

RIVERS OF LIVING WATER

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

May 11, 2008

Scripture: Psalm 104: 24-34, 35b;

John 7:37-39

The extraordinary earliness of Easter has pushed Pentecost into Mother's Day. It almost never happens. And all over this country pastors are facing the uncomfortable challenge of preaching to pews full of families who have come to church because mom asks everybody to do that on Mother's Day; or people sense a particular warming of the heart for the memory of their mothers on this day, and so they have come.

The religious holiday on the church liturgical calendar is Pentecost, but the heart wanders to mothers. The Holy Spirit vs. Mothers, the Third Person of the Trinity vs. the one who gave us birth! Do we have to make a choice?

A friend of mine in the ministry tells me that at her church they have declared a Mother's Day Free Zone, because, as she said, "it's a complicated, painful day for a good number of folks and even meaningless for others."

So let's start with some thought about God and the meaning of the text assigned for this day, and maybe that will lead us to something about our family and loved ones as well and how God fits into all of it.

Pentecost, like its name implies, comes 50 days after Easter. Pentagram or Pentagon is the five sided star that references that number. And Pentecost is ten times five, or fifty days.

Our remembrance of Pentecost is rooted in the Jewish festival, Shavuot, the festival of booths, a harvest celebration embedded in Israel's nomadic wilderness wanderings. As you can imagine people of the desert who do not farm are especially grateful for the food of harvest, food that they did not plant, seedlings that depend on water near wadis and oases that are scarce.

Charles Cousar, the New Testament scholar says that Pentecost

...recreates the nomadic experience and the transient character of life on the move. Part of the ritual of the festival is the daily libation of water brought to the Temple from the Pool of Siloam. Against [that] backdrop Jesus speaks of the gift of abundant water, living water that flows from the center of the believer's being. [It is a] reference to the coming of the Spirit...¹

We forget how abundant and luxurious is the water that is available to us all the time. We are not a nomadic people. We are always near a bottle of water, a faucet, a fountain, a spigot, a well. The water industry today is starting to make significant inroads in the beverage industry. Poland Spring, Evian, Perrier, Life Water... everybody is bottling something to quench the thirst.

We have a choice of sparkling, or flat, or flavored. And while we are more aware of the endangering of our waters and streams than ever before, water is not so scarce for

us as it is, say in Myanmar today, or in the battle fronts of Iraq where precious water must be delivered by truck to troops in the desert in 120 degree heat.

Water is something that is plentiful here even if it is endangered in some places on earth. And so it is harder for us to appreciate our religious forebears' celebration of water as a religious festival of great importance, except, of course, in baptism. For in baptism the water of eternity falls on the flesh of mortality and heaven meets earth as when the rain falls on the dry and parched land of a springtime afternoon.

Most of us think of Pentecost, if we know anything about it at all, as the day of mighty winds and dancing fire and speaking in the tongues of many nations. We most of us recall something about that story in Acts chapter 2 that tells about all the disciples being gathered together 50 days after Easter and while they were together a mighty wind swept through the house, and tongues of fire danced above their heads, and they spoke in the languages of the Parthians and Medes and Elamites.

So the color for Pentecost is red, to remind us of the fire of this season and the tongues that equipped the church to go into all the world bearing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Of equal importance with the fire of Pentecost is the water, however, the water that is symbolized in Jesus' teaching today. Water, the symbol of the Holy Spirit. Water, the life sustaining essence without which our bodies could not go on. Water, the washing and cleansing agent that purifies and cleans us.

A few years ago I was teaching a confirmation class of 8th graders, and we were discussing water and what it does and why it is a symbol of importance in our faith. And the kids mentioned all the usual things. Water cleanses you, quenches your thirst, sustains life. And finally one very smart young man said, "Water holds you up."

I wasn't quite sure what he was getting at but went on to explain, "You know, when you are in the water in a lake or a swimming pool or at the beach, if you lie back and float the water holds you up." And I realized that he had hit upon an absolutely great image of what the water of God's Spirit does in our life. It holds us up.

Jesus said, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. For "Out of the believers heart shall flow rivers of living water." And John goes on to say that Jesus said this about the Spirit which the believers had not yet received.

What an interesting phrase, "Out of the believers heart shall flow rivers of living water." Last week I preached a sermon about the eyes of the heart, how our hearts sometimes see with the eyes of faith and envision what our critical minds do not. Maybe Jesus' words today about our heart address not so much the function of that important muscle in the chest, the cardio-pulmonary interrelationship that is the focus of medical concern, but the cardio-spiritual relationship from which faith proceeds.

The Greek word in the New Testament for Spirit is πνευμα. And it is always a feminine noun. In fact I remember my Greek teacher in college saying you can speak of the Spirit as singular or plural; you can refer to the Spirit as She, but never should you speak of the Spirit as "He" and most especially never as "It."

I should mention that there's a bit of a controversy about whether perhaps the NRSV version has mistranslated what Jesus said, and that it's really Jesus from whom the living water flows, so that the reference is to Jesus himself. But all of us know the larger truth that we are nurtured and sustained and buoyed up by those whose hearts overflow with the goodness and kindness and grace of the love of God. Sunday school teachers, pastors, friends, coaches, co-workers, our long suffering partners and spouses in life, our children, our friends, and yes, if we are fortunate and blessed, our father and mother.

"Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water," Jesus said. And it's true. What we know of God is sometimes best mediated by the love of others whose forgiving, gracious, peaceful gift is that they love us and care for us just as we are.

It's graduation season again. And there will be a lot of speeches in the next few weeks given by notable people saying forgettable things. But someone recently told me about a graduation speech that was given by Fred Rogers, that's Mr. Rogers, to most of us. Fred Rogers of television's Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood who helped raise a couple of generations of children in this country through the years. It was a graduation speech at Dartmouth in 2002, when Rogers said,

I'd like to give you all an invisible gift. A gift of a silent minute to think about those who have helped you become who you are today. Some of them may be here right now. Some may be far away. Some ... may even be in Heaven. But wherever they are, if they've loved you and encouraged you and wanted what was best in life for you, they're right inside yourself. And I feel that you deserve quiet time on this special occasion to devote some thought to them. So let's just take a minute in honor of those who have cared about us all along the way. One silent minute.

He paused a long minute, and then went on:

Whomever you've been thinking about, imagine how grateful they must be that during your silent times you remember how important they are to you.²

Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water, Jesus said. And more than we realize, perhaps more than we can measure, almost all of us have been given rivers of living water from the hearts of others which sustain our spirit and nurture our soul.

I know that Mother's Day is a difficult day for some whose mother is not known to them; some whose mothers were less to them than a loving mother should be; and some whose mothers were neglectful or abusive or simply should not have been mothers in the first place.

My own mother was a remarkable person. A woman who single handedly raised four children on her own, my father having died early in life. Because my mother was a single head of household as we call it today, and she had a limited income, we never had much, but we always had enough. We were never rich, but we never lacked for what we most needed. We children had to take on a lot of responsibility early in life, but my mother was always there to cheer us on.

I am sure that whatever of faith I knew as a child, I gained from my mother. Because it was she who made sure we all got to church, much as I disliked church. She who taught me how to pray. She who later in life never stopped seeing me as the boy I once had been, both to the aggravation of my grown up independence, and also to the comfort of my knowing that there was still someone on earth who knew me through and through and loved me still and all.

When my mother died twenty three years ago, now, I had this realization that for the first time in my life, with both my mother and my father gone, the last person on earth who was there when I was born was now no longer on earth. And it was a kind of a psychic severing of a spiritual umbilical cord.

It seemed odd, as independent as I always was in life, to have this separation be made so final... until I realized that there was yet one other who was there that day I took my first breath, one other who had been there cheering me on all my life, one other who knew me through and through and loved me still and all... and that was and is God, the God whose love flowed out to me through my father and my mother like a river of living water.

Pentecost is usually thought of as a day celebrated remembering the mighty winds and tongues of fire and many languages that descended upon the disciples. The day the Spirit came in power and might to fill the church and embolden the disciples.

But it is also a day when we remember the gentler movement of the Spirit, too. The way in which, through the heart of believers, rivers of living water flow.

Tom Long of Emory University tells a story of a woman he met who was sharing her spiritual journey with a small group in her church. The woman was a dancer in a professional ballet company. And when she spoke it was clear that she was more comfortable as a dancer than a speaker. She spoke, said Long, hesitantly and haltingly.

She reminded the group that she was raised in that particular church. She described the sanctuary, including the baptismal font, and she said that she was baptized as an infant right in that very font. She did not remember this, of course, but she [said] that her father was very proud of that moment and that when she was a little girl, he would often tell her of the Sunday that she was baptized.

He would describe the baptismal dress that she wore, he would remember what hymns were sung and what the minister had said in the sermon, and he always ended the story by clapping his hands together and exclaiming, "Oh, sweetheart, the Holy Spirit was in the church that day!"

She then said that as a child, she would go to worship on Sunday with her parents and would wonder, "Where is the Holy Spirit in this church?" She would look at the brass organ pipes, at the rafters in the ceiling, and at the stained-glass windows, and she would wonder, "Is *that* the Holy Spirit in this church?"

Then she paused for a moment, and everybody in the room leaned forward to hear what she would say next. "As many of you know," she continued, "I lost both of my parents to cancer in the same week, a terrible

week, last winter. During that awful week, on a dark Wednesday afternoon, I was driving home from visiting my parents in the hospital, and I was passing by the church. I felt an intense need to pray, and so I came into the church and sat in one of the back pews and began to pray. The church was dark, and in the shadows I prayed and poured out my grief to God, and cried from the bottom of my heart. A member of the church, and here she named her, was in the kitchen preparing a meal for a church meeting, and she saw me praying and knew what was happening in my life. She took off her apron, came and sat beside me in the pew, held my hand, and prayed with me. It was then, the young woman said, that I knew where the Holy Spirit was in this church.³

You want to know where the Holy Spirit is? Do you want to see the signs of her presence? Is there a stirring of the winds? A sighting of the fire above any heads? Anyone speaking in tongues? Well maybe, sometimes.

But, personally, I see it most often, in the rivers of living water that flow from the hearts of believers.

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- ¹ **Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A.** Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 335.
- ² Fred McFeely Rogers, Dartmouth Commencement Address, Dartmouth News, posted online 06/09/02.
<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~news/releases/2002/june/060902c.html>
- ³ Thomas G. Long. **Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian.** San Francisco: Josey Bass, 2004. 128.