

“Living Water”

“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:37-38).

Water is life. It softens the ground and makes crops grow, it brings hydration and health to the body, and, while you can live for many weeks without solid food, without water the human body will start shutting down in a matter of days.

This fundamental relationship between water and life is also reflected in the Bible, and nowhere do we see water more prominently featured than in the Gospel of John. For instance, in John’s Gospel we read about Jesus’ first miracle where He changes water into wine. And it’s in John’s Gospel that we hear Jesus telling Nicodemus: “no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). And it’s in John’s Gospel that Jesus meets a Samaritan woman drawing water at the town well and tells her: “whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst” (John 4:14).

In John, Jesus heals a lame man at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-9). In John, he restores sight to a blind man at the pool of Siloam (John 9:7). In John, Jesus washes the feet of His disciples, with His dying breath Jesus cries, “I thirst”, and when the Roman soldiers pierce his side only John records that the spear is met with what else but “a sudden flow of blood and water.” John’s Gospel overflows with references to water and today’s text from John 7 is no exception. The obvious reference to water in this reading comes when Jesus says: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:37-38). And it seems like a safe and simple metaphor, until you dig a little deeper.

In the first verse of our text we are told that this scene occurs, “On the last day of the feast,” or, as John calls it: “the great day” and we learn at beginning of chapter 7 that the feast John describes here is the Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the Feast of Booths. This ancient festival was one the feasts instituted by God in Leviticus 23 that served as the framework for the worship of God’s people. Each feast had a different purpose and was accompanied by its own unique set of rites and rituals. And these feasts were not optional for God’s people. They were highly ordered ceremonies designed to remind the people about God’s saving action in their history, and through these sacred festivals the people received the forgiveness of their sins and the promise of the Messiah was renewed.

The Feast of Tabernacles was a harvest festival that took place about six months before the Feast of Passover. It lasted for seven days and for the duration of the Feast the people actually stayed in tabernacles or booths. These “booths” were crude shelters designed to commemorate the journey in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt when God and His people lived in tents. And here’s where the connection to Jesus’ words really starts to take shape. On each of the seven mornings of the Feast of Tabernacles, the people gathered for a service of prayer during which a priest filled a golden pitcher with water. He brought the water into the temple, mixed it with wine and then poured the water and wine mixture on the side of the altar as a drink offering. This occurred each day for seven days and then, on the eighth day, or as John describes it in our text, “the great day,” all the people gathered at the temple for a sacred assembly to conclude the Feast of Booths. On this day, the priests walked around the altar seven times in a procession of thanksgiving, and then the officiating priest took a pitcher of water from the pool of Siloam, mixed it with wine, brought it into the temple and poured it out on the side of the altar.

The ritual was similar to every other day of feast, but with a few critical differences. On this last and “great” day of the feast, as the priests carried out their duties, trumpets were sounded and the people

repeated in prayer the words of Isaiah 12:3: *“With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation! With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation! With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation!”* And with trumpets blasting and people chanting and the priest pouring the last pitcher of water on the altar of offering Jesus stood up, and in a loud voice He cried out: *“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.”* Imagine this scene. In the center of a crowded temple, in the middle of the closing assembly of the feast, as the water of forgiveness was flowing onto the altar, as the people of God were praying to be filled from the wells of salvation, Jesus stands and proclaims that their prayers for forgiveness and life and salvation were now fulfilled in Him!

And then Jesus says, “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” In our text, John clarifies that in these words Jesus was talking about the gift of the Holy Spirit that would be given to the Church on the day of Pentecost. Now, we often associate the Holy Spirit with fire, and yet here Jesus equates the work of the Spirit with life-giving and living water. In saying this Jesus used the language of the prophet Isaiah who proclaimed that, “the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field.” The imagery of water is used again in our reading from Acts as Peter quotes the prophet Joel to describe the birth of the Church saying, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people.”

These are important words for us to hear on *this* Day of Pentecost because, you see, the work of the Holy Spirit always has been, and is still today, connected to Christ. In Christ Jesus, we find the fountain and source of the waters of life, in Christ Jesus, the well of salvation is opened, and the job of Holy Spirit is always to point us to our Savior. In the waters of Baptism, the Holy Spirit is poured out on His people and Christ is delivered for our faith, for our forgiveness, and for our life. Luther wrote: “the special work and office of the Holy Spirit is (to) reveal and glorify Christ, (to) preach and give testimony concerning Him.” And, as the Spirit reveals Jesus Christ to the hearts of the thirsty, rivers of living water that lead us to eternal life begin to flow.

John’s Gospel overflows with references to the heart-cleansing, thirst-quenching, life-giving power of living water. The promise is there and the promise clear, yet the question that requires total honesty from us today as we consider Christ’s words about living water is this: “Are you truly thirsty?” In Psalm 63, David speaks words of confession as he writes, “O God...my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” So, what about you? Are *you* thirsty? Do you recognize the ways in which your life is dry and your spirit is wilting? Have you considered the parched condition of your heart? There are no more serious questions for you to answer today because Jesus tells us that He did not come for the righteous. Or, to put it in the language of our reading, He came for the thirsty.

People who think they are healthy don’t go to the doctor and those who are satisfied in themselves can’t accept a Savior. But to those whose sin has left them desolate. To the one whose life is dry and whose spirit is wilting; to the one who is cracked and broken by their sin; to the one who finds no fulfillment in this world; to the one who rightly despises his own skill and wisdom and sees the futility of his own efforts at salvation; to the one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness these words mean everything!

The Word of God that we hear today is only for those who acknowledge their need. These words of Christ are a call to the thirsty; they are a plea to recognize and uncover the dry, barren, and broken hearts of sinners who need help. And when, in the humility of repentance, we admit our need, and when we turn from our failed attempts to quench our own thirst and fill our own hearts, the Holy Spirit does His work and these words of Jesus save us: *“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’”* (John 7:37-38). Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold