

JUSTICE SUNDAY

Reflect, understand, and act — today and every day!



Justice Is the Human Right to Water

Building Wells Is Not Enough

A Sermon for Justice Sunday 2012

By Rev. Jim Eller

What is it like to be without water? It is hard to imagine. People need water to survive. Water is life. Water is essential to the well-being of people and virtually all life forms. We cannot live without water — but increasing numbers of people are facing water shortages, water contamination, and water scarcity. The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is committed to assuring that all people have the right to safe and affordable water.

Imagine this: There was an odd cloud off in the distance. You could see it from the hilltop as it moved to cover the entire city and the surrounding area. It looked a bit like ground fog but was not. It looked a lot like other low-lying clouds but not exactly. It seemed odd, but once it swept past there was no mistaking that this was a dust storm. It was thick. Cars drove with their lights on. Things became hazy, and it left a dirty feeling in your mouth. It went on for a couple of days and felt suffocating. Dust storms are interesting for the first three minutes — and then they are awful. Things become dirty, and you just want to run away, but there is no easy escape.

That was the only dust storm I have experienced. It occurred in 1990 as a result of relatively short-term drought conditions in the southern plains. Meteorologists said that it came from southern Kansas and was swept across Kansas and Oklahoma by strong winds and storms in the area.

A dust storm usually arrives suddenly in the form of an advancing wall of dust that may be miles long and several thousand feet high. They strike with little warning, making driving conditions hazardous. Blinding, choking dust can quickly reduce visibility, causing accidents and sometimes massive car pileups. Dust storms usually last only a few minutes, but they can last for days.

On July 5, 2011, Phoenix was hit by a massive dust storm, 5,000 feet deep and 100 miles long. On October 18, 2011, the largest dust storm in decades swept across Texas, blanketing Lubbock, turning day into night. It was 8,000 feet thick and was moving at 70 miles per hour; reports indicate it was the worst since U.S. Dust Bowl days.

The southwestern United States is currently experiencing one of the most severe droughts in U.S. climate history. Texas finished its driest 12 months ever (with an average of 8.5 inches of rain through September, nearly 13 inches below normal.) Water levels in the region's lakes have dropped by more than a dozen feet.¹

As a result of the extreme drought conditions in Texas and in parts of Oklahoma, the number of wildfires has increased dramatically. Estimates are that 6 out of 10 of the largest wildfires in Texas history occurred in 2011; those fires burned 4 million acres, destroyed 2,900 houses, and killed 10 people. This is the fourth year of extreme drought in the Southwest. Texas has been hit especially hard, but Arizona, New Mexico, and Oklahoma have also experienced serious hardships as a result of drought and wildfires.

Drought does not end at the border — it extends down into the northern region of Mexico, where 2.5 million people no longer have available water. Instead, they've had to truck water in for human consumption. According to Social Development Secretary Heriberto Felix Guerra, 1,500 communities in northern Mexico were without water in the fall of 2011). He said, "The water we truck in does not take into account crop failure or cattle losses."²

Given the circumstances of prolonged extreme to exceptional drought, losses of drinking water and dust storms are to be expected, and forecasts for the coming year do not indicate relief in the Southwest.

Dry periods in the Southwest are not unusual, but we are seeing more extreme and prolonged drought than at anytime in recorded climate history — the consequences of climate change and global warming. Weather is becoming more variable and intensified. A warmer atmosphere means warmer weather and a warmer ocean. A warmer ocean means changes in climate patterns, such as La Niña. It means more evaporation and more water in the air. So there are more floods, more droughts, more tornadoes, and more numerous and more intense hurricanes.

In his book *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*, Bill McKibben says that the world we have known is no longer the world in which we are living. We now live on a different planet than the one that has existed for the last 10,000 years. We no longer can depend on our Earth in the same ways we have. We now inhabit a different Earth, which he calls "Eaarth." It looks a lot like the old planet, but our weather is not and will not be the same as it has been. This is taking place as a result of the increasing amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. We used to believe that the tipping point for the initiation of negative reinforcing mechanisms with our climate would be around 500 to 550 parts per million. New evidence indicates that it takes place

² Daniel Tovar, "Mexico's Worst Drought Ever is Getting Worse," *International Business Times*, December 2, 2011, accessed January 6, 2012, <http://m.ibtimes.com/mexico-drought-260497.html>.

¹ *Huffington Post*, accessed December 5, 2011.

at 350 part per million of CO₂ — and we have now reached 390 parts per million, says James Hansen, one of the leading climate experts in the world.³

While some of the science of when and how climate change will affect us all is still being worked out, the general direction of climate change is evident. It will mean less dependable water resources among other things. Entire regions in our world have depended upon glacial ice as a water resource. Scientists estimate that many of these glaciers will be entirely gone within 10 years. Climate change means that some places will have far too little rain. Other parts of the world will experience flooding because of rising sea levels, while others will have too much rain. Overall, the number of people living without reasonable access to safe and affordable water will significantly increase.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, “an increasing number of regions are chronically short of water. By 2025, 1.8 million people will be living in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity, and two-thirds of the world population could be under stress conditions.”⁴ With increasing numbers of people living with water stress and uncertainty, we have a public health crisis and a humanitarian concern of alarming proportions.

Can you imagine being without adequate water for your survival? Can you imagine a world in which the only water available to you was not necessarily safe to drink? For those of us in the United States, where we take water safety and availability pretty much for granted, it is a bit hard to imagine no water running from our taps. Some people may have an inkling of what it is like to be without water, having experienced a drought and, along with that, limited forms of water rationing. Some of us may remember a time when we were not able to wash our cars or water our lawns, but there are many places in the world where communities are running out of water or do not have safe or affordable water. Imagine being without access to reasonably safe water to drink — and remember your life depends upon having water to drink.

There are many people and agencies that are acting together and independently to address these concerns about environmental justice and the human right to water. In an interview with Rev. Jim Eller, David Stevenson — the director of Engineers in Action, a nonprofit organization working to increase safe and affordable water supplies in Bolivia — shared that on average a Bolivian walks a distance of 1.1 miles to reach a source of water. Not all the water they find is even safe to drink.

As a spiritual practice, an act of solidarity, and a personal way of increasing his own awareness, David fasts once a

³ Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 15.

⁴ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Coping with Water Scarcity: Challenge of the Twenty-First Century*, accessed January 4, 2012, <http://www.fao.org/nr/water/docs/escarcity.pdf>, 10.

month. During that 36-hour period, he eats nothing and drinks only water. To get a bit closer to the experience of people in our world who live with water stress or scarcity, he taints his water, not with bacteria or industrial contaminants, but with pepper. He buys a melon-flavored mineral water that tastes awful alone; with pepper and bitter herbs, it is nearly undrinkable. So, when he fasts, he finds himself getting thirsty. He wants a drink — until he takes one and experiences how awful it is. When he gets thirsty, he drinks less and less; when he drinks, he feels like he is consuming something almost toxic. Now he begins to have a hint how millions of people in the world experience a lack of safe and available drinking water. Once a year all of the staff and volunteers of Engineers in Action share in this ritual of water solidarity.

While this is a spiritual exercise for Stevenson, it is a reality for many people in our world — except the contaminants are not melon flavoring, pepper, and herbs, but rather dirt, bacteria, and dangerous pollutants. Imagine trying to go without water for a day or imagine fasting and drinking only doctored water. Imagine if the only water you or your children could drink was not safe to drink. Imagine being without water.

UUSC has made a commitment to the human right to water. By working with international partner organizations, UUSC works to enhance the equitable access to safe and affordable water for all people. On a global scale, UUSC is a relatively small organization. It is not the United Nations, the International Red Cross, or Oxfam, but it is a visionary and effective organization. As a UUSC volunteer said recently, “UUSC does not build all of the wells the world needs, although we contribute to the building of many. What we really are about is making sure that, once a well is built in a community, everyone has a right to share in the water it brings forth.” UUSC is dedicated to advancing human rights and social justice — and defending the human right to water is central to environmental justice.

Climate change is going to put more and more people at risk for water scarcity or water stress. In the face of this tremendous challenge, certain sentiments come to mind: “What happens to the least of these, happens to me,” and “There but for fortune go you and I.” People without enough water are people who had the misfortune of being born at the wrong time or in the wrong place. It could have been any one of us, and in a decade or so, it will be some of us. If it were you or one of your family members without safe water, how would you want others in the world to respond? As human beings face the unprecedented realities of climate change, how do we want to respond? Hopefully we and others will respond with the realization that every human being is a person of dignity, a child of God, a holder of the divine spark of life, a piece of the whole human fabric.

We will be stronger as a world community if we act together, if we stand in community with the “least of these.” We will be more resilient as a species. We will experience fewer losses. We will have greater humanity — if we act for and with each other.

UUSC is committed to making sure that every person, independent of class, race, gender, location, or religion, has access to safe and affordable water that is adequate for their survival. UUSC has been working to make water safe and more accessible in places throughout the world, such as in Guatemala, South Africa, and Ecuador.

In Guatemala, a large mining corporation is extracting gold in the Guatemalan highlands. They have a government permit to mine there, but they are also mining on lands belonging to Sipakapense indigenous people without fully informing them or receiving the Sipakapense people’s permission to mine. Marlin Mining and its Canadian owner GoldCorp are operating in direct violation of international treaties protecting the rights of indigenous people. Violating a native people’s right to govern themselves and their lands is bad enough, but the mining is also causing the contamination of their water supplies.

Patricia Jones, manager of UUSC’s Environmental Justice Program reports the following: The mine is using a processing methodology banned in both the U.S. and Canada — cyanide leaching. The mine, like most mining in the world, uses vast quantities of water in the processing facility. The water is extracted from groundwater reserves, causing many local springs to dry and creating conflicts between small villages as their sources of water dry up. The process contaminates the water used, and these ‘tailings’ are held in a huge tailings pond on the Sipakapense lands. The tailings will be contaminated for millennia.

Given these facts, UUSC has partnered with two organizations working on the Marlin Mine, the Pastoral Commission for Peace and Ecology and the San Marcos diocese with Bishop Ramazzini’s support. Research and pursuant technical reports have shown water degradation. Jones notes, “The project reports are released to the communities, the public, governmental authorities, and the mine annually. The mine was roundly criticized for lack of reporting on water quality. Since the project started, the mine has established a community water-quality monitoring project that reports; the mine has released some limited reports; and the Guatemalan government has conducted some monitoring at the site. But the impacts of this project do not stop at reporting internally in Guatemala — three universities in the United States and Europe have begun to study the impacts of the mine, and have released reports. Shareholders passed a resolution requiring the mine to conduct a human-rights impact assessment, which was completed by the mine and made public in 2010. The Guatemalan Congress has begun an investigation and established a Transparency Commission. A new mining law has been presented to Congress.

Jones continues, UUSC supports the Sipakapenses to bring a legal case against the mine and the Guatemalan government for violation of their indigenous and human rights. The Sipakapenses have a case currently in the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights. The Commission ordered the Guatemalan government to require the mine to cease operations based in part on the degradation of the water quality and overextraction of water.”

So, as you can hear from all that Jones shared, UUSC is making a difference defending water quality and our precious human and environmental resources. Everyone has a right to safe and affordable water — it is a matter of life and death. The work in Guatemala is just one example of how UUSC is protecting the human right to water. There are many projects under way that reflect this commitment to water equity.

Every one of us is a part of the human community, and we human beings are experiencing new and profound challenges as people and as a species. How do you want to act? How do you want to respond? UUSC wants to make sure that every person has access to safe and affordable water. Digging a well is not enough to ensure water access. Wells have to be maintained to guarantee water, and human rights must be respected to make sure that every person has access to safe and affordable water. These are issues to which the UUSC is deeply committed. So choose to contribute to equitable access to water and to human dignity. Support UUSC in its work for water justice. Form a small group of concerned friends to monitor the water quality and availability in your city or region. Water matters, and the life it sustains matters — so join the struggle for the human right to water today.

UUSC Children’s Focus: Ryan’s Well and the Human Right to Water

Addressed to the children in attendance

What do you have in your home that many people in the world do not have?

Addressed to the full congregation

There are lots of right answers to this question, like a television, a car, a computer, and home heating and air conditioning. Less likely to occur to us is safe and affordable running water.

We take safe drinking water for granted. Tap water is such a given for most kids in the United States — and almost all Unitarian Universalist children — that it can be hard to imagine that other children in the world could be without safe drinking water. It’s almost like trying to imagine being without food or even air. We assume we’ll always have clean water, and we are indeed blessed to have safe and affordable water — but millions of kids and families in the world don’t. Water means a healthier and more secure life for us, but this is not true for too many children.

When one Unitarian Universalist religious education group was studying the human right to water and how to help create a greener world, they discovered the story of Ryan's Well®.¹ Ryan was a young person who wanted to make a difference for others once he realized that other kids didn't have access to safe and abundant water. He single-handedly raised enough money for a well to be dug in Uganda. As a result of his enthusiasm and commitment, hundreds of wells have been created. He even founded his own organization — a lot for a young person to do.

In the UU congregation I mentioned, Troy, a second grader, was so moved by Ryan's story that she asked parents and kids coming to her birthday party not to bring gifts but instead to make contributions toward a well. For her birthday, she raised enough money to create a well.

And building wells is important — but bringing safe and affordable water to all people takes more than that. Wells need to be taken care of, and some require energy to run. People need good sanitation as well as community water resources. To make a lasting difference, we need to not only help build wells but also support organizations, like UUSC, that help make sure everyone can use the wells once they are constructed. If governments aren't doing their job and providing safe water for all people — no matter where they live and who they are — then UUSC works with community members and other organizations to make sure that changes.

UUSC is taking action to achieve the goal of clean water for everyone. That is what the human right to water is about: safe, affordable, accessible water for daily human needs. [Count off on five fingers and repeat with the children to reinforce the U.N. definition of the human right to water: 1 = safe; 2 = affordable; 3 = accessible; 4 = water; 5 = for daily human needs.]

Biography of Rev. Jim Eller

Rev. Jim Eller is a Unitarian Universalist, social activist, and cofounder of the UU Seventh Principle Project (now Earth Ministries). Eller founded the Northeastern Oklahoma Environmental Network, which was pivotal in establishing the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality. A passionate supporter of UUSC, he is the emeritus minister of All Souls UU Church in Kansas City, the vice president of the UU Retired Minister's Association, and recent past chair of the UU Ministers Advisory Council on Congregation-Based Community Organizing.

Water by Wendell Berry

I was born in a drought year. That summer
my mother waited in the house, enclosed
in the sun and the dry ceaseless wind,
for the men to come back in the evenings,
bringing water from a distant spring.
Veins of leaves ran dry, roots shrank.
And all of my life I have dreaded the return
of that year, sure that it still is
somewhere, like a dead enemy's soul. Fear
of dust is in my mouth is always with me,
and I am the faithful husband of the rain,
I love the water of wells and springs
and the taste of roofs in the water cisterns.
I am a dry man whose thirst is praise
of clouds, and whose mind is something of a cup.
My sweetness is to wake in the night
after days of heat, hearing the rain.

From *Farming: A Handbook* (1970). Reprinted with permission.

Suggested Hymns and Readings

Hymns

Singing the Living Tradition

#110, "Come, Children of Tomorrow"

#21, "For the Beauty of the Earth"

#175, "We Celebrate the Web of Life"

#174, "O Earth, You Are Surpassing Fair"

#159, "This Is My Song"

Singing the Journey

#1021, "Lean on Me"

Readings

Singing the Living Tradition

#478, "A Prayer of Sorrow"

#651, "The Body Is Humankind," by Norman Cousins

#662, "Strange and Foolish Walls," by A. Powell Davies