

February 20, 2022
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
A Deeper Well: “Going to the Source”
Rev. Emma Nickel
Genesis 29:1-14

The source is where it all begins. It’s the root of things. This truth was illustrated in a disturbing, but powerful, way in 1854 when John Snow was studying the cholera epidemic in London, England. This was in the years just prior to the germ theory emerging. Then, people thought that illness came from foul air or that it had mystical origins. Snow, however, was an early public health researcher. He took a look at exactly *who* was getting sick in London. It wasn’t everyone. There seemed to be clusters of disease in certain pockets of the city. Snow looked deeper into the mystery and realized that everyone getting cholera was sourcing their water from one particular well. He told city officials to remove the handle from the Broad Street water pump and the disease would disappear from the neighborhood. No one believed him at first. But Snow insisted. Finally, when the city took Snow’s advice and removed the Broad Street pump handle, residents were forced to source their water from other wells. And soon, cholera *did* disappear from their neighborhood. Snow was right, of course! The Broad Street well was contaminated. It was the source of cholera. This powerful discovery kicked off the modern sanitation movement and Snow’s story is still one of the first teachings in schools of public health.¹

Now, I know I took a risk by telling you a story about a *contaminated* well today. But I did it to show us the power of the source. When the source is contaminated, people are harmed. But when we are certain that the source is good and life-giving, then all who receive its gifts benefit mightily.

Many relationships in the Bible find the source of their love at a well. The family of Jacob and Rachel found its source at the well, too. This well bound the nearby community together. That might be true of all wells, which often serve as a gathering place for the people who go there to draw water. But this well was a place the shepherds gathered in order to water their flocks of sheep. This well was covered by a very, very large stone. The stone was so large that, only when all the shepherds were gathered together, could they remove it to let the sheep have a drink. This system of communal access to

¹Theodore H. Tulchinsky, “John Snow, Cholera, the Broad Street Pump; Waterborne Diseases Then and Now,” *Case Studies in Public Health* 2018, 77-99, published online March 30, 2018.

²“3.Nadine Burke Harris: What Your Childhood Means for Your Health,” *Everything Happens with Kate Bowler podcast*, August 31, 2021, Season 7, episode 3.

the water protected fair access to the source of life, ensuring that no one took more than their share.

When Jacob saw Rachel approach the well with her flock, it seems he immediately fell in love. So much so, that Jacob broke the community norm. He didn't wait until all the shepherds were there to water their flocks. Instead, he rushed to help Rachel, hoisting the heavy stone off the well by himself so she could water her flock of sheep before everyone else. Then the two kissed, and Jacob's love blossomed. (We hope Rachel's did, too, though the scripture doesn't tell us her perspective.) Their love found its beginning at the well.

The church itself is something like a well - a place we come to find the love that is our source of life and relationships. The love we find here is not romantic love. In this place, we encounter the love of our ultimate source - our God. And in this place, we fall in love with ordinary, saintly sinners. Which means people like you and me. This community is by no means perfect at remembering the goodness of God's love or at sharing that love. But beautiful expressions of it emerge all the time. And when they do, it can feel like the well overflowing - with needs met, broken hearts cared for, and friendships nurtured. These are just some recent examples:

- A couple of months ago, a few friends in the church partnered to feed a family who was keeping vigil at their loved one's side before he died. Those friends shared financial resources and the gift of cooking and hospitality to provide for their brothers and sisters during a hard time.
- There is a church member who, every few months, and sometimes more often, brings a huge carload of canned goods and food for the Little Free Pantry. She never wants any recognition. We are always overwhelmed by her generosity and her quiet act of love.
- Our church has a prayer circle, which is a group of Deacons, Stephen Ministers, and other church members who pray for the needs of our church family and friends. Every day of the week, there is at least one person who prays for the people on our list. They know the names and they watch the updates on the list as situations change. They grieve with those who grieve and they rejoice with those who rejoice. Many who have been prayed for say they have experienced God's love and presence through those prayers.
- Recently, we were able to connect church members who'd experienced some mental health struggles with someone currently going through them. When the world seems full of shadows, when shame and doubt feel like they are winning out, knowing you are not alone in your struggles is a huge gift of love.
- Even financial giving is a way we share love. This church has a high percentage of people who are active members who also make a

financial pledge to the church. Probably the highest of any church I've been a part of. Nearly everyone who attends worship on a regular basis also pledges in some amount. That is a huge gift and it shows how we both experience and share God's love, which is the source of our lives. This year, we are all invited to think about how we can dig just a little deeper. Either by making a pledge for the first time, similar to the average pledge in our congregation of about \$2500 each year. Or, by adding \$25 per month to your previous pledge. If you're remembering that many of us increased our gifts last year, too, you're right! Yet we also remember that God's well is deep and our gratitude runs deep. So we seek to give to God and the church in proportion to that gratitude, which is ever deepening.

Just like in all these examples, we keep our well - this church - pure and flowing when we reflect God's love and share it widely in this community. Our well has the power to be a source of healing for us and for everyone who visits it.

Nadine Burke Harris researches the power of love and loving relationships.² She studies adverse childhood experiences, which include all kinds of hard things like growing up in a family where there's substance abuse, incarceration of a parent, divorce, medical trauma, and domestic violence. Harris' research shows how these situations often have a negative influence on the child's spiritual, physical, and emotional health throughout our lives. Which is not great news, since these experiences are so much more common than we'd like. But just as powerful is what her research shows as the antidote to these experiences: love! When children, or the adults they grow into, are surrounded by love, their lives shift. When they enter stable, loving environments, when they are nurtured and frequently reminded of their worth and dignity, it buffers the negative impact of their early experiences. Love helps heal those hurting places in their lives. Truly, love wins.

In this community, when we nurture each other well, when we remind our neighbors that they are loved just as they are, even though none of us are perfect, then we buffer all the other bad stuff we're going through. We help ease the pain of loss for the person sitting next to us. We remind the people on the prayer list that they do not suffer alone. We teach our children that it's not just their parents that love them, but they have an entire community who know their names, their interests, and who love them for who they are.

When love is our source, the hardships of our lives are not erased, but they are often eased. When love is in our well, our lives find their worth in God and we share that dignity with others. The source of our lives - our God - is love itself. That love is powerful enough to shape us and our community into life-giving, love-filled people. For all the gifts we find at God's well, we say, thanks be to God. Amen.