

Sermon- "Thirst"
Psalm 143:6; John 7:33-39a

When I was a young man I spent two summers working for the forest service. Our base camp was in the St. Joe National Forest in northern Idaho but we spent most of the summer fighting forest fires all over the place. From June through August electrical storms form over Idaho and the lightning sets trees and underbrush on fire. We'd hear the camp boss yell, "Let's go!" And we'd put on our boots and climb in the back of a transport truck and off we'd go. One of the things I learned from firefighting was what it meant to be thirsty. I mean, really thirsty. When it's 85 degrees out and you're digging a firetrail twenty or thirty feet away from a fire, you get very thirsty, very fast. After we ran out of the water we'd brought along we would have to depend on streams and springs which weren't always nearby. So we'd send a member of the crew out to find one and bring back water. As we would wait for him to come back, I used to identify with someone who was lost in a desert. Or with how Jesus felt when he cried out on the cross, "I thirst!"

There is a story about an old monk and a young monk walking through the woods. The young monk asked the old monk, "what can I do that would most please the Lord?" They were coming to a river and the old monk instructed the young monk to kneel down by the bank of the river. When he had done so, the old monk knelt down beside him, grabbed his head, shoved it under the water and held it there for thirty or forty seconds. The young monk thrashed about trying to get his head out of the water and finally the old monk let him go. After he stopped sputtering and coughing he asked the older monk, "Why in the world did you do that?" The old monk said to him: "when you yearn for the Lord like you yearned for air when you thought you were drowning, you will please him more than anything else you can do." Nothing pleases God more than for one of his children to thirst for him more than for anything else in the world. As Jesus said, "if anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink!"

Our problem is that we thirst for things God has made rather than for God himself. There are of course things we thirst for that we do need. We need food, clothing and shelter. We need family and friends. We need jobs. We need healthcare when we're sick. And God provides all these things. It isn't obvious to us that God is providing all these things because we have a Bart Simpson way of imagining that we're providing them for ourselves. But when we're honest with ourselves, we know that it is God who does the providing--as Luther says in his catechism: "...God has made me and all creatures; he has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land and all I have.

He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. All this he does out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me." God does indeed provide for all our needs.

God does indeed provide for all our needs. But the one thing God provides which we need the most but usually think about the least is a relationship with him. David cries out in *Psalms 143*.

"Answer me quickly, o Lord; my spirit fails. Do not hide your face from me or I will be like those who go down to the pit. Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul." Our greatest need is to have a close relationship with God. St. Augustine said: "our hearts cannot know peace until they find their rest in thee." We were designed—programmed if you like—to live in an intimate fellowship with our heavenly father. A relationship like Adam and Eve had with God before they ate the poisoned fruit. But when sin entered the world it severed their relationship with God--and the shock waves of that disjunction still resound through all creation. They obscure our thoughts of God and hide him from our eyes. We grope about, led only by our sin-dimmed senses and our puny power of reason, the blind leading the blind, and falling into ditch after ditch until we give up and despair of finding the truth. We become like one of the Russians Tolstoi described who, "...knows nothing and wants to know nothing because he believes that nothing can be known." Sounds like a professor of philosophy at one of our contemporary universities. So we abandon our search for truth, lose sight of our crucial need for fellowship with our creator and redeemer, and focus on superficial things.

But down deep, our thirst for God doesn't go away. And it has ways of making itself known to us. For some people it's a feeling that something just isn't quite right with their lives--that things are "out of kilter" in a way they can't quite put their finger on. I recall an old country western song that went, "I've got both ends out in the middle but I can't seem to get 'em tied." For others it takes the form of a sense of dislocation--that they are never exactly where they feel they should be--although they have no idea of where that is. For still others it's a nagging sense of urgency: they are always trying to hurry up and finish whatever they're doing, even when they have nothing to do next. A friend of mine who recently retired said, "I have nothing to do and I can't wait to get to it." As a Pastor I've had more than one man confide in me that they feel like they're just headed down the wrong path in life but they don't know what the right path is. Many Christians feel a lack of God's presence in their lives. Mother Theresa of Calcutta wrote in her diary in her later years, "when I look inside myself there is nothing: God is not there." I think of it as the "Christmas will be perfect next year" syndrome. When Karen and I started having children we always wanted the make Christmas day perfect for them.

Perfect presents, a perfectly decorated tree, perfect weather that had to include snow to make it a white Christmas, a perfect meal, every child perfectly happy. And our Christmases were joyous events. They were almost perfect, but there always seemed to be something that wasn't quite right. One of the kids would be sick. I couldn't get my camera to work properly. The furnace would threaten to go on the fritz. There was a problem at work I couldn't get off my mind. At the end of the day I would end up thinking, "this Christmas was ok but next year Christmas will be perfect!" The perfect Christmas was always one year out!

Feelings of urgency or dislocation or emptiness or of things being "out of kilter" all come from the same place. They come from forgetting about our relationship with God. Deep down in our souls we long for God, like a lost child longs for his mother and can't be consoled by anyone else. We have a soul thirst for God. According to the prophet Jeremiah, we try to satisfy our soul thirst by digging our own wells rather than going to the well that will supply us with living water. He wrote, "my people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." We oversupply our superficial needs and try to find satisfaction in the surplus rather than seek God where he wants to be found. We clutter up our lives with so many other things that we lose sight of our thirst for God. It's there—we just don't feel it. How do we keep in mind our thirst for God?

Let me tell you a little story about how he recently reminded me of my thirst for him. We have a cat named Chloe. I'm sure you've heard me complain about her. Chloe is without a doubt the most irritating cat that ever lived. For seventeen years she has been clawing our upholstery, ripping at our carpets, throwing up all over the house and terrifying any other cat we've tried to bring into our home. But worst of all, Chloe *howls*. Not "meows" but *howls*. Ever heard the word, "caterwaul?" It's defined as "howling in a shrill, piercing manner. "Chloe begins caterwauling sometime between 5:30 and 6:00 in the morning. Rip Van Winkle couldn't sleep through that sound. Karen gets up and feeds her then she resumes her caterwauling. When she finally stops, she crawls into one of our laps and demands to be petted. Two days ago, I was petting Chloe while reflecting how little she deserved it, and a thought came into my mind. In God's eyes, wasn't I a lot like Chloe? I was continually unappreciative, dissatisfied and constantly complaining—all the while expecting to be treated lovingly. No wonder the Bible tells us that, "precious to God is the death of his saints." It may be only death that finally stops our complaining. God alone knows why Chloe is the way she is. But he has entrusted this poor, miserable creature to our care and however offensive she may be, we are bound to care for her and treat her with love. Just like God has bound himself to care for me, a poor miserable creature who deserves to be kicked out of his kingdom, but expects to be loved. In her old age, Chloe has developed an almost insatiable thirst; she laps up water all the day long.

But now when I watch her drink, it reminds me that whether I “feel” it or not, my soul is a parched land that thirsts for God. And you know something? I’m starting to feel a little thirstier. So now along with David, I pray every day: “my soul thirsts for you, Lord!” And I hear Jesus answer: “come to me and drink!” Amen.