

## **12/12/10 Sermon**

“H2O”

Rev. Paul D. Daniel, Minister

It is a hot and humid Georgia day (hard to imagine right now with this wintry cold snap), but you are thirsty – parched in fact, so you reach into the cupboard for a glass, perhaps fill it with some ice. You go to the sink and turn the tap on and let it run for a while to get good and cold, and then fill the glass and gulp it down. Then, still thirsty, you repeat the process. You thought nothing of the precious resource you drank and, in fact, take it for granted. It is always there at your fingertips – an endless supply, your right.

But in reality, water is not endless nor a right for millions of people across the globe. In our southwest desert communities, they are rationing and restricting the use of water. The Colorado River, which supplies the entire region, runs dry before it reaches the ocean in California, yet 150,000 people there do not have access to that clean water. Locally, Lake Lanier that feeds Georgia, Florida and Alabama has seen court fights over water usage, especially with the recent drought emergency so serious that some cities were just months away from running out of water.

Now let's move to central and South America – countries like Bolivia, Ecuador and Guatemala, or to the African continent mired in poverty, disease, hunger and worse still, drought. People are literally dying from lack of access to safe, affordable water in these far flung areas. In Africa, women have to walk hours to the nearest well for often polluted water. In the process they are often attacked, raped or killed, leaving a generation of orphans. Unlike us, they have to think of water every day and the struggle to survive. Reaching to the tap is not an option.

Now compound the problem with multi-national private companies such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi taking ownership of often the only safe, fresh water, bottling it and then charging the indigenous population for their own water – water they cannot afford to buy so they have to subsist on the polluted, unhealthy water left.

We need to support the right of all people who do not have ready access to safe, sufficient, affordable, drinkable water and sanitation. Anything less is ultimately apartheid. In our own country, a disproportionate number of water shutoffs occur in low-income areas of most cities. According to the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC), when a ward or district in a city sees a 1% increase in the number of people of color, there is a 4%

increase in water shut-offs. When a shutoff happens, social service agencies can take children away from their parents because a home without water is considered unsafe for children.

In places like India, the soda companies have drained the ground water of local communities, in one case as much as 26 feet in seven years with the effect of wells and ground water pumps running dry, creating a crisis for the local population.

Access to clean, safe drinking water is one of the most fundamental necessities of life. It is therefore a basic human right, regardless of ability to pay.

According to the UUSC, "1.1 Billion people do NOT have access to safe drinking water, that is one in six people; and one in five people or 2.6 billion people have no access to basic sanitation. Each year, dehydration from disease claims the lives of nearly two million children. In the last 10 years, it has killed more children than all the people lost to armed conflict since World War II." I find those statistics staggering. Think of the social impact these numbers are having and their shifting and competing political and economic interests on a global scale. These stresses are causing increased drought, over population and extraction rates leading to water shortages, river and coastal flooding that will affect many local and regional populations. This in turn will lead to forced locations within and between countries, exacerbating conflicts and imposing migration pressure pushing people to war over diminishing resources.

Do not despair. There is good news emerging from all this bad news of this water crisis. The good news is that individually and collectively we can change this dynamic. It will take concerted and committed effort but people can have a positive impact over time. We can start small to save water: don't flush if it is liquid, "if it is yellow let it mellow" as the ditty goes – enough said on that subject. Bring your own bags to the supermarket to save using all that water to manufacture plastic, stop drinking bottled water and use the containers the sustainability committee sells. Reinvest your money in earth-friendly mutual funds and buy stocks in corporations that have sane environmental policies.

Recently the Unitarian Universalist Association switched investment companies from Fidelity Investments to TIAA-CREF because Fidelity refused to stop investing in companies that have a rapacious policy when it comes to the environment or policies that do not take into consideration the needs of the global world community. You can do the same thing with your own

resources. You can join with other concerned folks to changes structures of power and evil.

A recent story of hope and success by people united for action demonstrates the power of average citizens. The right to water is really a personal issue and knows no borders. It is a basic fundamental human right that should never be restricted or limited through government action, inaction or privatization. Let me a share a story that illustrates this point.

From *Defending the Right to Water*, the UUSC reports that in Bolivia, a "water war" erupted in the streets when the water rates in Cochabamba increased by 10 to 36 percent. A U.S. corporation, Bechtel, (what a surprise – one of the Darth Vader impersonators of the corporate world) won the bid for the 40-year water services concession and increased the water rates in all communities including the poor neighborhoods. The services, however, deteriorated. When Bolivia invoked the contract provision to cancel the concession for nonperformance, Bechtel sued.

In January 2006, the \$35 million suit was settled for 32 cents and legal fees. Water rights activist Oscar Olivera said, "It was because of the movement against abuses of privatization in Bolivia and around the world that the Cochabamba case was settled. Let people know that this victory was won because the 'tribunal of the people' decided it – not the tribunal of the World Bank. This is the power of the people."

This is the arena that the UUSC works in, so you can support their work by becoming a contributing member. You can support our UN-UU Office in their support of the recent non-binding resolutions to make water a human right. Hope and progress comes in many forms and from average people. Keep the faith. Keep hope alive. The spirit of love and cooperation can change the world.

May that spirit guide us this holiday season.

Blessed be!