

Living Water
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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John 7: 37-52

For much of our human history, survival has been the driving force of behavior. Since the dawn of civilization, most people lived under the very real possibility they could lose everything they needed to survive in the blink of an eye.

And yet, today, most Americans (not necessarily all, but most) live in some of the safest and most prosperous communities in the history of the world. Now I know our society isn't perfect, but compared to the ancient world, or the medieval world, or even the world of the industrial revolution, most people we know live pretty safe and secure lives.

The chances of Monroe being invaded by a members of a rival town is relatively low. And for all the economic problems and injustices that still exist, the chance of any of our neighbors experiencing starvation is also pretty low, thanks to the work of non-profit hunger relief agencies and public-school lunch programs.

And yet, for all of our relative wealth and security, we are a people driven by anxiety. We are not known for our contentment. Our physical needs may be satisfied, but our hearts are not.

It reminds me of that old Looney Tunes cartoon, where Wile E Coyote would be stranded in a desert without water for one reason or another. And he walked longer and longer in the sun and got thirstier and thirstier, he'd eventually think he saw an oasis on the horizon – usually with a couple palm trees and a pool of water. Then he'd run towards it when he got there, he'd start shoveling the water into his mouth ... and then the mirage ... the delusion ... would disappear ... and he realized he was shoveling sand into his mouth the whole time.

Some of us have chased such mirages ... but alternatively, others of us, see the mirage for what it is and despair that we are still thirsty.

We are a bit like the Israelites in the wilderness¹, shortly after God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt. They are in the desert, and they have no water. Their first response is to quarrel, and their second response is to despair – certain that they will NEVER be satisfied and that ultimately, they will die. They cry out to Moses *"Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"*

Sometimes we can be the same way. Our hearts thirst. And we seek satisfaction in many things, but nothing quenches our thirst. We drink the sand of consumerism or addiction, or social media doom scrolling and cynically conclude that we will never be satisfied.

What are the things that you chase, but that in the end only leave you thirstier? What are the mirages you follow, the delusions you pursue, only to find that you are shoveling sand into your mouth?

Or on the other hand, when you feel your thirst, and you look around you at the desert, do you just throw up your hands in despair, declaring that there is no satisfaction to be found?

I went in for an annual check-up the other day, and the doctor told me that I was dehydrated. Drinking water is, like, the most important thing for a body. Intellectually, I know that my body needs it. It's a basic fact of biology that human bodies are 60% water.

If physical thirst is proof that our bodies need water, then in a similar way our spiritual thirst is proof that we are designed to crave spiritual water. The question then is what is that spiritual water – that living water – and where do we get it?

God provided the physical water Israel needed by calling on Moses to strike a rock on Mount Horeb with his staff. Moses did as he was commanded, and by God's grace and power, water flowed from that rock, and the people's thirst was quenched.

In today's scripture, Jesus calls on those who hear him to come to him and drink, because he can quench their thirst. John's gospel is clear that what he has to offer them to quench their thirst is the Holy Spirit.

¹ Exodus Chapter 17

Now, that connection between water, the Messiah, and the Holy Spirit would not have been a surprise to the first-century Jews gathered that day at the Feast of Booths in Jerusalem. That's because there was a special water ceremony that was part of the seventh day of the celebration. So, depending on how John is counting the days of the feast, Jesus cried out these words about living water either on the same day as this water ceremony or the day immediately after it.

In the ceremony, a golden container was filled with water from the pool of Siloam, carried in a procession to the temple, and given to God with the morning sacrifice, along with a daily drink-offering of wine. So, if you are counting there were at least three acts of pouring liquid in this religious rite. One was a remembrance of God's provision of water to Israel in the desert. The second association was with the coming of the messianic age. The third was with the pouring out of the Spirit of God in the last days.

Into that context, Jesus invites them to consider their thirst for the Holy Spirit right then and there. Drawing from the words of Isaiah [55:1], he connects the needs of their hearts to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and he tells them that they can receive what they thirst for through him, just as Israel received water through the rock.

There is the surprising shift in verse thirty-eight. After urging people to come to him and to drink, Jesus then says, "*Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'*" The source of the living water has not changed, Jesus still abides. Jesus remains the source, the Rock out of which the water of the Holy Spirit flows to God's people.

But together, we are a river, a conduit, a channel, a pipeline through which Christ brings living water to others. God's people are meant to receive the grace and the blessing of the Holy Spirit, but that grace and blessing is not to end with them. They are to become a river, flowing to other people, by which Christ can bless others.

That is what Jesus calls us to in our text.

So, we need to ask ourselves, who is thirsty around us?

Who is it in your life whose spiritual thirst is clear? Who do you see chasing after mirages and shoveling sand into their mouths? Who is it around you that is despairing and losing hope?

And what is your typical response to them?

Third, and finally we need to ask: What would it look like for you to be a conduit, a channel, a river of the Holy Spirit in that person's life instead?

And as we begin to consider that, we need to remember again what we are in this picture – in Jesus's metaphor. We are not the water. We cannot satisfy or fix the other person ourselves. The Holy Spirit is the water.

It means we are called to be, as Martin Luther and C.S. Lewis have suggested, "little Christs" to those around us. Not that we are the source of their salvation, but that we are Christ's representatives, and by his power, through his grace, we are his hands and feet, as he offers his Spirit to those around us through us.

Which means we must respond with love and kindness. As they chase mirages, we refrain from disparaging them, but seek to help. Jesus never seems to begin a conversation by chastising thirsty people for not already finding the spiritual water they need – he begins by expressing his sincere desire to help.

In cases when someone is expressing their spiritual thirst in ways that frustrate us, the challenge will be to show love, kindness, and patience – along with sympathy rooted in the recognition that left to ourselves we might be doing the same sorts of things they are.

On the other hand, in cases when someone is misdirecting their spiritual thirst in ways that benefit us, the challenge is to maintain the priorities of Christ. Out of love for the other person, we reveal to them that they are chasing a mirage. That doesn't mean they should stop pursuing success, but they should do so for different reasons. Better paychecks and report cards are not the place to find living water.

We are surrounded by a world that is either trying to drink sand or despairing that they are thirsty creatures living in a universe with no water. And we – you and I – often join them in doing the same things: whether filling our mouths with sand or despairing of our hopeless condition. So let us come to Christ by having compassion on those around us and be conduits of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This is what Christ has called us to. This is the gift that God has given us. Amen.