

Greater Milwaukee Synod Assembly
Sermon for Opening Worship, June 1, 2017
Bishop Paul D. Erickson
John 7:37-39

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.' " Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Grace to you and peace, from God, creator, Christ, and Spirit of love; amen.

I remember it was a hot, summer week in July; I think the year was 1975, the summer between my freshman and sophomore years in high school. I traveled to St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, for a week of camp with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. It was, I suppose, a typical camp-like week, with worship and bible study, but instead of arts and crafts, we had track and field competitions, as well as softball and flag football. There's a lot I've forgotten about that week, but what I'll never forget was sitting under a tree, in a circle of smelly, adolescent boys, and reading the book of Romans.

Now, I had grown up in the church, and since my father was a pastor, I was in worship every single Sunday, so I was familiar with the bible. I knew the stories, I knew the rhythm of readings in the liturgical year, it was the water in which I swam; it was just there. But what was different that week was that, for some reason, a reason I would later come to name as the Holy Spirit, I heard the words on the page speaking directly to me. I began to taste and drink the fresh and life-giving waters of my baptismal promises, and I had no idea how thirsty I was. "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." And again, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." I began to furiously underline every passage that seemed to be speaking to me, and by the end of the week, almost the whole damn book was underlined. For what seemed like the first time in my life, I knew in my head and believed in my heart that the God of the universe, the God of earth and air, sky and sea, knew *me*, and loved *me*, and wanted me to do something with my life.

I wasn't sure just what that was, so I continued to read: theologians like Matthew Fox, *On Becoming a Musical, Mystical Bear*; poets and story-tellers like Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Teaching a Stone to Talk*; prophets and preachers, like Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* and *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, and I began to imagine ways to connect what I knew to be true about the God of justice and mercy with how we lived in the world. You see, at the time, I thought the Christian faith was all about theology and social justice, our heads and our hands. It wasn't until I spent four months in Mexico after college, living with Conchita and Cristobal and spending time in the base Christian community bible studies, that I was drawn back to the fullness of a Gospel that speaks to our heads, our hands, and our hearts. The life of faith is not only about what we know or what we do, but how we let ourselves be loved, and how we share that love with others. Conchita and Cristobal were not brilliant theologians, and their

actions did not dramatically change the social conditions of their community, but with a simple and pure love, they shared what they had received, and they changed people's lives.

“On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’” So, is anyone among us thirsty? Is anyone among us hurting, or lonely, or broken? Is anyone among us afraid, or frustrated, or angry or confused? Is anyone among us thirsty? Then come. Come to the waters of life, and drink, because this water is for you. Drink deeply from God's never-ending fountain of love, and let your hearts be changed.

And then I invite us all to ask ourselves, do we know anyone else who might be thirsty? Is there anyone among us, in our families and our circle of friends, in our congregations and our neighborhoods, is there anyone with whom we have a connection who might be thirsty? Thirsty for love; thirsty for justice; thirsty to know that their lives matter; thirsty for a chance to belong and be accepted not in spite of who they are but because of who they are? Is there anyone among us who needs to know and to experience the saving love of Jesus? Of course there is. And our task, our calling, our privilege is to not simply tell them where they can find what they are thirsting for, it is to remember the promise of Jesus, that “out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

For too long, too many of us have thought it sufficient to simply know where the water is, and too many of our congregations have assumed that if anyone is thirsty for our particular flavor of water, they will come and find us. The time has come for us to remember the invitation to come and drink the water ourselves and let it change us; the time has come for us to reclaim the promise that the water will flow through us, that it is our hearts that will be the vessels by which our neighbors will come to know and experience and drink of God's redeeming and life-giving love. The time has come for us to go and share what we have received.

And as we go, listening to our neighbors to better understand just what their lives are thirsty for, imagining new ways of responding to the thirsts around us, and courageously engaging in acts of justice and witness and love, we might just discover that the Spirit of the living God is at least one step ahead of us. We might just discover that our neighbors have something to offer us, as well; we might just discover that the rhythm of life is both giving and receiving, loving and being loved. We might just discover that, even though the deepest thirsts of our hearts and our lives will never be completely satisfied, the wellspring of God's love will never run dry. Thanks be to God; amen.