

## Water as a Spiritual Practice for Lent

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As we start Lent, I want to suggest to the UCC Churches in Southern California / Nevada Conference to engage in water conservation as a spiritual practice. It is a Lenten practice that the church as a community might engage as well as individual congregants. Practicing water as a spiritual discipline for Lent is even more meaningful for those Christians in Southern California / Nevada Conference of the UCC at a period of severe drought.

Let me start from a quotation from the North African Christian author, Tertullian (160-225 C.E.), writing in a sermon on Jesus' baptism, "Christ is never without water."

[http://www.tertullian.org/articles/souter\\_orat\\_bapt/souter\\_orat\\_bapt\\_04baptism.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/articles/souter_orat_bapt/souter_orat_bapt_04baptism.htm)

Water is the Earth's blood, its vitality, and water then becomes literally part of our blood flowing through our bodies and most of other life.

Water is the means of cleansing, spiritual and physical. We bathe or shower in water, we wash ourselves in water. We swim in water. We play in water. Water not only purifies objects for ritual use in many religions, but it can make a person clean, externally or spiritually, ready to come into the presence of God. Almost all Christians use water for the sacrament of baptism where we die into Christ with the hope of being resurrected with Christ.

Water is a human right issue; more than a billion people have no access to clean water. This year is the last year of the UN Decade of Action for Water for Life.

[http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/human\\_right\\_to\\_water.shtml](http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/human_right_to_water.shtml) Frank Turner, a Jesuit priest develops four themes to eco-justice of water: water as life and death, water as a human right, water as a common good, and water as a scarce resource related to conflict. <http://www.ecojesuit.com/water-in-catholic-social-teaching/5691/> Both documents from the internet highlight how important water is to life. Water justice can become a study focus for church groups, along with water imagery in the bible. In a recent sermon on the baptism of Jesus, I traced a number of gospel stories on Jesus related to water. There are numerous references, especially, in John's Gospel. This can be part of a spiritual practice for study and prayer for Lent.

Edward Echlin--an English eco-theologian—draws an insight from the baptism of Jesus.

When Jesus enters the Jordan, the waters and creatures dependent upon water, are sanctified by the presence of God's word made flesh. All waters are connected—water is like the blood of the earth. All waters are cosmic Jordan. All waters are Jordanized, sanctified, recreated, when the Spirit again moves of the waters at the Jordan at Jesus' baptism. Edward Echlin, *The Cosmic Christ*, Dublin, The Columba Press, 2004, p. 78.

The cosmic Christ is ever connected to water. When we realize that Christ is in every drop of water that falls to the Earth, waters the soil for plants and sustains animal life, and our bodies contain 65% - 70% water, it is easy to envision how Jesus speaks of "living water" to the Samaritan woman at the well. We understand Jesus' metaphor as the living water as God's unconditional love and grace of eternal life.

God gives Jesus to the world as the water of life, and Jesus offers himself to the world as the living water. This living water figuratively represents an unconditional blessing that reproduces itself, and like a spring, it is never exhausted. Christ, in the people suffering from water poverty, is still begging for something to drink, for water and for the living water. Are we willing to share a cup of living water? In the upcoming season of Lent, as we deny ourselves comforts in order to feel the pain of others, may we come up with practical ways of standing in solidarity with the many who are still crying, give us water ... the living water! We might practice a little further personal restraint in our over consumption of water. The average American uses more than a 100 gallons per day while the Navajo uses 7 gallons. We overconsume and often waste the way we use.

Water was scarce in Jesus' day, yet water was as much a necessity for life then as it is today. Half of the world's population today lives in arid regions where water is not readily available, nor clean water accessible. Just as the physical body needs water to continue living so does humanity and all life need the water of the Spirit.

This Lent can we engage in spiritual water practices, envisioning that each drop of water contains the cosmic Christ. Water conservation can be used a spiritual practice this Lent to come closer to Christ. Here are some suggestions to stimulate your imagination and your practice. I divide the practices for the Church, serving the greater community, and for individual members of the UCC church.

### **Spiritual Water Practice of the Church**

We can do some simple things to conserve water as a church. We at MCC United Church of Christ looked at rebates that the water utilities (LA Department of Power and Water) offered and replaced all the toilets in the church with high efficiency low flush toilets. We received a rebate of \$250 per toilet after they were installed (you need a building permit and licensed plumber to receive the rebate). The rebate covered the cost of our six toilets, and the only costs were for the plumber and the building permit. This resulted in saving 500 gallons per toilet or 3000 gallons of water per year, and on a practical level, it saved monies on our water bills and have certainly paid for themselves in less than a year. We did the same with rebates in replacing our urinals with Eco-blue computerized mechanism that reduced the number of flushes of the urinals with significant savings and use natural bacteria to remove any odors.

On another level of water conservation practice, we installed three fifty gallon rain barrels to harvest the water when it rains. You can secure them for reduced rates from the Tree People or other organizations that offer them periodically. You can also order them online. They provide a means of irrigating our garden around the church. We have a wonderful and surprising church garden for an urban setting (and all the plants have been donated) with desert landscape and other plants as well. During the summer months, the rain barrels fill completely every two weeks from the condensation water from our air conditioning units. Thus we recycle the moisture into watering our gardens. We as a church community adhere to the public guidelines for what days each week we may water our gardens.

### **A Church Water Practice for the Greater Community**

One of the wonderful events we hosted and partnered with the Business Council of North Hollywood was a Bio-Diversity and Water Conservation workshop from 10 AM to 3 PM on a Saturday with a number of organizations: The Tree People (<http://www.treepeople.org/>), the Theodore Payne Society, (<http://theodorepayne.org/>); LA Department of Water, and the LA River Restoration Project. (<http://www.theriverproject.org/>) We attracted more than a hundred folks from the community to the day's events of booths and workshop presentations. The Department of Water had handouts on how to reduce water usage and distributed for free five minute shower timers. Free indigenous California plants and trees were distributed. (It was an occasion to demonstrate that our church cares for conservation and the Earth)

One of the significant workshops was two sessions of how to remove your lawn and to landscape with native California plants and trees that use far less water than grass lawns. Several of our folks and others have used municipal rebates to replace their lawns with semi-arid landscapes and plants. These provide wonderful landscapes for any homeowner to show off, and you received a rebate per foot of lawn replaced. These native plants used also support California birds and helpful insects. This teaches how to co-live with our semi-arid environment and to conserve water.

We plan another such day of community workshops on water conservation within the next two months. And this has the added benefit to introduce our church to the greater community as a "green" or earth-centered community.

## **Individual Spiritual Water Practices**

Water consumption in Los Angeles has been reduced over the last couple of years with mandatory water practices and times to water. But we as a community can add to this conservation with some simple practices. Water utility companies have a number of residential rebates for toilet replacements, faucet aerators, and showerheads that can reduce water usage by more than 5000 gallons of water per year and save you money on your water bill. There are rebates to replace appliances with more water efficient ones.

Fixing leaky faucets indoors and outdoors, purchasing water efficient nozzles for hoses, front load washing machines and dish-washers. The rebate of the California Landscape Replacement Program has increased to \$3.75 per square foot for the first 1,500 square feet of residential turf replaced with water wise landscaping feature. That is \$5600 to replace your lawn with native California water-efficient plants. I have seen some of the residences of our congregants who have replaced their lawns with native California landscapes... and they are wonderful landscapes!

On a personal level, such pragmatic techniques such as not running the water while you brush your teeth or keeping to five-minute showers (and this is a hard discipline for myself, and I have to remind myself that this is a spiritual practice of water, honoring Christ who is connected to all water on this planet). Some residences are using gray water, waste water from showers, baths, sinks, and clothes washing machines for plant irrigation. It is a form of residential water recycling that can significantly reduce water consumption in Southern California with residential usage accounting for 54% of all water consumed. I wash my car at car washes that use gray water to recycle water for cars.

These simple measures, when done and perhaps covenanted as a community at Sunday worship, honors Christ who was baptized in the waters of the Jordan and the cosmic Christ who is in every drop of water. May water conservation become a spiritual practice to express our Earth are and also green discipleship in following Christ.

MCC UCC in the Valley is Earth-centered Christian community with a carbon neutral footprint, who made the Earth a member of our congregation.

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