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The Gospel of John
Rivers of Living Water
John 7:37-52

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Have you ever received a gift that changed your life? Like the kind of gift that you didn't even know you needed, but now that you have it, you can't really imagine what life would be like without it? I'm not talking about robotic vacuum cleaners – in fact, there's a Roomba cleaning my house as we speak. No, what I'm referring to – what our passage for this morning is referring to – is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" Then John helpfully clarifies these words of Jesus by saying, "Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."

The Spirit of God, says John, is a gift which Jesus gives to those who believe. God is in the business of giving gifts to his children, isn't he? That's who God is. In fact, the Greek word that we translate as *grace*, literally means *gift*.¹ God's grace is a gift. Grace is the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Spirit, likewise, is a gift. By his Spirit, God gives us himself. Our God gives gifts to us. Paul talks about God's gift-giving tendencies in Ephesians 4 when he says,

⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸ Therefore it says,

*"When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
 and he gave gifts to men."²*

This past Sunday was the day of Pentecost – the birthday of the church. The day, of course, when the church celebrates God's gift of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is the third of the three major holidays in the Christian calendar: Christmas and Easter being the other two. But, I always found it kind of funny how Christmas has Santa Claus and Easter has the Easter bunny, but there's no Pentecost Platypus. I wonder why that is? I'm not saying it's a bad thing. But on this day when we receive such an incredible gift from God, we have failed to make it a big deal in the way that we know how. Maybe its because we don't really understand the Spirit of God. We don't know what to make of him.

If the Spirit is a gift, then what kind of gift is he? What does this story we read this morning have to say? You'll remember from last week, that Jesus has been attending the feast of booths in Jerusalem. One of the major feasts in the Jewish calendar. And you'll recall how this was a festival which called the people to remember the faithfulness of God to his people while they were in the wilderness all those many years ago. And on the last day of the feast of booths, a

¹ The Big Relief – David Zahl

² Ephesians 4:4-8

day which John calls “The great day”, we find Jesus amid the crowd. On this last great day, he stands up and cries out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

You can imagine that he might have received a few strange looks from the crowd. But what he’s saying isn’t as off-the-wall as we might think. Because water is a huge part of the feast of booths. Jesus is drawing on imagery that’s right before the eyes of the crowd. They’re remembering the faithfulness of God in the wilderness, so they remember how Moses struck the rock to bring forth water.³ God satisfied the peoples’ thirst in the desert. God gave them the gift of water.

But that’s not the only image that would have been fresh on the minds of the crowd at the festival, because right in front of them, they would have seen this elaborate procession of priests within the city of Jerusalem. On every day of the feast, priests would take a golden pitcher and draw water from the spring that fed the famous pool of Siloam. You remember those healing waters from Jesus’s healing miracle at the pool on the sabbath in chapter 5.

Well, the priests would gather that water and walk up to the temple, and when they arrived, they would pour out the water upon the altar while the scriptures were read.⁴ The words of Ezekiel:

“Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar.”⁵

The words of Zechariah:

“On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea.”⁶

Water at the temple. God’s provision for all the earth. That’s the image in the minds of the people hearing Jesus on that day. In one sense they’re looking back – they’re remembering how God provided water for them in the wilderness. And in another sense, they’re looking forward – they’re hoping for a day when God’s glory would go out from Jerusalem into all the world.

So, when Jesus stands up and talks about thirsting and drinking and rivers of living water flowing, he’s speaking to a group of people who know a little bit about what he’s saying.

Or do they? Because, says John, what he’s really talking about is the gift of the Holy Spirit. A gift which, as John says, had not yet been given, because Jesus had not yet been glorified. How could the people know what he’s talking about if they haven’t yet received the gift?

But we know what Jesus means, don’t we? Because you and I live in the time of the Spirit. We know what it feels like to receive the Holy Spirit...that’s what our baptism tells us...

³ Numbers 20:10-13

⁴ Connections Lectionary Commentary – Craig S. Keener

⁵⁵ Ezekiel 47:1

⁶ Zechariah 14:8

to have those rivers of living water flowing from our hearts. Don't we? Well, honestly, sometimes we're not so sure, are we? I mean, are we missing something here? To have the Spirit of God within us... shouldn't we be in a constant state of awe and rapturous bliss? Rivers of living water flowing from our hearts? What does that feel like? I don't know. Does that mean that we don't know him? That we haven't received him?

Jesus says, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink." Now, that's something we know about. Certainly we know what that feels like. To be thirsty. To be unsatisfied by the offerings of the world. That's not a difficult concept at all. Pain and anguish. Loneliness, unfulfillment. Fears over whether we've saved up enough. Fear over losing it. Thirsty. Unsatisfied. Jesus says, "come to me and drink. For Whoever believes in me... Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water."

Maybe what it means to receive the Holy Spirit is not to be made blissfully unaware of suffering, but to be changed in such a way that we no longer live for ourselves alone. Paul says "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." What good are these things if we keep them to ourselves?

Jesus says, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink." How many of us are thirsty for love? Real love. The kind of love that makes us secure enough in ourselves to love one another in return. How many of us thirst for joy? For the kind of joy that helps us bear one another's burdens. What about peace? How many of us thirst for God's peace to spread through our families and communities? Throughout our fractured world? Yes, what about peace and patience and kindness and goodness all those things the Spirit alone brings? Jesus says, come to me and drink. Come to me and be changed. He offers us a gift. But the gift, friends, is God's own self. And it's a gift we cannot contain within ourselves. It goes out to all the world like rivers of living water.

That's a strange image. Living water flowing from the heart. I wonder where that comes from. The gift of the Holy Spirit. I'm skipping forward a bit, so I hope you'll forgive me. But there's a connection here that we might miss. In John 19, we find Jesus on the cross. Scripture says,

²⁸ After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." ... ³⁰ When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and [the ESV says, he] gave up his spirit."⁷

The Greek there, literally translated, says, he *gave* his Spirit." His Spirit. His gift. But to underscore this truth even more, John goes on to report that after he had died, "One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water."⁸ – I remember reading something about fluid around the heart in the pericardial sac⁹ – Why does John tell us this? Jesus says, "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'"

If it wasn't clear before, maybe John is trying to tell us that The Spirit is the self-giving, other-regarding, perfect love of Jesus poured out on the cross. And when he gives it to us, by his

⁷ John 19:28,30

⁸ John 19:34

⁹ Connections Lectionary Commentary – Craig S. Keener

grace, we become more and more like him. We are less concerned with keeping a tight grip on life as we know it, and we are free to choose the life he has for us. He woos us by his love into loving in return.

Frederick Buechner, in his first memoir, *The Sacred Journey*, talks about the experience of losing his father to suicide when he was only ten years old. And in the wake of that loss, Buechner's mother decides to move with her children to Bermuda for a fresh start. Not long after that decision, she received a letter from Buechner's grandmother. In it, she wrote, "you should stay and face reality". Buechner reflects on his grandmother's rather blunt advice in his memoir when he says,

"in terms of what was humanly best, this was perhaps the soundest advice she could have given us: that we should stay and, through sheer ... endurance, will, [and] courage, put our lives back together by becoming as strong as she was herself. But when it comes to putting broken lives back together—when it comes, in religious terms, to the saving of souls—the human best tends to be at odds with the holy best. To do for yourself the best that you have it in you to do—to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst—is, by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you that is more wonderful still. The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from. You can survive on your own. You can grow strong on your own. You can even prevail on your own. But you cannot become human on your own. Surely that is why, in Jesus' sad joke, the rich man has as hard a time getting into Paradise as that camel through the needle's eye because with his credit card in his pocket, the rich man is so effective at getting for himself everything he needs that he does not see that what he needs more than anything else in the world can be had only as a gift. He does not see that the one thing a clenched fist cannot do is accept... a helping hand."¹⁰

Jesus loves me, this I know. Jesus offers himself to us, but he doesn't force us to receive him. We can go on in our thirst, trudging through life unsatisfied, thinking only of ourselves. Or we can answer his call to come and drink, because with him are rivers of living water – his Holy Spirit; a gift that is meant to be shared. He gave his life in order to save ours. He was pierced so that we could be made whole. In this way, he shares his love, his joy, his peace, his patience, his kindness, his goodness, his faithfulness, his gentleness, his self-control. To receive his Spirit as a gift is to be transformed into his likeness. To live for others. Not because we have to, but because at last we finally can. The living waters which flow from the pierced heart of our savior are the same waters which flow from those who believe. If anyone thirsts, let him come. Thanks be to God.

¹⁰ [Humanly Best](#) — Frederick Buechner