

“THIRSTING FOR THE SPIRIT”
Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 7:37-39
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
June 4, 2017 (Day of Pentecost)

In the classic TV comedy show *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, the announcer would often introduce the next skit by saying, “And now for something completely different.” Well, how about something completely different on this Day of Pentecost? Instead of playing with fire as we usually do, I want to invite you to play with water.

The New Testament Evangelists tell the story of the giving of the Holy Spirit in two different ways. In Luke, Jesus' resurrection takes place on the Sunday of Passover weekend, and his ascension into heaven occurs forty days later. Before Jesus leaves the disciples, he instructs them not to jump the gun in their mission to spread the gospel, but to wait in Jerusalem to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. This gift of power comes ten days after the ascension during the Jewish festival of Pentecost, when the Spirit descends dramatically upon the followers of Jesus, giving them the capacity to preach the good news in many languages.

By contrast, in John's Gospel the climactic events of Jesus' earthy life – his resurrection, ascension, and giving of the Holy Spirit – are telescoped into a single day. Jesus is raised from the dead and glorified by God, and then breathes the Spirit upon his disciples. All of this occurs on Easter Day itself. It's also worth noting that in John, Jesus' promise of the Spirit is offered not after his death and resurrection, but before. Jesus uses the occasion of his farewell meal to prepare the disciples for his departure, assuring them that he will remain in their midst in a different way. He will send the Holy Spirit to take his place as their Advocate, Counselor, and Comforter. In fact, long before the last supper, when Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Festival of Booths, he promises to send the Holy Spirit to his followers. This promise appears in today's Gospel Lesson for the Day of Pentecost, where Jesus uses a unique, surprising bit of imagery to describe the coming of the Spirit.

Remember that in Luke's account of Pentecost, the disciples are huddled in a house in Jerusalem when they suddenly hear a sound like “a strong wind blowing” and see what looks like “tongues of fire which spread out and touch each person there” (Acts 2:2-3). Indeed, these are the images you and I normally associate with the Spirit's coming – wind and fire. In John, however, Jesus likens the Spirit to another element of nature – water. Quoting from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus says of himself and the Spirit, “streams of life-giving water will pour out from his heart” (John 7:38). And preceding that promise is an invitation: “Whoever is thirsty should come to me and drink” (v. 37).

Many years ago in a previous pastorate, I taught an adult Sunday School class which focused on the lectionary texts for each date on the Christian calendar. One Pentecost Sunday, that class examined the very lessons you and I have read today from Acts, 1 Corinthians, and John. A highly successful businessman happened to be a member of that class. He was a common sense, down-to-earth guy whose world was completely practical and concrete. That day he acknowledged to the group his sense of bafflement about the Holy Spirit. “I can relate to God as Father; I can relate to God's Son, Jesus Christ,” he said; “but I just don't get the third

person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit sounds like some kind of spook, and I don't warm up to spooks. When we sing the Doxology in worship and get to the words 'Holy Ghost,' I stop singing. I guess you could call me a 'Holy Ghostbuster.' As far as I'm concerned, you can remove Pentecost from the Christian calendar. This day means nothing to me."

I cannot help but wonder if that man was speaking for some of you. Winston Churchill once described Communist Russia as "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." If the truth were told, a lot of Christians regard the Holy Spirit in the same way. Pentecost is not so much a day of clarity and celebration as it is a day of confusion and consternation.

Well, I have good news for the "Holy Ghostbusters" in our midst. We're not dealing here with a character in a movie about paranormal activity. "Holy Spirit" is simply the name we assign to God's presence in the world. The God we know in Jesus Christ, whose primary abode is in heaven, is also active here on the earth. And I cannot think of a more down-to-earth, practical, encouraging, healing image for the Spirit's activity than this: living water flowing into the parched mouths of the thirsty.

We live in a world that desperately needs a drink. I don't know about you, but I find it a challenge to drink the six to eight glasses of water per day recommended for good health. I have to work to meet that goal. Even as I say this, I know that my problem is confined only to the privileged. Like you, I have daily access to an unlimited supply of safe, clean drinking water. But according to a research group called The Water Project, over one billion people in the world suffer water scarcity, which means that they either lack enough water or lack access to safe water.

Lest you and I forget, water scarcity is a life or death issue for many. This past week, 44 migrants from West Africa were traveling to Libya, hoping to resettle in Europe. They never got to their destination; they died of thirst when their vehicle broke down in the Sahara Desert. Thousands of people have suffered the same fate crossing the border between Mexico and the United States.

Sometimes this crisis even occurs in our own backyard. We've all read about the ongoing water woes in Flint, Michigan. Well, my hometown of Corpus Christi, Texas, recently suffered the same affliction. My best friend as a teenager was a neighborhood boy named Joe McComb. A month ago, my old buddy Joe was elected mayor of Corpus Christi. He defeated a former mayor who was criticized for mishandling a water crisis in that city. Last December, a chemical leak at an asphalt plant sparked fears of widespread water contamination. The 325,000 residents of Corpus Christi had to boil water three different times in order to bathe, swim, cook, and drink with a sense of safety.

Friends, every time you and I struggle to decide which brand of bottled water to buy at the grocery store, we are exercising the right of the privileged in this world. For countless millions, water is a precious luxury, when in fact it is a substance necessary for physical survival.

At the same time, we all know that water is much more than this; it is also a source of spiritual sustenance. A middle-aged woman tells about growing up far from the beach and seeing the ocean only a few times as a child. When she became a young single mother, she initiated what became an annual pilgrimage to the sea. Each summer she drove 14 hours from Chicago to the Florida panhandle and rented a small beach cottage. She had no extra money to

go to restaurants or play miniature golf or go fishing or enjoy a water park. She and her sons spent all their time in the sand and water. She remembers finding the sound of the waves to be soothing. She writes, “In the gentle lapping, I heard the heartbeat of the earth, pounding day in and day out, year after year, generation after generation, from time to eternity. The sea felt like the source of life itself – the belly out of which the living water flowed into my sometimes troubled soul. I would sit in the sand watching my children and sob as I poured out my heart to God . . . My annual trip became for me a yearly Pentecost moment in which I felt the Spirit of God being poured out on me through the living waters of the ocean.”

So it is that water is not only a physical necessity; it is also a source and symbol of spiritual renewal and nourishment. In Luke’s account of Pentecost, God pours out so much grace and love that the Spirit of Christ literally fills the hearts of his followers to overflowing. They drink in so much living water that some who witness their joyous response think that they’ve all had a little too much to drink!

It’s no wonder that in John’s version of Pentecost, the Spirit is described as “streams of life-giving water” which pour out from God’s heart. And notice that John uses this imagery of water at other points in his Gospel. When Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, he offers her “living water”; that is, a relationship with him that will quench a deeper thirst in her life (John 4:4-26). Earlier on, Jesus tells Nicodemus that the Holy Spirit is essential to the birth from above, and this birth is of both water and Spirit – an obvious reference to Christian baptism (3:1-15). And don’t miss the reference in today’s Epistle lesson, where the apostle Paul associates the gift of the Spirit with the Church’s other great sacrament, Holy Communion. “We were all made to drink of one Spirit,” he says (1 Corinthians 12:13).

And so, after the Sunday School class ended on that Day of Pentecost, the businessman asked if he could have a moment of my time before the worship service began. We walked into the sanctuary, where he was to serve as an usher and I was to preach and lead Communion. The room was still empty and quiet; we sat down on the front row and had a brief conversation. We had been talking in the class about the Holy Spirit, which this man regarded as an irrelevant abstraction. So he said, “I want to change the subject. On the surface, I have everything I really need. My business is thriving; I have a lovely home and a membership at the country club; I have a beautiful wife and three great children. But enough is never enough. I’m always looking for something more, and in all the wrong places. Now I’ve gone out and done some things I’m deeply ashamed of. I’ve pocketed a large sum of money that actually belongs to my employees, and I’m seeing another woman on the side.” Mind you, he was telling me all this just twenty minutes before the start of a worship service!

I listened and responded as best I could. I finally said, “Does it occur to you that you haven’t changed the subject at all? The very things you are seeking – validation, love, guidance, forgiveness, a new and better life – are precisely the gifts that the Holy Spirit brings?” He looked at me with a startled expression on his face. Then, I don’t know what got into me; the words just popped out of my mouth. I motioned toward the Communion table, looked back at him and said, “Need a drink?”