

“What are we Seeking?”

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Scriptures

Matthew 2

Sermon

When I was about 14 years old, I lived on the farm with my parents and grandparents. One summer I read a newspaper article on Water Witching. I was fascinated. So, I got a book at the library and studied the subject a little more. Just deep enough to believe I was ready to give it a try by Saturday afternoon.

With my newly trusted skill in hand, I told my grandfather that I was going to try to find water somewhere around the yard. I had found a y-shaped willow branch, the best natural tool available. I skinned the branch at the end of each handle. This allows the willow branch to rotate against the palms of your tightly squeezed hands.

I launched my search by walking back and forth over the entire yard. After a number of trips, I began to wonder. Maybe this is not for real! And then on my next trek across the yard I was so startled that I froze. The willow branch was bending forward, further and further. I tried to hold the branch tighter but I could not stop the movement of the willow until it pointed to the ground. I was amazed!

I had found water by water dowsing in my own yard. I dropped the branch at the spot, then I ran to the house yelling for grandpa. Grandpa, “It worked!” I said. He was surprised but very curious. He said, “show me”. I took grandpa to the spot where I had dropped the willow branch. He looked over the yard and down at the branch. Then he looked at me with a curious smile and said: “John, you have found the septic tank.”

I guess I had good news and bad. I experienced an amazing find of water through simple water witching. The simple use of a willow branch had led me to a source of underground water. The bad news: all I really found was a lot of sewage. What are WE searching for now? And how shall we discern our findings? Maybe we should be careful of what we seek? How shall we get any direction for our search?

The story in the second chapter of Matthew holds some power for me. We see that Herod is curious and troubled by the birth of Jesus. His coming, as told by prophets, would threaten Herod’s Kingship and his authority and his power.

The birth of Jesus spoke truth to power from day one. The possible change predicted from the birth of Jesus was a challenge and an extreme threat to all authority in Judea and beyond. King Herod was the seeker. He needed to know all about the birth. And he solicited his best advisors to know his course of action.

When he was not successful at finding and destroying Jesus, he was so afraid that he killed all the male children under two years old! **Leaders can perform amazing acts of destruction when they become afraid and their power is threatened by change.**

Finding discernment the best they could, Joseph and Mary, and even the Wise Men, listened for direction, acted on faith and moved forward to find the peace they sought. After time in Egypt, Joseph returned to the land of Israel only to find out that Herod's son was ruling in Judea.

Of course he would not trust that situation, so he went to the district of Galilee. The text says: "There they made their home in the town of Nazareth." Maybe that is what we are all seeking: a place to be at home, to be without fear, to live in harmony with the community, and to live in true hope for change.

Once, there was a renowned monk who lived in a beautiful monastery with many of his pupils. His teachings were known to be very effective and many of his students grew up to become great masters themselves.

One day, a student was caught stealing from his fellow-students and they reported him to the monk. But he took no action against the boy.

A few days later the same boy was again caught stealing. And again the head monk did nothing to punish him.

This angered the other students who drew up a petition asking for the dismissal of the thief. They to leave en masse if the boy was allowed to stay in the monastery.

The teacher called a meeting of the students. When they had assembled, he said to them: "You are good boys who know what is right and what is wrong. If you leave, you will have no trouble in joining some other school. But what about your brother who does not know the difference between right and wrong? Who will teach him if we don't? No, I cannot ask him to go even if it means losing all of you."

Tears ran down the cheeks of the boy who had stolen. He never stole again and in later life became renowned for his integrity.

What does it take to create profound change? Perhaps it is only simple truth and unbridled acceptance. What if change is not that difficult? What change are we seeking? It is often easy to

suck up to power, even destructive power, in our effort to gain influence. But the gospel has a different message. A message that turns power upside down.

When we speak simple truth to challenge oppression, our voice is authentic and becomes a source of power from that truth. We do not need institutional power to change the world of sewage. As we share truth with each other, we build community. We build trust. We build a place to call home – even if it is a little place with no class like Nazareth.

I ran across a story from an inner city family: Our house was directly across the street from the entrance of a busy hospital in the city. We lived downstairs and rented the upstairs rooms to out-patients at the clinic. One summer evening there was a knock at the door. I opened it to see a truly awful looking man.

“Why, he’s hardly taller than my eight-year-old,” I thought as I stared at the stooped, shriveled body. But the appalling thing was his face—lopsided from swelling, red and raw. Yet his voice was pleasant as he said, “Good evening. I’ve come to see if you’ve a room for just one night. I came for a treatment and there’s no bus ’till the morning.”

He told me he’d been hunting for a room since noon but he had no success as no one seemed to have a room. “I guess it’s my face. I know it looks terrible, but my doctor says with a few more treatments...”

For a moment I hesitated, but his next words convinced me: “I could sleep in this rocking chair on the porch. My bus leaves early in the morning.” I told him we would find him a bed.

Over the next few years, the old man came and stayed in our house after treatments. He was a fisherman by trade and always brought us fresh fish and oysters. He once told me that my children made him feel at home. He said “grownups are bothered by my face, but children don’t seem to mind.”

The old fisherman had a heart of gold, working long hours to support his daughter and disabled husband. He was always thankful for the blessings of life.

Every time I received the old fisherman’s gift of fish and oysters, I was reminded of the comment made by my next door neighbor: “Did you keep that awful looking man last night? I turned him away. You can lose roomers that way you know.” Maybe we did, I don’t know.

Recently I was visiting a friend who has a greenhouse. As she showed me her flowers, we came to the most beautiful one of all, a golden chrysanthemum, bursting with blooms. But to my great surprise, it was growing in an old dented, rusty bucket. I thought to myself, “If this were my plant, I’d put it in the loveliest container I had!”

My friend changed my mind. “I ran short of pots,” she explained, “and knowing how beautiful this flower would be, I thought it wouldn’t mind starting out in this old rusty pail. At least until I can put it out in the garden.”

She must have wondered why I laughed so delightedly, but I was imagining a scene in heaven. “Here’s an especially beautiful one,” God might have said when he came to the soul of the sweet old fisherman. “He won’t mind living in this small distorted body.”

You see, I was waiting to see the change in the old fisherman’s face. I was hoping to see a face that looked straight and whole, improved and healed by treatment. But the change I really needed was my own perspective. Simple truth and unbridled acceptance could be the best soil to grow the most profound change.

It is both surprising and not surprising when I see the results of fearful leadership. I wonder why they feel so threatened while they are otherwise so confident of their leadership role? I am saddened by times when I see our leaders resort to oppression in efforts to maintain their power. We see oppression in so many forms: sanctions in education; reduction in free speech; institutional racism; punitive structures in criminal justice; and so on. I am saddened when our community rejects help to those in need. I am disturbed when I witness trickery and deception as tools for resolving conflicts and fear. So what am I seeking? What are you seeking?

I have a simple hope for the new year:

I am seeking new ways to speak truth and love to power and fear. We must find new ways to build community and find a place like Joseph did in Nazareth. A place to make a home.

Let’s move forward. Let’s find new challenges for change. Let’s seek new light and love.

And let us not be disillusioned when we witch for fresh water and find a tank of lumpy sewage.

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