

Gathering the Waters: Our Church Community

Story: Here Because of You

One day, so the story goes, the Mulla Nasrudin, the Sufi wise fool, was walking slowly home along a lonely road. Night was falling as he heard the sound of horses hooves and spied a troop of horsemen coming toward him. His imagination began to work, and he feared that they might rob him, or force him into the army. So strong did this fear become that he leaped over a wall and found himself in a graveyard. The other travellers, innocent of any such motive as had been assumed by Nasrudin, became curious and pursued him.

When they peered over the wall and saw him lying motionless, one said, "Can we help you? And, if you don't mind me asking, why on earth are you here in this position?"

Nasrudin, realizing his mistake said, "Aahh ... it is more complicated than you might assume. You see, I am here because of you; and you, you are here because of me."

Address:

I wonder how many of us have had problems with plumbing in the last year – dripping taps, leaking showers or radiators? We've experienced all of these here at Essex Church in the last year – not to mention the leaking roof. I remember a plumber I knew years ago, called Derek who used to do that slow intake of breath when called to assess a plumbing problem, beloved of builders the world over – 'Sarah' he'd say – 'water will always find a way' – and then add, after a suitable pause – 'a way to annoy you!' – and then roar with laughter. And it's that quality of water – its ability to find a way and its seeming eagerness to find a way to join up with other water that this address will focus upon.

I've been here at Essex Church for four years now, four years and two weeks of living in central London - long enough to get some sense of the effect it has on us to live in such a busy and crowded place, in which so many people are moving in and out, a place in which so many people are wheeling suitcases or carrying big bags. London, like many other capital cities, is a place of transitions and all these transitions touch those who live here. On some days I feel London's buzz and energy, its excitement and rich variety. On other days it is all too much and I yearn for everyone to slow down and quieten down.

And for me that's where a church like ours has something to offer. This is a place for people to stop for a while, to re-charge their batteries, to connect with like minds and like souls. And how glad I am that we don't just keep this building for ourselves – that we actually put a fair bit of staff time and effort into allowing other groups to use this place for their own activities and as a base for their communities.

This week alone there has been a rich assortment of groups here – regular yoga and tai chi classes, the Aetherius Society were here on Friday night joining up with the Interfaith Seminary at one of their universal spirit gatherings, which focused on the power of prayer; the liberal Jewish group had their regular meeting as did the Buddhist meditators, the Hindu chanters, the Sufis and the Eritrean refugee group, the toddlers football class, the healing circle, the analytical psychologists – the list goes on. We could book this place three times over on some evenings of the week and this tells us a few things:

- It tells us that we are lucky to have a building in central London
- It tells us that there are many groups that get together that need a place to meet
- It tells us that Kensington Unitarians have a role to perform

Anyone who has ever been seriously thirsty, particularly in a hot and isolated place will know how scary that can be. If you have known thirst you will also have experienced the relief when someone offers you a drink of water. There is nothing that tastes quite so refreshing as water in such a moment. And here in London I have come to think that many are thirsty – thirsty for community and for connection. In a small village or a quiet street, where people do not move away very often you are likely to be known by the people around you, by shopkeepers and neighbours. I have lived in a small country village – and I know it's not an experience to romanticise – it is not, as they say, everybody's cup of tea. Lots of us choose to live

in a city with all the facilities that such a place has to offer. And looking around us all here today I know that some of you have the good fortune to live in remarkably settled areas of this city, areas where you are known, where people stop to talk in the street with one another. But this is not the norm here in our busy metropolis – and because of that – here in our church community we have a particular set of tasks to perform.

We make a difference every time we show up here at church on a Sunday morning because we are adding our strength and resources to this our shared community.

We have the power to change other people's lives, just by the way that we greet them and make them feel welcome here. Three people this week have mentioned to me that the reason they stayed here or came back here was because of the welcome they received – a smile, a friendly word, an offer of support, a suggestion of an activity to join in with, someone who actually remembered their name and where they came from. It sounds a small thing doesn't it, to have someone remember your name but let's not underestimate its power - to be known by name in an anonymous city can make a difference to someone's day. Nor let's forget the conscious effort it takes to remember someone's name when next we meet them. So thank you to all of you who make these efforts with those who walk through our doors each week.

In the programmes we are running here we are creating Essex Church as a centre of creativity and spiritual exploration; it's a place where people are free to ask questions, to explore the nature of belief, to support one another in going deeper. And that going deeper is what is needed to counteract the prevailing feeling of transition in our world. We need to put down some deep roots and find those well springs that Anthony de Mello spoke of in our reading earlier on – that is the way to find those living waters, the sources of nourishment to strengthen us on life's journey. And strength is the reward for joining together in community – for together so much more can be achieved. There is a lot to do to improve our society as Elie Wiesel so eloquently puts it in the quotation on the front of your order of service sheet:

'This is the duty of our generation as we enter the twenty-first century -- solidarity with the weak, the persecuted, the lonely, the sick, and those in despair. It is expressed by the desire to give a noble and humanizing meaning to a community in which all members will define themselves not by their own identity but by that of others.'

In modern life we have the challenge and the privilege of belonging to many communities – no longer defined solely by membership of just one tribe or group. We have the privilege of choice – shall I join this, or this, or this? We have the freedom to move on if a community no longer seems to meet our needs. And we have the challenge that such freedom brings – the challenge of staying put, of putting down roots, of then coming to terms with the difficulties that will inevitably emerge – for no human endeavour is without its problems. But the rewards of engaging with the difficulties of community are great, I think, because then life is real. We are here in a community and what do you know – some people annoy us, some people ignore us, some people do too much and some do too little – and there are always too many jobs to be done by too few willing hands.

But together much is possible – that is the power of community, to achieve more than could be achieved by us as separate individuals. And here in our church community we are called to serve the wider community of which we are part, to offer an opportunity for connection, a chance to partake of spiritual refreshment and perhaps to put down some roots and to build a sense of ownership of this place and this people, and a sense of truly belonging - for love like water always finds a way and how good it can be to be able to say – paraphrasing Nasdrudin in the story we heard earlier on – *we are here because of one other.* Amen

'Gathering the Waters' Ceremony:

And so it is time now for our ceremony in which you are invited to line up and pour a little water into this common bowl and to speak briefly about what this represents for you. You might say where the water came from if you brought it back from your travels, or pour some water from this jug and tells us its meaning in your life. Some people have been far away this summer; many of us have stayed at home. As we pour the water let's remember its symbolism – from the vast expanses of our globe that are coloured blue by the great oceans, from the rivers and streams that bring life giving water to the land, the rain clouds in the sky, the water that pours so freely from our taps yet is still not freely available to most of the world's population, the water that makes up our bodies and that flows as our tears. Water connects us all and in that spirit I pour a first few drops to remember all the people in our church community who cannot be here today and who would like to be remembered by us all.

Words to bless the waters at the end: I give thanks for the gift of life and for the spirit that connects us all. May we in this community know our good fortune and work tirelessly to create our church as a place of welcome and sanctuary. Amen.