

What's Essential to Living? by Pastor Marty Toepke-Floyd

*“Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” (John 4:14)*

Water is essential to life, which is why Jesus uses the image to explain spiritual matters. Liquid water is a unique feature of our planet – something Genesis recognizes as God's own Spirit rushes over the waters of creation. When scientists study the other planets and moons in our solar system or beyond, they search for water's spectral signature. Why? Because if there is no water, there is no life. We humans, and the plants and animals we depend on can't survive without a plentiful source of clean water.

For millennia human civilization has advanced where there are rivers, streams, and oceans. The ancients dug ditches to carry water miles from a reliable source to irrigate fertile fields. Seas and rivers have long been used for fishing and transporting goods. When the European pioneers came to the Great Plains, they depended on the rains for their crops and cattle, and springs, creeks or wells for their own drinking water.

Another liquid mentioned in the Bible is *oil* – olive oil pressed from ripe fruit of trees native to the Mediterranean. Olive oil was used in cooking and perfumes, in lamps for lighting, and for religious rituals of anointing. The trade in olive oil has been big business in the region for millennia.

There is a kind of oil not mentioned much in the Bible. *Crude oil* pumped from the ground and used for lighting, heating and power generation is a relatively modern development dating to the 1850's. Before that it was rarely used for anything and considered a nuisance when drilling water wells. Yet crude oil was flammable, and when slightly refined to a purer grade like olive or whale oil, suddenly the demand for crude oil took off in the industrial nations. As chemistry advanced, more and more uses of the various hydrocarbons distilled from crude oil were discovered.

I live in a world totally shaped and dependent on oil pumped from the ground. I have never known what it is like to live without the plastics, the power, the ease which hydrocarbons provide me daily. The Oil Age is not even two centuries old, and already it has allowed humankind to travel farther and faster, to grow more food to feed more people, to dig deeper and build higher, and to fashion more goods and gadgets than even we who use them can comprehend.

Yet our dependency (addiction?) has a steep price. Not only is there the specter of permanent climate change from burning so much carbon and producing heat trapping gases, but there is the direct threat of pollution to the land, the waters and the air. One only has to see the pictures and hear the stories coming from the Bakken Oil Fields, to know the terrible cost and diminished quality of life that crude oil production entails.

The reality that “oil and water don't mix” is the basis of the current conflict taking place near the Standing Rock Reservation. While it's true that even those protesting depend on oil products to fuel their pickups and run their generators, it's also true that a possible leak of crude from a pipeline crossing the Missouri River would contaminate the major water source that they and many – including folks in Spink County – depend on.

It would be difficult and inconvenient to live without oil. It is impossible to live without pure water. This is the heart of the matter as the Water Protectors resist the Dakota Access oil pipeline crossing the river. Prayer warriors on ponies pitted against hard hats in bulldozers on the frontlines of the struggle between the modern world's thirst for oil and the created world's need for clean water.

I could learn to live with less oil as there are other sources of energy to keep the lights on and vehicles moving. I couldn't learn to live with polluted water, contaminated land and noxious skies. None of us can live that way, but many of us could live more simply and maybe even better if we conserved both water and oil, and used more alternative energy.

Oil which is fundamental to the Modern Way of Life, or clean water which is essential to all living things? The choice to me is obvious if not easy. God, give us the will to make right choices every day in many little ways as we collectively decide the next seven generations' fate and our planet's future.

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