
***The Fifth Word from the Cross:
I Thirst***

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Do you have a drink of choice? Ever since college, I've been a Dr. Pepper drinker. I used to drink Coke regularly, but my college roommate always drank Dr. Pepper. Pretty soon, I discovered that poor college students couldn't be picky about the type of carbonated beverage in the house. Thus, my addiction to Dr. Pepper was born.

I still like Coke, and I'll drink a Sprite on occasion, but if I have a choice, it's Dr. Pepper that I want. Dr. Pepper used to be the only way I took my caffeine – until Abby was born. Then, a number of sleepless nights turned an occasional drink of coffee into a daily habit. Now, it's coffee with breakfast, a Dr. Pepper with lunch, and water or iced tea for dinner. But, when I am thirsty – really thirsty – it's not Dr. Pepper that I want. It's certainly not coffee or even iced tea. The only thing that will quench my thirst is water – ice cold water. Lemon-lime Gatorade is a close second, but nothing beats water.

Everyone of us has been thirsty at some point in our lives. In doing research on the topic of thirst, I came across a movie that intrigued me. It is appropriately titled: *Thirst*. Although I haven't seen the movie, the synopsis drew me in: Is water a human right for all people or a commodity to be bought, sold,

and traded in a global marketplace? The first country the movie *Thirst* documents is Bolivia. Here they follow a community leader named Oscar Olivera. Olivera leads over 10,000 people in an insurrection against the police and the army over a water privatization contract given to the U.S. based Bechtel Corporation. The second country highlighted is India, where a water conservation movement has rejuvenated rivers and changed the desert landscape. But the central story of *Thirst* focuses on Stockton, California, and its Mayor Gary Podesta. The movie shows citizens in Stockton upset by the Mayor's proposal to turn over control of the water system to a consortium of global water corporations. They are worried about price hikes, water quality, and layoffs of public employees.¹

While Bolivia, India, and even Stockton, California, seem far away, there is plenty of water intrigue right here in Texas. T. Boone Pickens, a name well known in the Panhandle, made his money in oil. But now he is drilling for water. Pickens is buying acres and acres of land in the Panhandle in order to pump water out of the Ogallala Aquifer, an underground water reservoir that stretches from south of Lubbock north into Kansas. On the dry Panhandle plains, the Ogallala is sometimes the only water farmers and ranchers can count on. Pickens projects that he could pump as much 65 billion gallons of water per year which he would then sell to one of the state's largest cities. El Paso, San Antonio, and Dallas are three good candidates. Needless to say, the Ogallala could not be recharged quickly enough to replace that type of pumping.²

Other water fights exist. Last fall, San Antonio lost an opportunity for a new PGA golf course and village because of public protest. Its proposed location was on top of a recharge zone for the Edwards Aquifer. And just this week, a split Dallas City Council voted to update the city's 50-year water plan.

Why the big fights over water? The answers are simple – water is a precious and limited commodity; water quenches thirst; water sustains life.

As I said before, when I am thirsty I want water. And perhaps that's why in this morning's scripture passage, I envisioned Jesus asking for water. "I Thirst." Surely it is water that he needs.

All of the gospel accounts speak of Jesus receiving a drink while on the cross. Someone provides Jesus with a sour wine or vinegar. But only in the Gospel of John does Jesus take the initiative through his words: "I Thirst." On the surface, Jesus demonstrates his humanity – his thirst acknowledges the pain of the cross. But a deeper look at the words reveals a greater symbolism. They recall three earlier passages in John, each speaking to a different audience.

The first symbolic tie is to Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. In the fourth chapter of John, a woman of dubious reputation has come to draw water in the heat of the day – at a time when no one else is likely to be around. Seeing the woman, Jesus asked her to give him a drink. She replies, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Jesus then answers her saying, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

What do you thirst for? We all thirst for something. A quick search of the word “thirst” on Google revealed that some people thirst for:

- Knowledge
- Entertaining and enlightening fiction
- Justice
- Power
- Serenity

I’m sure you could add your own thirst - the list could go on and on. We tend to equate thirst with our desire or need for something. I want safety and security so I guess I’m thirsty for peace. I’d like to have a new car so I am thirsty for a reasonable monthly payment. And, personally, I guess I’m thirsty for an A&M National Championship because I sure desire that. But the question this raises is: How is your thirst quenched?

We tend to think that our thirsts will be quenched when we get something. I picked up a book the other day while shopping at Costco. It was one of those get-your-financial-house-in-order-books. Like most books of this type, it challenged the reader to separate needs from wants. Take care of the things you really need first, then you can focus on the things you want. What do you need? Think carefully...What is it that you really need?

Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give...will never thirst; the water that I shall give...will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” What do you thirst for?

The second symbolic tie between “I Thirst” and an earlier passage in John recalls Jesus at a temple festival. In chapter seven, John states that Jesus stood up and cried out to those gathered there, saying: “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believers heart shall flow rivers of living water.’ “

On the cross, Jesus said, “I Thirst.” And rightfully so. It had been a long day...no sleep, time in front of Pilate, the Sanhedrin council, back to Pilate, a trek with a cross, an extremely painful method that brought him to this end. But, to Jesus, “I Thirst” was not a case of his very real mortal weakness. “I Thirst” meant completion. This was the Son of God speaking. Even in this condition, he was aware of his divine destiny. He had come to lay down his life for his sheep. The crucifixion was not an accident, but the deliberate self-offering of the Good Shepherd.³ He came to give eternal life. He came to quench thirst. Those who are thirsty will find drink in him.

The third tie to the words “I Thirst” recalls Jesus’ question to Peter at his arrest – “Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?” Jesus’ thirst symbolized his willingness to embrace his death.⁴ But I think this symbolism also presents a challenge to the church – a willingness to embrace Christ’s call.

What is the church thirsty for? More members? A greater emphasis on Mission work? A deeper spirituality? Theologian Richard John Neuhaus tells a story of how he began to understand what the church thirsted for. When he was a boy, no more than seven, Neuhaus attended a “mission festival” in the Canadian hamlet of Petawawa, Ontario. This annual mission festival was a very

big event among the people of that time and place. For this special occasion, a guest preacher was required, and this year, he came all the way from “the States.” This preacher had a most dramatic flair in making the case for the urgency of world missions. Neuhaus states that well into a sermon that lasted more than an hour, the preacher suddenly stopped. For a full minute there was complete silence as he looked intently at his wristwatch. Then he tossed his head, threw out his arm, and pointing directly at Neuhaus sitting in the third row, announced “In the last one minute, thirty-seven thousand lost souls have gone to eternal damnation without a saving knowledge of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!”

Neuhaus wrote that this was, he believed, the first theological crisis of his life.

“This seven-year-old boy was electrified. I immediately put my mind to work figuring out how many minutes we had been sitting there while thirty-seven thousand people per minute were going to hell. I looked around and was puzzled to see everyone else taking the news so calmly. Mrs. Appler was straightening the bow in her daughter’s hair, and Mr. Radke was actually smiling as he nodded approval at the preacher’s words. Hadn’t they heard what he said? In my agitated state, I wanted to jump up and shout that we better get going right now to tell all those hell-bent people about Jesus. The real crisis came later, however. I was excited all day and had spent a restless night contenting with dreams about all those people in hell. The next morning I discovered that the

visiting preacher and my Dad, who was the pastor of the host church, were taking three days off to go fishing.

Thirty-seven thousand people were going to hell every minute and they were going fishing! I knew there was something very wrong here and wrestled with possible explanations. Maybe they didn't care about all those people. It was not only my Dad and the other preacher, but my Mom, my brothers and sisters, and the entire parish who seemed to be taking very much in stride yesterday's announcement of cosmic catastrophe. This said something not at all nice about the people who were dearest to me. Slowly, another explanation began to recommend itself: The mission festival preacher didn't really mean what he said. Not really. And everybody understood that, except me. After a time, my initial alarm subsided as I came to think that he and they did not mean it at all, that it was just 'church talk' and not to be taken seriously."⁵

Neuhaus claims that he has since come to understand the church's thirst in a very different way, yet not untouched by that sense of urgency. The first apostles were eyewitnesses to what happened. The opening passage of 1 John lays out the mandate and motive of Christian mission:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we

saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.

Jesus, hanging on the cross, said, "I Thirst." And we are all witnesses to what happened on the cross. We are sent into the world to urgently bear testimony to this. As the church, we are called to spread the gospel message. We are called to thirst for Him and for all for whom He thirsts. The church does not have a mission – it is the mission.

Mother Teresa is certainly an example of this type of witness. "We want," she says, "to satiate the thirst of Jesus on the cross for the love of souls." At the entrance of the chapel of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity in the Bronx are the words, "I Thirst, I Quench." Service to others is a drink offered to him. In offering that drink, our thirst is quenched. I thirst, I quench.⁶

Debates over water and other thirst quenchers will rage on, but our thirsts are quenched by the completion of Jesus' earthly life. Christ calls the church and its members to be missionaries. We are called not to bring Christ to where he has not been before, but to meet him where he has been all along. For him the whole world thirsts, and Christ thirsts for the thirsty, hungers for the hungry, and yearns for the yearning. From the cross Christ has already counted them all. And he assures us that none of them, none of us, will be lost.

¹ From *Thirst* website: <http://www.thirstthemovie.org>

² From Public Citizen website: <http://www.citizen.org/cmep/water/us/bulksales/texas/index.cfm>

³ Rutledge, Fleming, *The Seven Last Words from the Cross*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005.

⁴ The New Interpreters Bible. "John." Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995. p. 832.

⁵ Neuhaus, Richard John, *Death on a Friday Afternoon*. New York: Basic Books, 2000. p. 153-155.

⁶ Ibid, p. 145-146.