Thirst is a deeply human experience. It is the cry of the newborn and the need of the new mother after childbirth. It is the cry of the wounded on the battlefield and it is our last ministry to loved ones on their death beds. Thirst is our bodies warning us that we don’t have enough of the most essential part of ourselves. It is a longing, a need, sometimes desperate.

And the fifth word of God incarnate from the cross is this: I’m thirsty. The One who is the fountain of living water, who calls anyone who is thirsty to come to him and drink, is dying, thirsty, on the cross.

It’s been a heck of a journey for Jesus, from the abundance of refilling the jars at the wedding in Cana with the best wine to asking for a drink of the worst wine. From being the fountain of living water for the Samaritan woman at the well (“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,” he’d said.) to being the dry spring on the cross. From passing around the cup among his closest followers to having been poured out for all. **This is the end of God’s journey of downward mobility**, God’s choice to embrace humanity by sharing our humanness. From eternal life as Creator of the universe to life as a helpless baby to being treated like a heretic to execution as a criminal to basic thirst—sour wine on a sponge touched to cracked lips. God chose the most complete possible identification with God’s children: God chose to live and suffer and die with us. When he proclaims his thirst, he is one of the suffering, a member of the club we all belong.
to at some point. He declares the depth of his humanity. He has been emptied. With us. For us.

When we hear this word, he is asking for a drink. But he has been thirsty all his life; the Son of God has other, deeper thirsts, too. In his first sermon, he read from Isaiah of his thirst to "bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In his sermon on the mount, he proclaimed his thirst for blessing for those who are poor, for those who are hungry, for those who weep, for those who are hated. Overlooking Jerusalem on his way into the city for the last time, he lamented its unfaithfulness, thirsting for the people's repentance and return to the covenant. Jesus is thirsty for connection between humanity and the Creator God. Jesus is thirsty for the Kingdom of God to be realized on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus is thirsty with unrequited love for humanity.

Jesus suffered with his brothers and sisters throughout his ministry. He showed us that healing flows through entering into and bearing suffering with those who suffer. This is a truth that we tend to ignore, or that we don't believe is true. It doesn't seem like it makes any difference to someone's suffering if I can't help or fix it or make it go away. But ask the person in pain who is gripping their loved one's hand; there is some kind of healing that happens simply because someone else is entering into the pain with them. I remember the scariest pain I've ever had: I had a gallbladder attack one night a couple of years ago and it made a difference just to be in the same room with Lauren. Even though she couldn't do anything about the pain. She has told me the same, and it's taken a long time for me to come to believe what she tells me: there is healing through the surprisingly basic act of entering into suffering with another person. Bearing the burden together is redemptive, even though the burden may not be any lighter. Ask a mother whose child is deployed in Afghanistan whether it is easier to bear the burden if there are friends or family by her side. Ask a man whose wife is dying if having his son there with them matters. Ask the homeless person if enduring the pains and indignities of being indigent is less demanding when Jim from the church comes by every Thursday evening. Ask the addict who is trying to reorient her life away from the drug what difference it makes to have fellow addicts walk the journey of recovery with her. Consider the redemptive power of a loving family who suffers the foster child's nightmares and wet beds. Jesus showed us that healing doesn't come through drive-by caring. It comes through stepping into the muck with each other and living the suffering together. Healing comes through servants willing to suffer with others, following in the footsteps of the Suffering Servant.

So to those of us who say we want to follow him, he says, "Take up your cross and follow me." Notice he didn't say, "Since I carried the cross, you don't have to." He lived a life of suffering and death not so that we could avoid suffering and death, but so that our suffering and death could be redeemed by being joined to his. So that new life can come through suffering and death. So that we might have the capacity to bear each
other’s suffering. So that we can enter into the suffering of our neighbors as Jesus entered into ours.

That’s what church is. Our temptation is always to leave the suffering part of discipleship out, but when we do that, we become a religious club. We’re nothing more than another branch of the YMCA—and don’t get me wrong, I love the Y—but the church is called to be much more than a club. Clubs exist for the enjoyment and fulfillment of their members. The church is called to take up our cross and follow the one who emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. The church exists to carry on Christ's suffering with our neighbors who suffer; the church exists for the sake not of its members, but of the world.

Earlier in the week, as his ministry was drawing to a close, Jesus had stood in the middle of everything and proclaimed to all around, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Rivers of living water will brim and spill out of the depths of anyone who believes in me this way, just as the Scripture says." The One who thirsts for us is the One who offers to quench the world’s thirst. And beyond that, he proclaims that those who drink of his living water will become fountains themselves. Those who thirst and are satisfied by Christ's gift, then have the gift to offer to others. Our salvation is our call to ministry. In our baptism, not only does the water cover us, it begins to flow through us. This is why baptism is the beginning of the ministry of all Christians. If we drink, then we must let the fountain flow through us. And Jesus has made it clear to whom we must offer his water. He told the parable of the sheep & the goats, and the righteous were confused: "‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ "Truly I tell you," he said, "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

As Jesus thirsted, suffering with and for humanity, so the body of Christ is called to follow him to the place of thirst for the healing of the world. Are we willing to go there?

Do we thirst for the healing of the world as Jesus does? Enough to enter into their suffering with them? Enough to look for ways to provide for their thirst? Do we thirst for the healing of the world enough to get our hands dirty in the effort to provide water to those who thirst? Enough to leave our own comfort behind to take water to the places of thirst? Enough to structure our own church activities not around our own enjoyment, but around the thirst of the world?

How will we carry water to those who thirst for Christ? How will we enter into the suffering of our neighbors?