

Rivers of Living Water

[Acts 2:1-21](#)

[John 7:37-39](#)

Happy Birthday God's People!

Today is Pentecost, the day when the Holy Spirit arrived in wind and tongues of fire and the disciples found themselves on the streets, preaching the gospel. It is also the birthday of the church because it is the Holy Spirit working in and among us who creates the Body of Christ and enables us to be the church even when the church building is closed. It is the birthday of the church because it is the day that the disciples came out of meeting in closed rooms and began to tell others about Jesus the Christ.

There are two possible gospel readings for this morning, and I chose a different one from usual but before I tell you why, I want to talk about the one I didn't use.

The one we didn't read this morning is from John's gospel, just like the gospel I actually read. We actually heard it a few weeks ago on the second Sunday of Easter. Jesus appears to the disciples who were meeting in a room locked for fear of the Jewish leaders. He breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

What an astonishing contrast this is with the reading from Acts. In Luke's telling of it, the Holy Spirit made a great splash. In John's telling, the Holy Spirit came quietly just with Jesus' breath. We know that John's gospel was written a long time after Luke- Acts so what this tells us, I think, is that as the Christian community grew and spread there were many different forms and different experiences. Perhaps the writer of John's gospel had not read or heard about the Luke-Acts Day of Pentecost – their experience was that the Holy Spirit comes quietly just like a breath.

Which helps with a question I have often wondered about – why don't we all speak in tongues? why don't we all have gifts of healing?

But the gospel I chose for this morning makes me think that actually we all do have a gift of healing and one which the world needs rather badly right now. So let's take a closer look at it. It's so short I'm just going to read it again.

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Of course it doesn't mean there was no Spirit – we see the Spirit of God at the very beginning of Creation, hovering over the void – and the Spirit inspired the Old Testament prophets. But believers had not yet received the Spirit – that came later, after the resurrection, because it was the Spirit whom Jesus said would come to comfort the disciples after he ascended.

Here, Jesus says, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.” As you know, the Bible is intertextual, which means that a reference or a metaphor in one place resonates with metaphors from other places. The gospel writers used this to add depth to simple statements. Jewish Christians would remember the personification of Wisdom, or Sophia, who is portrayed in the book of Proverbs as the first of God's creation, there from the beginning of time and who offers people understanding and wisdom. She laid out her feast and called from the highest point of the city, “Come eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed.”

It seems to me that there are echoes of Sophia in Jesus' words, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.” And this is not long after he has been telling the crowds that they need to eat him, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” So the feast that Wisdom prepared is become the feast that Jesus offers, and we make that manifest in the Eucharistic meal.

But Jesus is not instituting a sacrament here. “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.” When we are thirsty, knowing Jesus as the Christ, gives us refreshment. It is our faith that provides us with the nourishment that we long for. And when I say faith I do not mean belief in the sense of believing something as fact, but the kind of faith that supports our living to the full, the faith that God loves each of us unconditionally; the faith that Jesus shows us the way to God, and that as St Augustine put it, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”

When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well he told her, “Whoever drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” So the water that is Jesus becomes in us a spring of water, and that is exactly what Jesus says in this morning's little reading, ‘Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.’

Isn't that amazing! Out of our hearts shall flow rivers of living water! Not just a trickle, not just a stream, but rivers of living water that provide nourishment, life, joy for the whole world. The metaphor of water was a powerful one for the people of desert regions, just as it is a powerful one for us today in a world which is increasingly short of fresh water. In Revelation we hear that the river of life flows from the throne of God.

It is when we enthrone God in our hearts and minds that the living water flows. Our faith is not belief in three impossible things before breakfast. Our faith is in loving our Creator, sovereign God with all our heart, mind and soul and our neighbor as ourselves. And it is that love that empowers us. When we choose to love God, when we choose to give our lives to God's service,

when we choose to enthrone God in our minds and think on those things which are beautiful, and holy, then out of our hearts shall flow rivers of living water.

I saw that living water in action this week when some of us provided a memorial service complete with flowers and refreshments for Ron Quigley who was one of our unhoused neighbors. It was a honor to be there with some of you and some of the least privileged members of our community as we put Ron into God's hands, where of course he has been all along. That living water will flow on Saturday when we provide lunch at People's Kitchen, but not just any old food – food that has been bought and prepared and served with love.

Each one of you, people of God, each one of you has felt Jesus breathe on you. It may have felt like a passing breeze. It may have been so subtle that you hardly noticed it, but the Spirit is in you. The Spirit is working through you. And as each one of us makes the choice which we have to make again and again just like building any habit, as each one of us makes the choice to enthrone God in our hearts and minds, so the river of living water flowing from my heart joins with the river of water flowing from your heart and the world is transformed.

A few weeks ago I asked you a question from Marjorie Thompson's book Soul Feast, "What could happen if an entire congregation or community became a faithful doorway into God's living presence?" and I ask you that again, people of God, but with a different metaphor, "What if the entire congregation of St. Benedict's became a river of life, flowing with God's living presence?"

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