

“Strength in Fragility”
Sermon by Rev. Elmer Lavastida
Guest Speaker, Peace United Church of Christ
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Today is the beginning of a week of prayer for unity around the world. It has been scheduled for this date every year, the 18th through the 25th of January. The 18th is the traditional day for Peter’s conversion, and on the 25th, that is the day for Paul’s conversion, so between Peter and Paul, we join the church universal to live in unity.

This year, it has been the privilege of the Brazilian church to provide the program for this year, and I received it in Santiago. I was surprised to see John 4 as the passage for this day. It is not the passage that is in the lectionary, so I am rubbing up against the lectionary this morning, but it is the passage for this week of prayer. Brothers and sisters from Brazil give it this title: “Give Me To Drink”. Those were the opening words of Jesus’ dialogue with that Samaritan woman, and it was interesting that two people were asking each other to drink. Jesus asked her for a drink, and she asked Him also for a drink. There were different wells. There were different waters to be drank from that morning, but that simple expression enriched both their lives “Give me to drink”. We generally think it was the Samaritan woman that was blessed and, as we read in the passage, she went back and witnessed to her community and the community received Jesus’ presence. There was such joy.

We tend to overlook that Jesus was also blessed. When the disciples came back with the snack that they brought from Sikar, they offered it to Jesus. He said “I have food to eat that you know nothing about”, and they thought it was an enigmatic answer—“Oh, has somebody brought in another snack that we don’t know of?” He was just telling them “I have already eaten. I feel satisfied. I feel full.” because the dialogue was that the woman had been so important for him. They probably planned to be only two hours or so, have a small snack, a short rest, and keep on the way going towards Galilee. It turned out that this dialogue made them stay for two full days in that place, and it is very beautiful to see how communion was born through such a simple dialogue and how fellowship was given birth that noon day in Sikar and Palestine in the first century.

This brief encounter extends a lesson to us of the possibility of simple things, very fragile things like a conversation, like a friendship, like worship together, bringing lasting unity.

I have here an article that was published in one of our newspapers in Santiago de Cuba. It was published on the 16th of November. When I read it, I was impacted with one of our excellent journalists (name provided in Spanish) in Cuba. I was attracted to the article precisely because of that title there (provided in Spanish) which means, in English, “the mysterious strength or force of fragility”. I said “I wonder what she has to say about that?” She was actually focusing on the life of one of our outstanding Cuban women who is no longer with us. She passed away (name provided in Spanish). She was one of the two women who assaulted the garrison in Mukalla in 1953, together with Fidel Castro. If you ever come to Santiago, they will give you the full story there in Mukalla where these brothers and sisters were there.

Three groups assaulted the garrison as a military strategic. Two groups were able to go away because they were informed that the battle was not to be won, so they rushed away, but the third group didn’t get the message, and they stayed on until all their bullets were gone. They were fighting from the windows of the hospital and they were asked to get into the bed with pajamas and to fake that they were sick people in the hospital, but they were too young and too rosy-cheeked to be in the bed, so the military came and found them, took them out, tortured them and finally killed them, but before they were taken prisoners, they brought to her in a pan (or whatever it was) the testicles of her

brother and the eyes of her fiancé, and they were announcing to her “This was what happened to the rest of the men and you can imagine what’s going to happen to you”, then she was taken prisoner, and she spent many months in seclusion. She had only one book to read. It was a small place with hardly any sunlight.

What the journalist is trying to show is how this woman later became such a strong woman. She founded one of the very interesting institutions in Cuba (name provided in Spanish) which is a place to gather cultures from all over Latin America and make it available, not only to the Cubans but to the rest of Latin America. We have had their excellent writers, novelists, poets and all kinds of art. She is the one who founded that. How could this woman be so strong and have such impulse to go on with life after having suffered all of the tremendous sufferings of her life before? Well, it is that sometimes when we feel very fragile, when there are circumstances when we seem that we are weak, those are times in which we become strong, in which we gather force and strength to face the rest of life. That is why I think that John 4 is a tremendous example of that.

Jesus came to Samaria. Actually, He was not supposed to cross the place at all but was to go on the trans-Jordan road that would miss Samaria because of the difficulty between Jews and Samaritans, but He purposely (as we read in the first verses of this chapter) went through Samaria and sat there at the well all by Himself, at 12 o’clock, in the very scorching sun, and this woman came up and the dialogue began.

One of the interesting things about the word “fragile” is the synonyms that I found in a thesaurus. Hear the synonyms of this word: delicate, tenacious, flexible, and resilient. I always thought that “fragile” was like a glass—it breaks and you can’t put it back together again, or that “fragile” was becoming weak, and every time weaker. No...not necessarily. This was a very simple dialogue between these two that began a very fragile moment between two strangers, two people of different cultures, a man and a woman in the midst of a scorching midday in Samaria and, yet, what tremendous strength came out of this dialogue! What a tremendous encounter!

There is no doubt that perceiving the identity of each one of us is sometimes seen as a threat by the identity of the other. If we are not certain who we are, it is very difficult to be in contact with other people. If we are not certain of how we behave, it is very difficult to face other beliefs, so that is why she says “How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink—a Samaritan woman?” The answer of Jesus, so full of peace, so full of that tremendous calmness, said “If you knew the gift of God”. That’s all He answered—“If you knew the gift of God”. The woman feels threatened by His presence. She immediately builds up the traditional barriers—“You are a Jew. I am a Samaritan, so there is nothing to do. There is a barrier between us.” She explains to Jesus that the door is closed. She tells him with her simple words that the dialogue will not continue, yet Jesus presented those tremendous words “If you knew the gift of God”. It is that capacity to be resilient. It is the capacity to have that flexibility, and you only have that capacity as a gift from God.

We tend to be very protective of ourselves. Something in our nature has been made that way, and sometimes when we face the other, we think immediately that the other is going to be a challenge instead of being a blessing to us—whatever it is. There is a resilience, a flexibility that can go to the negative side, though.

It is very interesting that in Cuba during the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s, there was quite a lack of dialogue between church and state, and it made restrictions for the church, but then in the ‘90s, the climate changed very much—the political climate, the social climate—and the decade of the ‘90s was a tremendous time of dialogue between the secular society, the government, and the church, and the Christian presence. During those three decades of stress between church and state, how was it that we came close to each other? We had, every month, services in which all denominations of the city, all the non-Catholic denominations, would get together and sing and preach. It was also a time when ecumenical organizations were born, student groups, workers’ movements, youth movements, and

unity was so important with us during that time of stress. When the '90s came, and the ideological stress was taken away, now who we are all went back to our confessionalism and to defend our denominations. There are not too many more of those services or those worship times of all the churches coming together.

So, it is interesting. Unity is fragile and we have to care for it very much. We have to be very aware of it. We have to be very intentional about unity. It is a gift from God, but it has to be cultivated by each one of us and by the church, in general. Yes...unity is fragile. It is delicate. You need to be willing to drink water from the other well. You need to be willing to share the water from your well with the other one. It doesn't come from a stoic toleration. It is not a spirit of superiority – "Oh, my water is better than your water". It doesn't come, either, from forcing yourself to do it. It is a gift of God. It comes in a very natural way when you cultivate it. It needs a spirit of complementarity, when you know you are not complete in yourself, when you know you need the other to be more holistic, more full in life. Your own growth and richness depends on sharing your life with the other.

The center for which Gisella and I have been privileged to work for these last 19 years, celebrated in December its 19th anniversary. During the celebration and the worship, we heard some beautiful testimonies of those who have been blessed by the life of the center. It is a center working with more than 12 denominations in our area, doing social work in the community and training for the people of the churches. We heard Yonardo stand up. Yonardo is a Seventh-day Adventist young man, and I was wondering when I saw him at the microphone "What is Yonardo going to say?" Yonardo said "When I came to the center three months ago, my eyes were closed. I could only see my church, my denomination, and these months have just opened up my vision. My horizon has widened."

Seventh-day Adventists, I don't know how they are here, but in my country they are quite enclosed in themselves, yet Yonardo witnessed that he was willing to drink water from another well.

Then, this Methodist pastor stood up, and he was going to say something of a project he has done in his church, restoring houses for people in a very poor community of our city. When he stood up to speak, he couldn't speak. He just cried in the microphone. This project has made him so tender to his community. It has opened his heart to those who surround him, so by the time he began speaking, many of us in the congregation were weeping to see how life changes when you are willing to exchange the water from the different wells.

I should mention this morning, what a moment this is for our two countries. Just a few days before we flew into the United States (We came up on the 26th of December), we still hadn't gotten over the shock of hearing your president on our T.V., and our president at noon on December 17th was saying that diplomatic relations were going to be dialogued again—after so many years, after so much animosity, after so much enmity during 50 years—50 years—half a century! That's a long time and, all of a sudden, we are going to talk. We don't know what is going to come of that but, certainly, I see in that the noonday of Samaria, a Samaritan woman and a Jewish Galilean, sitting one in front of the other and saying "Let's talk" and offering each other different kinds of water.

Our cultures are very different—very, very different. Our music is different, our food is different, even our church life is different. So many things are different in us and, yet, we need to talk, and I would put forth in front of this congregation that you pray for this because it is a very delicate and fragile moment for our countries. Unity, as I said from the beginning, is fragile. It is very delicate. It is very flexible, too. It is resilient. As Christians, we have to be very yielding into this world of unity with other churches like today, this week, as we begin to pray for unity. The body of Christ is not united. There are many of us who are united, and we share so much of our faith with others, but there is still animosity. When the community table is served, not all Christians, Orthodox, Protestants or Catholics can come to that table. Isn't that a contrast to our Lord Jesus with his disciples breaking bread and drinking wine that night in Jerusalem?

So, we need to pray, and we need to pray not only during this week between Peter's and Paul's conversions. We need to pray during the whole year that, as Christians, there will come a time when we don't have to erase all the names—Presbyterian, Methodist, Pentecostal, Baptist. That's the richness of the church. That diversity, I think, has been brought about by the spirit of God so that there are enough colors to go around for all the tastes, but we also need to come together and worship together and not feel that anyone is bigger or more important or more special than any other.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said "We have learned how to fly like birds. We have learned how to defy the ocean and swim in large ships, but we need to learn that important capacity of walking together as brothers and sisters". We must recognize, as Gisella said in her words, that there have been tremendous efforts of North American Christians trying to break through those barriers between our countries.

We pay tribute this morning to Reverend Ted Brown of the Pleasant Hill community. More than 25 times he's been down to Cuba with groups of North American believers from all over the country because he has put forth this Cuban seminar in the news and people have just come to go to Cuba. When Ted did it in his first trip, it was so new that the Cubans were surprised to see this huge group of North Americans coming out from the plane. The North Americans, themselves, were so surprised that they could set foot in Cuba and not be threatened.

I had a brother who lived in Michigan for many years, and when our dad celebrated his centennial in 1987, he didn't go down because a lot of people here told him "You'd better not go. It's dangerous to go to Cuba", so he missed our father's centennial because he didn't trust going down to Cuba. These are some of the things that have been happening the past 50 years, so we must pay tribute to those who have gone with love, and we must also pray for what is ahead after these conversations begin, because both of our countries must not only come together but respect each other, so we really need to pray for this—every day. Pray for your president and for all those who will be representing government going down there. Pray for our president and those who will be representing our government in those talks and for all the things that will be going on. This is a tremendously exciting year—2015. We are opening doors that we have not seen open for such a long time.

Jesus, our Lord, in that wonderful day in Palestine, gave us the secret. I leave with you this phrase this morning. Take it away as you go from church. He said to that Samaritan woman "Give Me to drink", and today He comes to us again and says to each one of us "Give Me to drink". Amen.