

“Rivers of Living Water”

John 7:37-39 ³⁷ On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as {37,38 Or If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me. And let him drink, ³⁸ who believes in me. As} the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." ³⁹ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

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This passage from John reminds me of an experience I had a few years ago down in West Virginia while training for the Marine Corps Marathon. I did a lot of running on The Greenbrier River Trail like the Caledon Trailways is a rails-to-trails project that follows alongside of the Greenbrier River. I was to do about a 17-18 mile run that morning but I got started a little late so it got hot sooner than I would have liked and the humidity had it hotter than I was expecting. I thought I was Super Camel that morning. Instead of carrying water or placing some along the way, I thought I could make it to the 15 mile point where I could get some water in Buckeye. So, I started south on the Trail doing alright up to the, I think, 9 mile point where I was going to turn off the trail and head up Stephen Hole Run Road to Buckeye. That road is very hilly and that's where the heat caught up to me and I started to fade. I had no water and no food and I was a ways from the river, dangerously thirsty, and the strength to run had dwindled. I knew I was in trouble. It was late morning and it appeared no one was home at the houses I passed so that I could just ask for some water. To be honest, I was too proud to do that anyway. I came upon an apple tree and sourced some quick energy and resolved myself that as soon as the road came back down to the river, I was going in and having a drink which was an intestinal gamble considering the sewage treatment plant that was upstream in Marlinton had limitations on its capacity.

I have never been so thirsty in all my life and it was my own stupidity that got me there. Dehydration is a dangerous thing and can cause permanent damage. Water is one thing the body cannot go too long without and as soon as the body realizes it really needs it, you become singularly focused on it knowing that your life may be in danger. You get anxious and confused. You grow weak. You can faint because your blood pressure drops. In the end your heart can be damaged and your kidneys can fail.

Jesus and his disciples as did many people back then traveled by foot through some very dry places where water simply wasn't available. Thirst was something they knew well back then and it is no wonder that Jesus and others used thirst as a metaphor for the passionate longing for God or for something more than this life has to offer. I don't know if you have ever been thirsty in spirit before. It's an acutely angry cry to God to step in and put things to right. It is an inordinately selfish lust for the will of God be done for you right now. It is grief unto despair because you've lost so much of what you've come to rely upon to

make it through life. It's Jesus dying on the cross saying, "I thirst" and the only thing anyone can offer is vinegary wine in a sponge.

My friend, Dwight Diller, who taught me the banjo often says, "Only desperate people come to Jesus." The thirsty ones Jesus so emphatically invites to himself are those who know too well the desperation of life as you know it coming to an end and the anxiety, confusion, and the incapacity to act and pull your life together that comes along with it. When these thirsty ones come to Jesus and drink they look up from the ladle knowing what it is to truly have faith, to truly know God's comfort, love and faithfulness and then have to live one's life in the wake of this grace.

Defining faith has been a pretty hot topic over the two millennia of the Christian church. If salvation is by grace through faith then when have to know the relationship between grace and faith. Lately, the discussion has revolved around whether we are saved by the faith of Jesus Christ or our own faith in Jesus Christ. There are those who reduce faith to be simply believing something about Jesus and to do so unquestioningly. There are those who reduce faith to being simple obedience. "I believe what it says in the Bible so I do it." Unquestioned and unquestioning intellectual ascent and obedience are not what faith is. Faith is knowing that in the life-threatening moments of desperate thirst God the Father himself with the face of Jesus and the Love of the Holy Spirit has personally taken hold of you, changed you in your deepest self, and made you a living and hope-inspiring testimony to his presence in life. To drink of Jesus is simply to meet him personally and be forever changed into being a believer, one who "faith's it". I think of the Apostle Paul who started out as a hater of the church. So thirsty for God that he was orchestrating the imprisonment and death of Jesus' followers. Paul met Jesus personally. On the Damascus Road, a bright light began to shine and Jesus called Paul by name and simply asked him why he was persecuting him. Paul had no answer other than to believe and be changed.

Jesus says that "the one who believes in, as it is written, 'Rivers of living water will flow from his belly.'" The belly in the Bible not only refers to the part of us that gets full when we feed it. It is where the appetites, the desires, the cravings, the thirsts, indeed, desperation originates. Imagine having that part of you that knows thirst being suddenly changed to being a conduit of God's healing work in the Holy Spirit not only for yourself but for other people. Imagine the same thing being true about whole churches. When we sang that song with the young people, "Spring up, O Well, within my soul. Spring up, O Well, and make me whole. Spring up, O Well, and give to me that life eternally." did you think that was just about dying and going to heaven or do you realize its a gut-wrenching prayer asking God to quench our thirst by filling our bellies with his very self so that we are changed and become part of the means by which God works in the lives of others to quench their thirst. Jesus invitation was not "come unto me all you who just want to sit around believing things about me so that you can go to heaven when you die." He said "let all those who thirst come to me and drink and the river of living water that will heal the nations will begin to flow from that part of you that before was so very thirsty.

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Today is Pentecost and we celebrate that God has poured his very self upon his people, upon us each and is filling our thirsty bellies with living water so that they overflow, so that the life, his life, that is in us overflows to give life to the thirsty ones around us. I have met many so-called Christians in my life who have simply been the harbingers of hate, wanting people to believe what they do so that they can control them with guilt and shame, people who were quite apt at manipulating the thirsty ones. I've also known many Christians in my life who have truly suffered thirst and been changed by Christ. These were the folks who in my time of divorce came to me and helped me cope and grow through my thirst rather than judged me and gossiped about me. These folks some knowingly and some unknowingly, got the river of life flowing out of them. This is true of churches too. The world is full of churches who just want to fill their pews by looking with condemnation at the world around them. Yet, there are other churches, usually smaller in number who, some knowingly and some unknowingly, got the river of life flowing out of them, and have a rich loving communion in their midst through whom the thirsty do come and find Christ and drink. I know this to be true here. That leads me to say, my friends, I hope you are drinking. Amen.