

The River of Life

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Two services

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On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried 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.'" 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.

When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." Others said, "This is the Christ." John 7:37-41a

Many of you know that I often like to start off my messages with a question. I have one for you today, on this Pentecost Sunday. What is the greatest river in the world?

The answer to that would depend on how a person measures greatness. If we were talking about the longest river in the world, that would be the Nile River in Africa. According to my source it is about 4,132 miles long. But if we were talking about the volume of water the river discharges, we should choose the Amazon River in South America as the greatest. I'm told that approximately 20% of all the freshwater discharged into the world's oceans is from the Amazon River. But there is at least one more way to measure greatness in a river. It might mean the river the most people depend on. A point could be made that that would be the Yangtze River in China. It claims to be the third longest river in the world and it is one of the busiest in commercial traffic. Also, its water is pushed through the world's largest hydro-electric power station.

Having said all that, I have to share that none of these is the greatest river in the world. You will probably be amazed to hear that the river I'm talking about doesn't hold water at all. Yet you can drink from it and wash in it. The word "river" serves as a metaphor of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Psalm 46:4 speaks about this river when it says, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy places where the most high dwells." This river does not have a formal name, but we refer to it as the "River of Life". It's the greatest river that there is. It flows from Christ, and it flows through every Christian.

You will not find the "River of Life" on any map. But it is not imaginary, because Jesus said it was real. Jesus talked about it toward the end of what was known as the Feast of the Tabernacles. The Feast of the Tabernacles was a sacred festival held by the Jews that lasted seven-eight days. During this time, the people lived in tents and booths (temporary shelters) to remind them of the time when their forefathers had wandered through the wilderness and lived in it, and how God had provided for them. It marked the completion of the harvest and was a joyous time when people celebrated how God had provided for them both in the past and in the present.

So it was on the last, great day of the feast that Jesus stepped up and said something to point people to a higher level. There was a lot of attention given to water during the festival. So Jesus cried 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 waters.'" Our Gospel reading makes it clear that he is linking the water to the Spirit. It tells us that the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Now in verse 39 when it says the Spirit had not yet been given, that does not mean that the Spirit was not yet in existence or operative. John himself had already spoken of the Spirit's effect upon Jesus himself. But the full effect of the Holy Spirit and his work in the dawning kingdom was to follow the completed work of Jesus Christ, and it was timed to be after our Lord's ascension into heaven.

Of course, we see that happened on the day of Pentecost. The disciples had been told by Jesus that they would receive power from on high, and we are told in Acts 2:1-21 that happened in dramatic fashion. There was a loud sound like a mighty rushing wind, divided tongues of fire rested on each one of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. That resulted in them having the incredible gift of speaking the gospel in other languages so that people coming from distant places could hear it in their own language.

Now this was amazing and dramatic, but it is also important for us to realize that it marked a change in God's relationship with his people. Not only did the disciples receive the Holy Spirit, but he is still coming to people today. The Holy Spirit has come to us also. We don't have to see anything spectacular to know we have received the Holy Spirit. We have the Word of God that tells us so. In Acts 2:38-39, the Apostle Peter says, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." The Apostle Paul addressed the church at Corinth and said this: "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" (1 Cor. 3:16)

Note that not only were the disciples filled with the Holy Spirit, but they received at least one gift, maybe a lot more. Remember this: the Holy Spirit does that to us also. He does that to all believers. 1 Corinthians 12 tells us, "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed." He then goes on to say, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone." He then goes on to list all kinds of gifts, and it is not an exclusive list, there are many other gifts. There are even other lists in the Bible. But he stresses that "All of these are empowered by one and the same spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills." (v.11)

Paul wants us to think of ourselves as important members of the body of Christ. Everyone, no matter what his gift or gifts are, is important to the body of Christ. Paul says, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit." (v.13)

Now we started this message with a question, and we will end it with several questions. But you can best answer these. What gift or gifts do you have? How are you using your gift or gifts to serve the Lord? Is there a gap or hole or lack of people power somewhere in St. Mark's ministry? If you think so, are you willing to fill that gap? Let's not judge each other in this matter, but let us each judge ourselves.

Maybe you'd like to attend a class where we study the gifts of the Spirit and try to identify some of the gifts we have. Our former President Nick Nicholson was really into this and taught some classes on the subject. We can do that. Let Pastor Mark or myself know. We will try and fit something in down the road.

Good times are fine; parties are fine, the joy and celebrating at the Feast of Tabernacles is fine. But you know what? The joy quickly dies down. Jesus offers people something a lot more permanent when he says, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink." He offers us something that makes our heart glad, that refreshes us, and sustains us no matter what may come our way. The River of Life is not only awesome because it flows from Christ, it is awesome because it flows through every Christian that we may be a blessing to others. The Holy Spirit equips and empowers people to be a blessing to others. You may have the gift of encouragement, or the gift of leadership, or the gift of showing mercy, or some other gift. Jesus said "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" These gifts from the Holy Spirit should be welling up inside of us like flood waters eager to rise over the banks and wash over the lives of others in a refreshing stream. If they do, people will be blessed and you will be blessed. Let's ALL find a way to serve the Lord in our church and see what happens! Amen.