I carry a quart glass mason jar filled with water from our well to my father who is plowing a field on our Kansas farm. Reaching the red Farmall tractor, my father stops and turns off the engine. He gratefully receives the jar of water and drinks. Precious drops drip down his chin onto dusty overalls. Finished, he offers me the empty jar with a heartfelt “thank you.” He continues plowing and I turn and walk across the moist rows of soil back home.

Carrying water to my father was one of my childhood responsibilities. Offering the mason jar was more than giving a drink of water; it was a relational act of hospitality between my father, the sacred gift of water, and me.

This simple, life giving act of hospitality carries profound spiritual and moral lessons about “Sister Water” (St. Francis of Assisi, Canticle of the Creatures). Sister Water in the mason jar speaks of mystery and water hospitality in a world where conflicts and wars increasingly revolve around water resources amid ever mounting population growth or extreme weather such as droughts resulting from global climate change.

Water hospitality of the mason jar instructs that water is a sacred gift, a sister who actually makes up at least 70% of our bodies, just as the earth’s body is 70% water. We are born out of the water of our mother’s womb and we are baptized by water that carries us into the sacred womb of God on earth where we live out our life’s journey. Beginning in Genesis, we see the waters are good. “. . . and the waters gathered together God called ‘Seas’, God saw that it was good” (Gen 1:10). The root meaning of good is “to bring together” (Ayto, 259). In creation all the elements of life are brought together through water.

Hospitality brings together people, creatures, and elements so that they know they are not strangers, but are one family or community. St. Francis’s Canticle of the Creatures

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sings loudly of this amazing truth that all are one within the kinship of the Holy One, Compassionate God and Creator.

From the beginning we are part of the earth’s cycles of which water’s cycle intimately entwines our planet. Humans are not outside of this natural cycle, but part of the intimate relationship that allows the hospitality of water. Just as Genesis begins with our relationship to the waters as good, one can assume from this, the common good for which we are called to be in relationship of gratitude and responsibility.

However, our waters, which have been home to life, are being threatened by toxins that violate the purity of water, even within the womb, which is the first human experience of water hospitality. “In 2005 a study of the umbilical cord blood of ten randomly chosen newborns in the United States was tested for toxic chemicals. A total of 287 toxins were found, with the average for each individual infant being 200. Nearly three-quarters of the chemicals were known carcinogens, and the rest were identified as threatening the nervous, endocrine, and immune systems” (Gottlieb, 10).

The deterioration of water quality poses numerous moral and spiritual questions. In the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus speaks of himself as living water. One can only know the meaning of such teachings if one experiences water as living and healthy. I have pondered the question. If our waters are polluted and pure water even threatened to near extinction, can we really understand the spiritual meaning of living water? Is not our understanding of God and Jesus threatened if our waters are threatened?

While Aquinas did not experience the ecological devastation on a global scale that we face, he reflected in his time upon the understanding of the Divine in relationship to the natural world. “The whole universe together participates in the divine goodness and represents it better than any single being whatsoever” (Summa Contra Gentiles, St. Q. 47, Art. 1).

Anne Clifford, C.S.J., writes, “From the standpoint of an ecological theology based on Aquinas’ insights, the destruction of our earthly habitat suggests that discernible traces of the Trinity are lost. When species are made extinct, a unique manifestation of the goodness of God is gone forever” (Zayac, 54).

Deterioration of water quality, however, addresses only part of the ethical and spiritual dilemma we face with current global water concerns. The other element involves access to water within globalization and commodification of water where increasingly those with money and power hold the mason jar of water to the exclusion of millions of people, whole rivers, watersheds and bioregions.

Hebrew Scripture speaks of the water hospitality as an obligation to friends, guests, strangers, and enemies, and I will include the natural world as part of this community. “If your enemy is hungry give him something to eat, if thirsty, something to drink” (Proverbs 25:21). In fact, if the book of Matthew is an indication, we will be judged upon our abilities to share in the gracious gift of water in hospitality. “For I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink” (Matt 25:35). There is no cost for water; it is a gift of the Creator.

What is the moral implication we face today with 1.1 billion people (17% of world population) without access to improved sources of water? How do we face our neighbor and God knowing that by 2025, at least 3.5 billion people or nearly 50% of the world’s population will face water scarcity? (Water: Essential for Justice and Peace). Currently the average U.S. citizen in their home uses 293 gallons of water a day while the average African family uses 5 gallons of
water a day. How do we deal with such disparity in distribution?

In *Water, An Essential Element for Life*, the Pontifical Justice and Peace Council’s 2003 paper for the Third World Forum on Water, held in Kyoto, Japan stated, “Sufficient and safe drinking water is a precondition for the realization of other human rights. . . . There is a growing movement to formally adopt a human right to water” (*Origins*, 738).

At the Fourth World Forum on Water in Mexico City in March of 2006 the effort to make water a human right was taken up and was not passed by the assembly, though numerous people’s groups and religious constituents worked for its passing. While people of faith have been silent too long on ecological concerns of water and climate change, people of various religious traditions are beginning to claim their prophetic voices. An Interfaith Statement given at the forum as part of a panel of union members, indigenous people, and organizers from throughout the world stated:

Preserving and making available fresh water as a sacred legacy is a collective responsibility that includes the involvement and participation of all . . . . Of special concern to us are the increased instances of the commercialization, commodification, and contamination of water and water services which often result in the disturbance of the natural flow of water systems disrupting ecosystems and decreasing accessibility of water for marginalized people. (*Water: Essential for Justice and Peace*)

While corporations such as Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and Nestle see water as one of the major business opportunities of the twenty-first century, the ancient ideal of water is that it is sacred. Sitting with Sister Water, we have much to learn as is echoed by Pope Benedict XVI in a recent call to address the ecological challenges of our times by listening to the natural law:

Everyone can see today that humanity could destroy the foundation of its own existence, its earth, and therefore we can’t simply do whatever we want with this earth that has been entrusted to us, what seems to us in a given moment useful or promising, but we have to respect the inner laws of creation, of this earth, we have to learn these laws and obey them if we want to survive. . . . This obedience to the voice of the earth is more important for our future happiness than the voices of the moment, the desires of the moment. . . . Existence itself, our earth, speaks to us, and we have to learn to listen. (Allen)

Our dualistic thinking and acting that usually interprets the material world devoid of spiritual essence makes it very challenging to hear and obey the voice of the earth or of water. Water invites us to look deeply into the glass of water that we drink as pure gift. She invites us to open our hearts to hospitality and live out relationships as part of not apart from the sacred earth community.

**References**


