

## **There's a River of Life Flowing out through Me**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.  
The Day of Pentecost. May 11, 2008. (Text: John 7:37-39)*

Flying back and forth to California these past weeks was a lot easier than driving was a month ago when we went out there. I've been told that people miss a lot by flying instead of driving. I completely agree. You miss thirteen hours behind the wheel of the car, and that's o.k. by me!

When we fly over the dry parts of our great country, it's easy to spot the irrigated areas. Easier to see them from the air than from the highway, don't you think? Brilliant circles and rectangles and valleys of green stand out against a pervasive background of brown. On Planet Earth, water is essential to most forms of life. Human bodies are 55-80% water, depending on our size. We can go without food for many days if we have water, but if we're completely deprived of water we'll die of thirst pretty quickly.

Today is Pentecost, the Church's celebration of the Spirit of God. The gospel tells about Jesus going to the Temple in Jerusalem during a different Jewish festival, one called *Sukkot* or "Booths" in English. One of the features of that celebration was that on the last day of the feast, "the Great Day," the High Priest himself would come and – with great pomp and ceremony – pour out a special offering of water on the altar, a large quantity of water. Having the High Priest officiating was very special, and the occasion was grand. As he poured out the water, he prayed for God to save his people by sending rain —life-giving water for them to drink and to sustain the crops planted in their fields.

It must have upset the congregation in the Temple when Jesus stood up in the middle of them that day, as soon as the High Priest had performed his ceremony, and shouted: "*Let anyone who is thirsty come to ME, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture says, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'*" What Jesus did that day was as shocking to those people as it would be to us if somebody stood up in church here at the end of the Eucharistic prayer and shouted, "*I am the Bread of Life that came down from heaven! So come to ME to get the real bread you need!*"

On Pentecost, we're used to associating the Holy Spirit with imagery of wind and fire because a "rushing violent wind" filled the house and "tongues of fire" rested on each disciple's head when the Holy Spirit first came down on the young Church fifty days after Easter. Red is the color for Pentecost, to remind us of that fire, and the beautiful flowers at the altar this morning look like floral flames. But if you go through the New Testament and count the metaphors used to describe the Spirit, *water* is the one that occurs most often. Paul says "*in the Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*"

The people present in the Temple on the day Jesus interrupted the High Priest's solemn water-offering ceremony couldn't make a mistake about what Jesus meant. He meant that *He* was the answer to the High Priest's ritual prayers! *He* was offering them the "water" they really needed, a direct connection with the living God that comes through faith. In the verses we read from John this morning it says the "water" Jesus had in mind was the Holy Spirit, and that the Spirit would flow out from Jesus and from the hearts of *all* who came to believe in Jesus. —That means the Holy Spirit flows out through *us* when we share our faith.

There's a song we used to sing in church twenty or thirty years ago here in the Diocese of Colorado, but which I haven't heard in a long time. It's a seventies tune, so it's pretty dated. (I'm pretty "dated" too, so I guess that's why I remember it.) I won't try to sing it for you, but the words of the chorus go like this: "*There's a river of life flowing out through me. / It makes the lame to walk and the blind to see, / Opens prison doors, sets the captives free. / There's a river of life flowing out through me.*"

I want to tell you a fact about faith that maybe you don't know: *if we don't share it, our faith DIES inside us*. I said earlier that when we fly across dry parts of our country we can look down on the brown landscape and see where life-giving water has been poured out, creating green fields and producing food for animals and people. If you fly over the Holy Land, the land of Israel and Palestine, you can look down on the Jordan River Valley – the most productive part of that arid country. The Jordan River starts in the north, near Lebanon, and flows south, creating the big lake the gospels call “the Sea of Galilee.” As you look down from the plane, you can see that the countryside around the Sea of Galilee is the most green and productive land in the region.

As you continue flying, you can see that the Jordan flows south out of the Sea of Galilee and ends thirty or forty miles farther along in another body of water, a lake that's called “the Dead Sea.” You probably know that the Dead Sea is “dead” because water only flows into it; no water flows out of it. It's like the Great Salt Lake in Utah. When a lake traps all the water that comes into it and doesn't let any water out, the mineral content of the water gets so high that nothing can live in it. The water becomes toxic, and the lake “dies”.

That's a picture of what happens to Christians when we don't share our faith. We become just like the Dead Sea. The water of life flows into us, but if it doesn't also *flow out from us*, it will change. It will die.

God is a Giver. The Bible says that God is “*the giver of every good and perfect gift.*” The epistle lesson this morning describes some of the gifts of the Spirit that God has given to the Church. But the main thing for us to remember is that God intends us to *pass along* everything we've received.

This morning Virginia and Brian McNellis are bringing their little daughter to be baptized. That's a simple thing, but the symbolism is powerful. It means they want to *pass along* their faith to their child. That faith isn't going to be passed along by the sacrament of Holy Baptism itself. It's going to be passed along as Brian and Virginia teach her what they believe and demonstrate their own faith in action.

Almost all of us have a habit of thinking about coming to church on Sunday as being something like taking our cars to the filling station —only not as expensive! We come to get “filled.” We come to “receive” something from God, like the presence of Christ in Holy Communion, maybe a word of wisdom from the Bible, maybe inspiration from a sermon, or maybe just love and reassurance from friends who are worshiping with us. That's all fine and good – as long as we never forget that we're being *filled* so that we can go out of here and *be emptied* again. We're “getting” in order to be able *to give*.

Most of us are pretty humble about the personal spiritual resources we have available to share. It's healthy for us to stay humble, no question about that. But the reality is that we each have received the life-giving Spirit of God. We each have received a gift from God. Each of us has something to give away, in God's name.

We might not realize exactly *how much* we've been given until we decide to start giving it away. Then we'll discover that the old seventies song I quoted has a lot of truth in it: “*There's a RIVER of life flowing out through me.*” —A river of *LIFE*... a river that will keep on flowing, keep on filling us back up, again and again —just as long as we keep letting it *flow out* through us to others.