

Quenching Rivers of Living Water Still Flow

John 7:37-39 (NIV)

³⁷ On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.” ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” 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.

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.” (verse 37b) These are the words of Jesus that I racked my brain over this past week. Am I thirsty? How am I or any of us thirsty? What is this thirst? If I’m thirsty, what am I drinking that isn’t quenching me? I need to figure these out in order to understand why Jesus would invite me to get a drink from him.

Jesus’ call to drink on this last and greatest day of the festival of the tabernacles, this Israelite festival pointing people away from the temporary dwellings, tents, on earth to an eternal and permanent dwelling with God, was a call for unbelievers to believe in him, to have more than temporary satisfaction and providence and instead to have these eternally and continuously as “rivers of living water flowing from within them. By this he meant the Spirit...” (verse 38b-39a) When Jesus offered people to come to him and drink, he was offering them the permanent and continuous work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is probably the most abstract person of the Triune God. We get that God the Father has the primary responsibility of making us and taking care of us. We get that God the Son lived perfectly for us and died for us to take away our sins and fill us with his holiness. But what does the Holy Spirit do? As we heard in our first Bible reading from the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit came visibly as tongues of fire resting on the apostles (and probably other believers there that day). They then spoke in languages they had never learned before, declaring the wonders of God to all sorts of people in Jerusalem for the Pentecost feast! The Holy Spirit equipped God’s people with the means to do mission work, to spread the message of what God has done for all.

The Holy Spirit has done and continues to do more on an everyday basis as our second Bible reading said, “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:3b) The Holy Spirit brings you to believe in Jesus as your perfect substitute of holy living and as your Savior from sin. He changes your heart to believe this. The Holy Spirit does this in ways that we can’t see. He works through means – namely, the Good News (the Gospel) of what God has done to take away your sins and fill you with his perfection.

The Holy Spirit makes this happen inside of you using his Word and his sacraments – Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. When a child is baptized, it’s not just some sort of symbol or physical cleansing. What we can’t see happening is the spiritual cleansing, the spiritual rebirth. In baptism, the Holy Spirit takes a person – sins and all – and washes them all away and makes them completely clean, clothed with Jesus’ perfect life and now belonging in the family of God. In the Lord’s Supper, it’s not simple nourishment of our physical bodies in a meal of bread and wine. What we don’t see happening is that the Holy Spirit is giving us Jesus’ body and blood in, with, and under the bread and the wine given and poured out for us in the new, one-sided covenant where God forgives our wickedness and remembers our sins no more. When the Holy Spirit works through these means, he makes those rivers of living water flow from within you because he has changed you on the inside, quenching your most desperate need and thirst, which is for the forgiveness of all the things you have ever done wrong and filling you completely and overflowing with Christ’s perfection. Only the Holy Spirit quenches and provides rivers of living water to flow from within you.

If you are thirsty today, maybe it’s because you have tried to fill up on something other than the Holy Spirit. You’ve maybe tried the Diet Cokes of religion, other faiths that seem to look like what Jesus is offering, maybe have a similar taste, but aren’t the genuine thing. They have some of the same commands, some of the same ideas about God, some of the same names, and they stick around, but ultimately they are imitations. Like any soda, they don’t leave your thirst quenched. Or maybe you’ve tried to quench your thirst with filling your life with the Gatorade of hard work and accomplishments, that if you just get enough things done, then you will have filled up your life and won’t be lacking anything. But you know that you never do enough work to remain quenched. Your accomplishments eventually get surpassed, need to be done again, or simply vanish over time. You get thirsty all over again.

Name the beverage, the thing – whether it’s recreation, money, relaxation, medicine – that you try to quench your thirst of life, and you will inevitably find that none of them become rivers of living water flowing within you. They all go away. They all achieve only a temporary thirst quench. It’s only the Holy Spirit that Jesus is offering to all people that truly quenches, that just one drink is enough to have rivers of living water flowing from within you. Only the Holy Spirit fills you with Jesus’ total forgiveness and complete perfection so that you never need anything else. This is Jesus invitation, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.” (verse 37b) This is an invitation that stands for all people for all time.

This what made me struggle in writing this sermon. Maybe it's arrogance or ignorance, but I couldn't think specifically of a time when I would say that I was spiritually thirsty. But if Jesus' invitation to drink of the Holy Spirit to have living water flowing from within them is a call to faith meant for unbelievers, then it makes sense why I have a hard time pinpointing a specific time in my life when I was spiritually thirsty. I've had the rivers of living water of the Holy Spirit flowing from within me for 37 years now since I was baptized when I was less than a month old. The Holy Spirit quenched my spiritual thirst before I could even articulate that I was thirsty for a Savior from my sins. For every one of you baptized in the name of the Triune God, you have had the same rivers of living water flowing from within you since that time. If you believe that Jesus is your perfect substitute of holy living and that his blood, his sacrifice, covers and removes your sins, then you have the Holy Spirit as rivers of living water flowing from within you.

The Holy Spirit may be hard to visualize, but we see that he is as powerful today as he was on that Pentecost some 2,000 years ago. Not even a pandemic or an earthquake plugged up the rivers of living water here as the Holy Spirit has continued to work through the means of God's Word and his sacraments to bring the Gospel, the Good News, to people and quench their spiritual thirsts. I've seen him working by the people connected to God through all our online worship opportunities and Bible classes, bringing his peace and certainty in uncertain times. Little Dorthy Bergeron was baptized in the NICU and now has those rivers of living water flowing from within her. Kimberly Hurley and her son William were baptized at the beginning of this month and also have had their spiritual thirsts quenched by the Holy Spirit. In the last two weeks, willing men and women graduated from Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and received divine calls to go out into the harvest fields and bring the thirst-quenching Holy Spirit to so many more people that they haven't even met yet. Missionaries are still doing mission work and more people are learning different languages so as to plant and water more Gospel seeds, leaving it up to the Holy Spirit to make them grow and quench people's spiritual thirsts. God-willing, in June we will see another baptism of a little baby girl, see the Catechism kids take adult ownership of their faith and be confirmed as well as four more adults who have had their thirsts quenched by their baptisms and the Gospel in Word through our Bible Information Class. We see those wonderful things happening, and that's the Holy Spirit working.

At the same time, that same Holy Spirit is flowing as rivers of living water within you and out of you. Paul wrote, "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." (1 Corinthians 12:4-7)

The Holy Spirit is flowing out of you since you have already drank him through the words and life of Jesus, through your baptism. Don't try to plug him up; let him flow out into your life! Continue sharing the total perfection and forgiveness you have with God with other people. Continue inviting them to hear what God has done for them – whether it's here in person or online. Continue to let the acts of kindness flow out of you - checking in on the people who are here and the people who aren't here, as so many of you've been doing. Continue giving as the Holy Spirit enables you - whether it be your time, talents, or treasures as you help around the church sanitizing, cleaning, mowing the lawn, setting up what we need for worship, bringing much needed supplies, all of that. All these things you do because the Holy Spirit is flowing as rivers of living water within you and is pouring out of you in so many different ways as help for others and service to God and his kingdom.

On this day of Pentecost, a day where we get to return to worshiping in person, we are and remain quenched as the Holy Spirit has filled our thirst for forgiveness by washing away our sins and filled our thirst for perfection with Jesus' perfect life. The Holy Spirit has created in you and me rivers of living water. He flows within us and then overflows into our lives as we serve others. Let those rivers of living water continue to flow as the Holy Spirit continues to be in you and quench your thirst so that you can quench the thirst of others. Amen.