father had the thought he might find help outside of

Capernaum. He began walking south not knowing what or who he would meet. After a while the father reached Cana.

It was in Cana that Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding reception. Jesus' mother saw a need, believed Jesus could respond to the need, and nudged him to act. Jesus told the servants working at the wedding to fill six, thirty-gallon jars with water. The servants brought the large jars of water to Jesus and further followed his instruction to draw out some of the content of the jars and present it to the chief steward for approval. The steward was taken aback because this late arriving wine – the wine Jesus provided – was better tasting than what they served earlier in the reception. The servants and the disciples who watched Jesus turn the water into wine believed. In this act of turning water to wine God's generosity was made known to them in a new way. In Jesus, God comes closer.

When the father heard that Jesus was passing through Cana he sought Jesus out. The father knew his son's need, believed Jesus could respond to the need, and begged him to act. Jesus did not initially respond to the father's request. It seems the father caught Jesus as he was deep in thought about the circumstances under which the people would really understand his presence among them. What would it take for the people to understand they were both getting a glimpse of God's intent for the world *and* were actually in God's presence? How long would it take the people to understand Jesus is from God and is God "newly present"² in the

² Sponheim, *Paul Speaking of God*

flesh? All of this deep thought could be heard in Jesus' response, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." Reverently and still desperate the father from Capernaum persisted and said, "Sir, come down before my little boy dies." The father wanted Jesus to come closer so his son could live. Jesus did not agree to "come down" to Capernaum as the father requested. But God did come closer. From Judea to Samaria and back to Galilee everywhere Jesus travelled he demonstrated that he would – God would – come closer. Jesus told the father, "Go home. Your son lives." God was closer to his son than the father imagined. The son was healed. The father looking for a miracle healing received so much more. In Jesus, God came close. The father and his household believed.

Jesus revealed God in new and unexpected ways in Cana: to servants working at a wedding, to the disciples and later to a desperate father. Until it happened, they did not know they would meet God. They were ordinary people and Cana was an ordinary town. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus shows up in ordinary places to be with every day, ordinary people. They did not have to be important or become someone other than themselves. They did not have to go to a special place to meet God. God sought relationship with them just as they were, right where Jesus found them.

God seeks relationship with us just as we are and wherever we are found. We can and should expect God to come to us "in, with

and through”³ people – those who are part of this worshipping community and the people we meet in our daily lives away from Westminster. When we come closer to the people around us, God comes closer to us.

In and through communities God comes closer to the world God loves. Congregations like ours are equipped with strengths we can use to help re-form communities where all people – especially our children – have what they need to thrive and reach their full potential.

One of the strengths Westminster has that the world desperately needs us to exercise is the strength to accompany. Because God comes close to us, we have the strength and ability to accompany our neighbors – especially those who are overwhelmed by the systems and structures we move through with great ease. Reverend McCathern and the Joy Tabernacle congregation used their strength to accompany in the Civic Park neighborhood in Flint.

When leaders kept their distance from the Civic Park neighborhood, the church accepted God’s invitation to come closer. Up close to their neighbors they could see both the threatening and promising developments. Anna Clark gave a glimpse of the congregation’s efforts to bring life back to the neighborhood:

³ Guthrie, Shirley *Christian Doctrine*

“When Pastor Sherman McCathern and his congregation at Joy Tabernacle realized that Civic Park was not on anyone’s list of priorities they launched their own programs to fix up the neighborhood. They covered over the vacant windows and doors “to take the abandoned look away,” helping people imagine what a healthy Civic Park could look like. They paid young men to mow lawns and board up empty homes. People who never dreamed of owning a place of their own moved into some of the left-behind houses. The church created the Urban Renaissance Center to serve as a social ministry for single parents, seniors, ex-offenders, recovering substance abusers, and anyone else who walked in the door.”⁴

This congregation held up a mirror for the neighborhood and encouraged a neighborhood that had been invisible to see itself correctly; to see all of its hidden beauty and assets. The congregation called other institutions to invest in the community. The congregation partnered with neighborhood residents and other organizations to build networks and systems of care. Before, during and after the water crisis Joy Tabernacle accompanied neighbors and was as an anchor in the neighborhood.

Later in our worship Megan and Jordan will share a stewardship moment to help us deepen our understanding of our role in Building the Beloved Community and the call to love our neighbor as ourselves. Know this, we cannot build beloved

⁴ Clark, Anna *The Poisoned City: Flint’s Water and the American Urban Tragedy*

community or love our neighbors unless we are willing to come closer. God, who comes close to us, will continue to equip us as a congregation to come closer to our neighbors.

Thanks be to God.

Pastoral Prayer

Meghan Gage-Finn

Creator God, who was and is and will be forever, you are source of knowledge and light, hope and truth, justice and grace. Spirit of Christ, guide our thoughts and actions so that we might continually ask, seek, knock, and find you present in our lives.

We have entered this time of worship and prayer each with a different need. Some of us have hearts full of peace and gratitude, love and joy. We have been eager to greet this day, to be part of the rhythm of compassion and kindness you seek for your world.

But others of us bring hearts heavy from the weight of disappointment, of the continual “not yet” of dreams and expectations unfulfilled.

Some hearts ache with sorrow, for brokenness in relationships, for loved ones in pain, or from the new emptiness of grief that darkens the whole horizon.

For some of us we bring to you hearts embittered, fed up by ideals betrayed, hardened by the politics of the day, angered by cries for change that go unanswered.

No matter what we have brought to this time in our week, this space in our lives, we have all entered this place searching- for courage, for respite, for resolution, for the ability to believe and

trust; we voice our longings in sacred company, that our hearts might be filled, our thoughts deepened, and our souls lifted.

May the doors of our hearts be wide enough to receive all who hunger, all who are lonely for friendship; may they welcome all who have cares to unburden, thanks to express, faith to nurture. May they welcome the youngest and most vulnerable among us, that children might know the precious value of their worth, each beloved in your eyes.

And may the doors of our hearts be narrow enough to shut out pettiness and pride, envy and enmity; may they be closed to the temptation of judgment and doubt, of gossip and competition.

May they be ever more aware of the pain and injustices of this world: of your children malnourished and victimized, whole populations disregarded and discounted, your creation injured and groaning from the cost of our abundance and ignorance.

We lift up to you those who think only of their problems but don't know to turn them to you or to this sacred community, those who are ill or in pain, in hospital or receiving care to find their way back to wholeness, and we pray for the caregivers who encourage, watch, wait, hold fast, and hope.

And we all keep watch as seasons change, sun stills and shadows hush the ends of the day. As the brilliant palette of color all around us moves toward the simple, dormancy of life, may our hope lengthen as limited light asserts its defiant response to

gloom and shadow. May we remember that always beneath the coming transitions awaits new life, a new way, the mystery of promise and believing. As the earth prepares for the dying away that inevitably leads to renewal, may we prepare ourselves for the renewing work of your Spirit in each one of us. You graciously receive our prayers, O God, and may we quiet our hearts enough to hear your call. Grant us enough health to fulfill that call, and the compassion we need to attend to others. Give us patience enough not to become discouraged and enough audacity to move to action in your name. May our very lives be prayer, and as the heavens pray and every creature and every living thing in all life prays, may we add ours to the holy chorus of prayer by saying together in one voice as your Son taught us, *Our Father...*