

Rivers of Living Water

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, May 23, 2010)

Acts 2:1-21(TEV) ¹When the day of Pentecost came, all the believers were gathered together in one place. ²Suddenly there was a noise from the sky which sounded like a strong wind blowing, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire which spread out and touched each person there. ⁴They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

⁵There were Jews living in Jerusalem, religious people who had come from every country in the world. ⁶When they heard this noise, a large crowd gathered. They were all excited, because all of them heard the believers talking in their own languages. ⁷In amazement and wonder they exclaimed, “These people who are talking like this are Galileans!” ⁸How is it, then, that all of us hear them speaking in our own native languages? ⁹We are from Parthia, Media, and Elam; from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia; from Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰from Phrygia and Pamphylia, from Egypt and the regions of Libya near Cyrene. Some of us are from Rome, ¹¹both Jews and Gentiles converted to Judaism, and some of us are from Crete and Arabia—yet all of us hear them speaking in our own languages about the great things that God has done!” ¹²Amazed and confused, they kept asking each other, “What does this mean?”

¹³But others made fun of the believers, saying, “These people are drunk!”

¹⁴Then Peter stood up with the other eleven apostles and in a loud voice began to speak to the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, listen to me and let me tell you what this means. ¹⁵These people are not drunk, as you suppose; it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶Instead, this is what the prophet Joel spoke about: ¹⁷ ‘This is what I will do in the last days, God says: I will pour out my Spirit on everyone. Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message; Your young men will see visions and your old men will have dreams. ¹⁸ Yes, even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will proclaim my message. ¹⁹ I will perform miracles in the sky above and wonders on the earth below. There will be blood, fire, and thick smoke; ²⁰ the sun will be darkened, and the moon will turn red as blood, before the great and glorious Day of the Lord comes. ²¹ And then, whoever calls out to the Lord for help will be saved.’

John 7:37-39 ³⁷On 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, ³⁸and 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.’” ³⁹Now 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.

The usual image for Pentecost is tongues of fire, an image that Luke used in our reading this morning from Acts. Of course, we should not understand this literally. Luke was trying his best to convey to his readers an understanding of a wonderful, mystical experience. The disciples, who had been hiding, were transformed. They had a new boldness, a new courage, and a powerful message of tremendous impact to tell the world. Flames are indeed a good image – then as well as now. We still talk about a person “being on fire” when they are really excited about something, or when they give a dynamic, charismatic presentation, and these disciples were certainly on fire for the Gospel. But in our Gospel lesson, Jesus uses a different image. He uses the image of Rivers of Living Water, flowing from us, as the result of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is neither water nor fire, but those two images can help us understand the wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit. Water is a more positive image: it nourishes, it has movement, and is a very common element in our lives. So this morning I would like to focus on water as a way to visualize the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus’ comments about Living Water in our Gospel lesson were spoken at the Jewish festival of Booths. This was, and in some areas of Judaism, still is a rather complex festival. Quite simply stated, it is a harvest festival. First fruits and grains are brought in to the temple as an offering and sacrifice, but the focus is not really on thanksgiving for the harvest. During this festival, the people look back at their history. They remember their departure from Egypt, passing through the waters of the Red Sea, and the years of wandering in the wilderness before they entered the Promised Land. In this festival, they spent 8 days living in Booths, or tents, to commemorate their time as nomads, wandering in the desert after leaving Egypt, and before settling in Israel. On the 8th and final day of the festival, the laws of Moses were read to remind the Jews of God’s will for them. They celebrated the harvest, as well as God’s acts saving them from Egypt, but there was also a third, future element in

the festival – they prayed for rain. In Israel, winter is not only cold, but it is a time of more rain. If it doesn't rain much in the winter, the spring rains are too light to sustain most crops. In modern times, Israel has accomplished excellent harvests through irrigation. But in Old Testament times, they were dependent on the winter rains. Without those rains, next years crops would fail. So the focus of their celebration was not only to thank God for the harvest, but to pray to God for water, for winter rains for the next season. On the last day of this festival, when the people had been reminded of how they had come through the waters of the Red Sea, and when they had listened to the word of God, and the laws of God, and when they had prayed to God to send his waters, the winter rains, on that last day, Jesus stood in the temple and said, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.”

Those who had ears to hear, understood. God was to them a God of the waters. He not only sent the rain, but he moved on the face of the waters and created the world. He sent the floods in the time of Noah. He brought his children through the waters of the Red Sea and led them to freedom from captivity. From a rock he brought forth a stream of water to quench the thirst of his chosen people. Through the waters of the Jordan, God led his chosen people into the Promised Land. And now his Son, Jesus Christ, had come to quench the deepest thirst of his people, their thirst for righteousness, for salvation, for God's presence.

John knew that this call from Jesus was much more than an invitation to come to him. This is why John adds the interpretive verse, “He said this about the Holy Spirit, which believers in him were about to receive, for as yet the Holy Spirit had not been given. Through waters, God-given waters, all our thirsts are quenched, and we receive the Holy Spirit. This same image is part of our baptism service. In the older E & R baptismal service, after the act of baptism there is a prayer offered for the Holy Spirit to dwell within each person present. The newer UCC order for baptism is a bit more direct. After the minister baptizes a person, using the traditional words, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,” and then a second blessing is pronounced, “The Holy Spirit be upon you, child of God, disciple of Christ, member of Christ's Church.” In the act of baptism, each one is born anew, of water and of the Spirit. Through baptism, we become members of the Body of Christ, and we receive the Holy Spirit as rivers of Living Water come upon us. But it doesn't end there. The waters we receive must flow through us, and revive and refresh others.

Some years ago the Colorado River shifted course, and a new lake was formed in Southern California. It was called the Salton Sea. It is 45 miles long, 17 miles wide at the widest point, and as much as 80 feet deep. It is also about 225 feet below sea level. The water from that branch of the Colorado River is just enough to maintain the lake at that level, but there is no outlet. By the time the Salton Sea attained this size, the amount of water evaporating equaled the amount flowing in. Developers flocked to this new sea to develop it as a new Southern California Playground. 250 miles of streets were laid out; resorts and a yacht club were built, golf courses were developed. But because of the high rate of evaporation, with no water flowing out, the salt became so concentrated that life in the lake was stifled. That lake, which had appeared to glitter with promise, suddenly turned to brown mud. Today, the banks of the Salton Sea are a ghost town. Fresh waters still flow in, but since nothing flows out, the sea and all around it have become dead.

The waters we receive from God, through the Holy Spirit, are just like that. If we only receive blessings from God, and do not pass them on to others, we become like the Salton Sea – we too will become dead, as will everything around us. This is true of us as a church, and as individuals: As we receive, so we are called upon to give. Now some folks might be thinking – OK, now he is going to talk about money. Absolutely, money is one of those things we all receive – how much are you passing on to help others? But there is so much more to life than money. As you have received a gift of joy and happiness, are you passing that along to others? As you have received the gift of fellowship and support from the church, have you called others to come and share in this fellowship? As you have found comfort and strength from God's Word, and from worship, have you invited others to come and share in the same comfort and strength? As you have received blessings from God, through the Holy Spirit, have you permitted those blessings to flow through you, from your heart to touch others?

The gift of Pentecost should not just be described by those tongues of fire. The gift of Pentecost is the gift of the Holy Spirit, a powerful, refreshing gift from God. Jesus said, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me – I am the Living Water” And he also said, “Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.” He was talking about us when he spoke those words. The Living Waters that flow from us will refresh others, inspire others, lead others to Christ. May the Holy Spirit rest upon you, and may Rivers of Living Water flow from your heart and bring new life to those around you. Amen.