

January 10th, 2016 Message
In the Water Together
Dr. Catherine Brewer

Good morning and Happy New Year! For those of you who may not know me yet, my name is Catherine Brewer; I usually go by “Catie”. I am married to Brent Brewer, one of First Presbyterian’s newest deacons, and mom to Alonzo, the 3-year old wearing the hat, and Lillian, the very busy toddler chasing after said 3-year-old. When I am not here or entertaining those two, I am a faculty member in the Department of Chemical & Materials Engineering at New Mexico State University. I teach on thermodynamics and heat transfer, and conduct research on biomass utilization. Today, I am going to talk about something special that I work with on campus and something that you are all familiar with. I’m going to talk about water, but not quite in the same way that I talk about water with my graduate students—no pH, no electrical conductivity, no density, no excess temperature of boiling, none of that—instead, I’m going to talk about water’s ability to bring me to that pew (or there about) every week that I can. Let me explain...

Around this time about 4 years ago, I was a graduate student at Iowa State University and just entering the 2nd trimester of pregnancy with Alonzo. I had the good fortune of being able to participate in a prenatal water aerobics class. At least once a week, I would leave the lab a little bit early and make my way to the physical therapy pool in the clinic across the street from the hospital. I would join half a dozen to a dozen other ladies at various stages of expanding bellies and fading swim suits. We would descend the steps into the gloriously warm but not too hot, shoulder-deep water where our instructor, Lyn, one of the hospital’s physical therapists, would lead us in 40 minutes of walking in circles, stretching, moving our limbs through the

water, and best of all, floating on pool noodles. The warmth relaxed our tension, the water's resistance gently strengthened our muscles, the movements improved our flexibility, and the buoyancy took the weight off of our feet. These benefits alone would have kept me coming back week after week.

However, as many of you who have been in physical therapy classes are aware, the physical benefits are just a small piece of the story. For me, the best part of the whole experience was the company: the other moms—most first timers like me, our instructor who had had several children of her own and guided hundreds of pregnant women, and the occasional other patients of Lyn's (mostly people recovering from surgeries or injuries) who could not make it to the pool at their usual times. We would talk: talk about what stage of pregnancy we were at, talk about our preparations, talk about what to expect at the next doctor's appointment, talk about the big and small things going on in our lives. Brent had a special name for this little group: he referred to us as the "water yaks," for our tendency to talk non-stop before, during, and after each session. This group were some of the first to know the day I defended my doctoral dissertation and when I received job interviews for a postdoc position at Rice University and then a faculty position at NMSU. I was there when each of my colleagues learned whether they were expecting a girl or a boy, and when one of them faced gestational diabetes. Most of what we talked about was the mundane stuff: aches, cravings, purchases, baby name decisions, worries, and plans. What made our conversations special was not the topic per se, but the opportunity to be ourselves, in the water, with others who would listen and care.

Our lectionary for today has three other examples of camaraderie in water: one with Israel, one with Jesus, and one with Samaria.

In our reading from Isaiah, water represents a trial rather than a comfort. Hear again Isaiah's words:

But now, this is what the LORD says—

he who created you, Jacob,
he who formed you, Israel:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

²When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;

and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.

Isaiah is speaking as the ten northern kingdoms of Israel have been swept away by Assyria and the flood that will be Babylon is gaining strength. At this point, Israel has crossed several water bodies under God's direction (crossing the Red Sea out of Egypt and crossing the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land), so the reference to passing through water makes sense. The Israelites can remember God's deliverance.

The part about the fire is different and worth noting. Isaiah could not have known on his own that the “walk through fire” would be reality almost 200 years later when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would be thrown into a fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. Pretty amazing prophecy when you think about it...

Anyway, back to the topic at hand. This chapter is in the second half of the book of Isaiah, sometimes called the Book of Comfort. Isaiah foresees the overwhelming captivity that faces the tribes of Judah in Babylon. He knows that they will feel like they are in

water over their heads, just like a woman experiencing her first pregnancy or a surgery patient not knowing how the recovery process will go. At that moment, they cannot do anything on their own and they do not have the experience to know it will all work out. God inspired Isaiah to write words of comfort reassuring Israel that he had a plan for their salvation.

We ourselves entered this sanctuary in over our heads. As we described in our confession of sins earlier, we have ignored God and not followed his will; we are in the same deep river Israel was in, in danger of being swept away by our flaws, our failings, and our distractions. We cannot get out of sin on our own and the rest of the world is in the water with us. It is in this dangerous situation that we encounter our second example of camaraderie in the water, this time at the Jordan River. We read from Luke 3: 15-22:

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." ²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

God knew how much sin has leaked and overflowed into our lives. Baptism, like many of the other ritual practices in the Old Testament that involved water, was meant to symbolize the washing away of sin's residue. When Jesus was baptized, it was not because he needed to have his sins washed away; rather,

Jesus' baptism was Jesus jumping into the water with us—Jesus meeting us, where we are, to do what we cannot. Through his perfect life, innocent death and triumphant resurrection, Jesus saved us from being overwhelmed by our inability to swim, our inability to follow God's will in our lives. We will not be swept away to punishment for our disobedience; Jesus took on that stream of water for us. Instead, Jesus has moved us from a stream over our heads into a pool at shoulder-level where we can live and grow together.

In our final example of camaraderie in the water, we learn more about the people who are to be in the water of life and growth with, in God's physical therapy pool. We read again from Acts 8:14-17

¹⁴ When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. ¹⁵ When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

A little bit of context for this passage: in the very early years of the church, there were large numbers of Jews coming to faith through the preaching of the disciples...and just as large of a push-back from the Jewish religious establishment. Stephen had just been stoned to death, and Saul (who would later become Paul) had scattered the early believers with his persecution. These scattered believers found themselves in unfamiliar pools with unfamiliar people, the Samaritans. Heeding Jesus' instructions, the early "followers of the way" shared their faith and baptized. However, they didn't stop there; they followed up, by sending word to Jerusalem to send

Peter and John, and by praying for the Holy Spirit to come and give guidance and instruction. If I might put this in terms of my original story, these early believers didn't just stay in the pool and co-exist with the other patients of God's salvation, they worked to build up a community in the water for continued growth and healing.

To me, this church represents a physical therapy pool. God's Word and the Holy Spirit relieve the pain of things that have gone wrong, remove the weight of guilt from my shoulders, give my heart new flexibility to love, and strengthen my mind to face the challenges of the coming week. For these reasons alone, I do not want to miss a Sunday. However, as with my water aerobics class, the biggest blessing of a church is the camaraderie in the water, the chance to share in life's experiences and to learn from each other.

So how do we, here at First Presbyterian, build this camaraderie? I have a suggestion I would like you to consider as you go forward this week; that suggestion is to really ask and to really answer the question, "how are you doing?" Let me explain.

A few years ago, there was a television show called "In Plain Sight". The show followed a U.S. Marshall named Mary Shannon as she helped people adjust to life in the witness protection program in Albuquerque. Mary's mother, Jinx, struggles with alcoholism and, at one point in the show, begins to participate in Alcoholics Anonymous or AA. In a scene that stuck with me, one of her fellow AA participants, Peter, meets Jinx at a dinner party at Mary's house. Introductions are made and Peter asks Jinx how she is doing. Jinx is currently going through a rough patch but, like most of us, she answers with "fine." Peter somewhat takes her aside and asks again, this time saying, "I am a friend of Bill's. How are you doing?" Bill

refers to Bill Wilson, one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. His name, Bill or Bill W., is used as a signal to other members of the organization. For example, paging Bill W. at an airport will alert other members of the organization that one of their own is struggling with temptation and needs immediate support. By telling Jinx he is a friend of Bill's, Peter is letting her know that he is water with her; he is also on the road to recovery, he also has his good days and bad days, and he really wants to know how she is doing.

In a few minutes, we will all shuffle out of this sanctuary, shaking hands with the friendly person at the door, and making our way to coffee, cookies, and a room full of other people, several of whom may ask us how we're doing. Before you respond automatically with "good" or "fine," remember that those people are in the water with you. They too have been in over their heads with the children of Israel. They too have had Jesus jump in and rescue them from sin through the waters of baptism. They too have come this week to God's physical therapy pool with the Samaritans for the Holy Spirit and healing.

So when someone here asks how you are doing, I encourage you to respond with how your week really was or with what really awaits in the next week. Some weeks, you may have good news to share: I extended my knee a tiny bit farther, everything looked good on the ultrasound, I got a project finished and submitted on time, I reconciled with a co-worker...Some weeks, you may share struggles and setbacks: I was injured, I made a mistake, I lost my patience, a loved one is ill, I am worried... Either way, share and listen; mean it when you say "how are you doing?" Let them know, above all else, that you are present on the road to recovery with them.

This is God's pool and God's sanctuary; may we help make it a source of comfort, strength, and camaraderie for all of God's children. In Jesus name, Amen.