

"The Fruit Jar"

(EXODUS 17:1-7 NIV) *The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ²So they quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?" ³But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" ⁴Then Moses cried out to the Lord, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵The Lord answered Moses, "Walk on*

ahead of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

(MATTHEW 5:6 NRSV) *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."*

Some of my earliest memories are of riding on my Daddy's cotton sack. I *think* I remember that. I do know that when I look at my mother's family album, some of the earliest photos of me were taken in the cotton field. I see the pictures, and I *think* I remember.

In 1949 I went with my cousin's family to go camping in New Mexico, and on the way out we spent a couple of days on my uncle Miley's farm, out past Ranger, Texas. It was "pickin' season," and my uncle offered my cousin and me, I think it was, a nickel a sack if we'd join in the pickin'. I remembered those pictures in the family album, and I figured it was in my blood. A nickel a bag: I figured twenty, twenty-five bags a day for two days... That ought to keep me in candy bars and chewing gum for the rest of the trip.

Do you know how heavy a cotton sack can get? It's just cotton, right? Just a big pillow, right? Well, let me tell you, those little ol' pieces of white fluff can pack pretty tight! A full sack of cotton was supposed to weigh 200 pounds! And fillin' one up was like filling a 55-gallon oil drum with water—using a tea spoon. In two days, I think I picked enough cotton—maybe—to fill a bag-and-a-half!

My shoulders and back ached, my hands were cut and bleeding; but the thing I remember most about picking cotton was the thirst.

Aunt Avis packed our lunches—leftover biscuits and sausage from breakfast—and she put them in flour sacks. And we took water in quart fruit jars. There was no ice, but the well was deep, and the water was cool. Then we all piled onto the wagon and Uncle Miley cranked up the Farmal and towed us out to the field.

We left the fruit jars with our lunches in the shade of the wagon, so the water would stay as cool as possible.

We'd walk out several rows from the wagon and start. The rows were 25 miles long—uphill, both ways! But I guarantee it wasn't snowing that day! It was hot! And dry! And dusty! And the cotton fuzz flew around my face and got in my nose... And the thirst hit about half-way out the first row.

My mouth was dry from the dust and the cotton fuzz; I needed to swallow, but my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth; the heat radiated up for the earth, and the sun beat down on my back, and it wasn't even eight o'clock, yet.

Finally, we reached the end of that first row and turned back toward the wagon. It was barely visible on the horizon.

My tongue began to swell inside my mouth, and all I could think about was the fruit jar under the wagon. The wagon seemed to move with us: we walked and picked and walked and picked, and I'd look up and the wagon seemed no closer than before. And everybody was ahead of me!

I finally returned to the wagon, and I let the strap fall from my shoulder and headed for the wagon, and my fruit jar. I fell to my knees and picked it up. It was still cool to the touch. My hands trembled as I unscrewed the lid; and, thirsty as I was, I was careful to put down the lid so as not to get dirt in it. And, finally, I lifted the fruit jar to my parched lips and felt the cool wetness slide down my dehydrated tongue; my hot throat "sizzled" as the water hit it, and in the background I could hear the "Sons of the Pioneers" singing: "Cool, clear water."

Coke may call itself "the real thing"; but when you're really thirsty—*really thirsty*—nothing satisfies like "cool, clear, water."

The people of scripture knew the value of water. When the Children of Israel were led out of Egyptian bondage the first obstacle they encountered was water. And God parted the waters so they could cross on dry ground.

And the most frequent obstacle before them also involved water. They were thirsty: the water from the rock at Rephidim; the bitter waters of Marah; and again the water from the rock at Kadesh. And they wandered forty years in the wilderness, where thirst was a daily issue.

And in that dry land water continued to be a major concern for those people. It formed their values. The Psalmist wrote: "... *like a dry, worn-out, and waterless land, my soul is thirsty for you*" (PSALM 63:1 GNB).

So it's no surprise that Jesus used water as a frequent metaphor for the most important aspects of the relationship between God and humanity:

- JOHN 7:37 (GNB) *"Whoever is thirsty should come to me, and whoever believes in me should drink. As the scripture says, 'Streams of life-giving water will pour out from his side.'"*
- JOHN 6:35 (GNB) *"I am the bread of life. Those who come to me will never be hungry; those who believe in me will never be thirsty."*

- **MARK 9:41 (GNB)** *“I assure you that anyone who gives you a drink of water because you belong to me will certainly receive a reward.”*

Kinda' gives a whole deeper meaning to the act of baptism, doesn't it? ...and of Jesus walking on the water.

And in the Sermon on the Mount—the first public teaching reported by Matthew—Jesus says, *“Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness! For they shall be filled.* MATTHEW 5:6 (NKJV)

People who live in Las Vegas know what it means to be thirsty—really thirsty. Do you know what it means to thirst after righteousness?

Thomas Bandy says the largest and fastest growing spiritual population in North America is the “Spiritually yearning, institutionally disillusioned public.” They're spiritually thirsty; but institutional religion hasn't quenched that thirst.

According to every poll in the last 25 years, 95% of North Americans believe in God; but fewer than $\frac{1}{4}$ of them are actively involved in any organized expression of Christianity. And of the 24% who are actively involved in a faith community, less than 1/3 of them will be in attendance at any given gathering. And for the first time in American history, Christians are not the majority among faith communities.

“Spiritually thirsting; but institutionally disillusioned.” I believe they are among those Jesus had in mind when he said, *“Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness! For they shall be filled.*

And when Jesus said, *“I assure you that anyone who gives you a drink of water because you belong to me will certainly receive a reward,”* I believe today's application of that statement would picture us reaching out to that “spiritually yearning, institutionally disillusioned” public. And here's their disillusionment: *IN THEIR PERCEPTION*, the water we offer has become contaminated. And they stereotype all Christians and all Churches on the basis of the image that predominates the media: television evangelists, Westboro Baptist Church, the “Prosperity Gospel”... *IN THEIR PERCEPTION*, all religion fits that stereotype: judgmental, materialistic, homophobic, exclusive and hypocritical. Their perception defines our ministry.

It's not enough for the church to say, “They know where we are. If they want to come, they'll come.” Jesus did not teach a “Field of Dreams” theology: “If you build it, they will come.” The church has tried that for the last fifty years. It hasn't worked. Jesus was very clear: “Go out into the highways and the byways and bring them in.” Because they're thirsty. Our task, while I am with you, is to examine the water we offer, to make sure it's pure.