

“Come Thirsty and Drink”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 7:37-39

February 5, 2017

On the last and most important day of the Festival, Jesus stood up and proclaimed:

All who are thirsty, come to me!

All who believe in me, drink!

As the scripture said: “Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.”

Jesus said this about the Spirit. Those who believed in him would soon receive the Spirit. But the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus had not yet been glorified.

When some in the crowd heard these words, they said, “This man is truly the prophet.” Others said, “He’s the Messiah.” But others objected, “The Messiah can’t come from Galilee, can he? Don’t the scripture say that the Messiah comes from David’s family and from Bethlehem, David’s village?” So the crowd was divided over Jesus. Some wanted to arrest him, but no one grabbed him.

John 7.37-39. Common English Bible (alt)

I once hiked down Sabino Canyon in the Arizonan desert. A creek runs through it, so water is always there. I could soak my hat and pour water over myself. Within minutes, though, my hat and I would be bone-dry.

What if there had been no river?

When deployed to the desert, soldiers are told, “A pint of water every hour!”¹ You need a pint to replace what you’re sweating out. “A pint of water every hour.”

What if your canteen drains empty?

I’m thirsty. I’ve got plenty of water; we are truly blessed! It’s my soul. The depth of my being thirsts.

You? Maybe you’ve be sweating it out . . . running through your days, here-there-and-everywhere, do-this-do-that. Sweating it out, but not taking enough back in. Thirsty.

Maybe the air is desert-dry. All the upsetting craziness out there: this week, this month, and the year’s just started. Any gulps of refreshment are quickly sucked from you. Thirsty.

¹ N. T. Wright, John for Everyone, Part 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 103.

That's me. Thirsty.

II

It was the Festival of Shelters (or Tabernacles). Jews call it *Sukkoth*. It is rooted in the biblical story of God's People. After freeing Israel from slavery, God led them through the wilderness, teaching them to be God's People. Forty years. All that time, God provided for them.

Where there were no roadways or maps, God led them: a pillar of cloud by day, and fire by night. Where there was no food, God fed them: manna from heaven, daily bread. Where everything was dry, God quenched them: rock, struck by Moses, gushed water.

For *Sukkoth*, Jewish families build makeshift shelters – *sukkah* – outside. They eat their meals in there for the whole week. Some sleep in there. It's all about remembering the wilderness, when God's providing was so unmistakably necessary and so obviously good. (And remembering that God's providing is just as necessary and good, every day.)

For these past three weeks, our Bible readings have been set during this Festival. Jerusalem thronged with pilgrims who'd come to celebrate. Jesus came also and confronted them with who he is. (He confronts us too, by the way.)

The last day, the Festival reached its climax. Remembering the water from the rock, priests would pour out water.²

But over the masses pressing forward, Jesus proclaimed loudly:

All who are thirsty, come to me!

All who believe in me, drink!

III

There is it. Simple! Simple . . . and as deep as a bottomless well.³

Thirsty. That's it. That's all you need. Dried up, worn out, tongue swollen, lips cracked, stumbling from step to step.

Didn't you pack enough for the journey? Didn't you know where you were going? Did you

² Ibid, 93 and 104. Also, Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 489.

³ *“Thirsty?” “Yes.” “Please come and drink away.” The simplicity of the gospel is present in this little transaction.” Bruner, 487.*

waste it? Did you gulp it down for the fleeting pleasure? Did you fill up on pollution and foulness? Is it your fault that you are thirsty? It does not matter. You're thirsty. So come. *Come to me*, says Jesus.

Maybe it's not your fault at all. The air dried out, the taps turned off, and all rivers be damned. What you had so plentifully has been slowly dripped-dropped away. Who's to blame? It does not matter. You're thirsty. So come. *Come to me*, says Jesus.

For Jesus, all you need be is needy.⁴ If you are thirsty, drink!

His scope is expansive: Everyone!

His standard is simple: Thirsty!

His invitation is gracious: Come!

His offering is endless: Drink!

That's it, the Gospel in a nutshell. Good News, proclaimed with the passion of the Saviour, who cries over the push of the crowd. *Everyone . . . thirsty . . . come . . . drink!*⁵

IV

Jesus calls it "living water," this gift he gives. Literally, "living water" is that which is not kept in a cistern, or stored in a bottle, or lying in a pond. Living water is water flowing, water bubbling, water surging. What Jesus is offering here, promising here, is active, dynamic, and powerful.

Life. That's Jesus. In him is life, for all people. Trusting in him is life forever. For the dead, he is resurrection. For the living, he is abundance. God's love for the world is such that God has given us Jesus, against death and for life.⁶

Believe Jesus. Trust Jesus. And living water, the water of life, will flow from him to you.

⁴ Bruner, 487.

⁵ Matthew Henry wrote that here we have "the substance of the whole gospel; here is a gospel invitation to come to Christ, and a gospel promise of comfort and happiness in him. Notice (1) when Christ gave it: at the end: It is good to be lively at the close of an ordinance. Christ made his offer 'on the last day of the feast.' (2) Notice how he gave it: 'he stood and cried,' which shows His great earnestness and importunity. His heart was upon it, to bring poor souls in to himself. . . . Love to souls will make preachers lively. . . . (3) The invitation itself is very general: 'If any man thirst,' . . . (4) It is also very gracious: 'If any man thirst, let him come to me and drink.' If any man desires to be truly and eternally happy, let him apply himself to me, and be ruled by me, and I will undertake to make him so." Quoted in Bruner, 490.

⁶ "Life" is a constant refrain throughout the Gospel of John.

By now, our hunch is growing that Jesus is not talking about simple H₂O. The Gospel-teller quickly confirms it: *“Jesus said this about the Spirit.”* The Holy Spirit. *The Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son.*⁷ The Spirit who is God, filling and refreshing with presence and power.

The Spirit poured out periodically, from time to time, on particular people with unique tasks. But now, because of Jesus, the Spirit will flow freely, abundantly, pouring into everyone who comes to him, everyone who thirsts for God. *“Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled!”*⁸

V

What has to happen, for this life-giving, Holy Spirit pouring-out to happen?

“After Jesus is glorified” it tells us. Glory is the fullness of God’s presence, the shining revelation to us of who God is. Jesus said that he is not about puffing up his own glory. He seeks to show the glory of the One who sent him. Now the Gospel-teller begins unfolding the “glorification” of Jesus, when the fullness of who he truly is will be revealed.

When will that happen, Jesus’ glorification?

Through the whole drama of Jesus’ suffering and betrayal, his condemnation and abandonment, his crucifixion and death, his resurrection and ascension. His glory will come when he sinks most deeply into our human sin and shame, our every rejection and humiliation. This is the terrible opposite of every notion we have of glory . . . yet it is precisely when Jesus is shown to be the glory of God!

And so giving himself for us, Jesus changes us. Jesus’ suffering and death for our sin is his act of divine grace which breaks Sin’s power over us. Jesus makes us clean and fit for the Holy Spirit to flood in with God’s overwhelming love.⁹

Because of God’s grace, the Holy Spirit floods into us . . .

⁷ From the Western version of the Nicene Creed.

⁸ Matthew 5:6 (the Beatitudes).

⁹ Tom Wright says that, *“[Jesus] is the one true [Spirit-giver], because he is the one and only lamb of God who gives himself, in glorious love, for the sins of the world.”* And later, *“Only through the work of the cross . . . can human hearts be made clean and fit for the [Holy Spirit] to flood them to overflowing in the way God longs to do.”* Wright, 105f.

VI

. . . and floods out from us.

Recalling Scripture, the Gospel-teller says, “*Out of [the person’s] heart will flow rivers of living water.*”¹⁰ Whose heart is not clear. Jesus’ heart? Makes sense . . . he gives the Spirit to us. But maybe it’s the hearts of us who receive. That fits too. Jesus gives us the Spirit — freely, abundantly, simply because we are thirsty and trust him to give. But the work the Spirit does in us does not stay in us. It spreads from us.¹¹

Martin Luther explains what Jesus is saying here like this:

*[Those who come] to Me I shall equip, not only to be refreshed and satisfied and to quench [their] own thirst but also to become [sturdy, earthen vessels], endowed with the Holy Spirit and with gifts that enable [them] to give consolation and strength to many other people and to serve them, as [they were] served by Me.*¹²

We are thirsty souls, living in a world, in communities, in neighbourhoods, in families of thirsty souls. People you are with every day are thirsty. Jesus invites you to come, trusting him. Jesus calls you to go, trusting him. To trusters like you, he gives, overflowing. From trusters like you, he gives, overflowing.

For you and through you, Jesus gives graciously . . . come and drink.

For you and through you, Jesus gives expansively . . . for everyone thirsty.

This is what it is, to be People of God. Thanks be to God.

¹⁰ It is not clear which particular Scripture is referenced here. For a good discussion, see J. Ramsay Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 465ff.

¹¹ For a discussion of the various translation and interpretative issues, see Bruner, 488 and Michaels, 463ff

¹² Quoted in Bruner, 489.