

May 28th, 2023

John 7:37-52 “Out of the Believer’s Heart”

One of the unspoken perks of being a parent or a grandparent or a “cool auntie or uncle” is that you don’t have to make excuses for watching cartoons. There should be no shame in liking cartoons as an adult, but there is a stigma associated with it. You don’t often hear about co-workers discussing the latest episode of Scooby-Doo at the water cooler on Monday. But let’s be up front and honest. Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck’s “Wabbit Season/Duck Season” is up there with Abbot and Costello’s “Who’s on First” as one of the greatest two-person comedy routines ever written. Granted, most cartoons were not quality entertainment like the stuff Warner Brothers, MGM or Fleisher Studios were producing, and maybe that contributed to the stigma. Gen X and the Millennials, however, broke the mold. We’re the ones who finally said, “We’re not ashamed of watching cartoons. In fact, we’re going to make cartoons *for* adults.” And thus, adult cartoons like *the Simpsons* and *King of the Hill* were born. But there’s still something a little ... pedestrian about adults watching and enjoying cartoons made for kids. “C’mon you’re kidding me ... you watch *Batman the Animated Series*?” Maybe. But it’s with my kids. Mind you, I didn’t have kids when that one came out but who’s keeping score?

Since my kids were born, though, there have been some great cartoons made for all ages; *Avatar the Last Airbender* being my favorite. There are some profound morality lessons in that show that young and old alike can learn and they often lead to some great family discussions around the table. The problem with *Avatar the Last Airbender* is the same problem that the *Harry Potter* books and movies had. Want to guess what that is? A lot of churches frown upon them. Why? Because there's magic involved. It's "new-agey." There are lessons about how important it is to be good stewards of our natural resources and how to live peacefully with your fellow humans and all those other heretical ideas that are supposedly contrary to Biblical Christianity. The premise of *Avatar the Last Airbender* is that there are four distinct civilizations on earth trying to live peacefully with each other. There's the water tribe who have mastered control of water, the earth kingdom who have mastered control of rock and soil, the fire nation who have mastered control over fire and the air nomads who have mastered control over the air. How new-agey can you get, right? Anyone who talks about earth, air, fire and water that much has got to be some tree-hugging pagan or something.

Except ... I have one word to offer ... one *name* to challenge the notion that God, and therefore the church, should reject the idea that one can use supernatural means to manipulate air, earth, fire, or water: Moses. See what just happened there? In the Bible, Moses is portrayed as an air bender, an earth bender, a fire bender and most importantly a water

bender. And the story of Israel's Exodus from Egypt is a profound morality lesson that young and old alike can learn from and that often leads to some great family discussions around the table. But the star of this week's scripture is Jesus. Anyone want to talk about how Jesus walked on water? Or how he said that faith can move mountains or how he used mud from the earth to heal a blind man? Oh dear heavens, Pastor Jesse is wound up again this morning.

Last week we had our annual Pentecost in the Park celebration with our sister church from Paradise. The problem is that last week was *not* actually Pentecost because it's really hard to reserve the park for Memorial Day Weekend! Today is "real" Pentecost, so let's continue our celebration, shall we? The lectionary gives us a gospel text this week that we don't often get to study because we always use the one from Acts 2 on Pentecost. As I mentioned last week, sometimes we say that Pentecost is the birthday of the church, but I like how our pew bibles label Acts 2 as "The Coming of the Holy Spirit." For me that's the most important part of the story. By the way, does anyone remember how the Holy Spirit manifested on the day of Pentecost? As a rushing wind and then as tongues of fire that rested on the disciples. And for our text this week, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as "Water that flows out of the believer's heart." There's those pesky elements again! Wind, fire and water.

Now, as usual, the context for our passage this morning is very important to understanding what this all means. Let's set the stage for what happened before Jesus compared the Holy Spirit with "rivers of living water" here in verse 37. Back in verse 10 of this chapter, we discover that Jesus' brothers had planned on going to Jerusalem for the Festival of Booths also called "Sukkot." According to the Book of Leviticus, Sukkot started out as a minor festival celebrating the completion of the harvest. By the time of 1 Kings, Sukkot had evolved into this huge 8-day, temple-centered commemoration of how God protected the Israelites in the wilderness after they escaped from Egypt (thanks in part to Moses the water-bender.) In Jerusalem, during the time of Jesus, one of the rituals that was performed at Sukkot was that priests would process from the Temple to draw water from the Pool of Siloam, then return through what's called the Water Gate to pour the water on the altar. Anyone remember where Jesus made the mud to heal the blind man? By the Pool of Siloam where you can still visit today if you travel to Jerusalem.

So at the beginning of chapter seven, Jesus was in Galilee hanging out with his brothers who wanted to go to Jerusalem for Sukkot. He was trying to lay low because the Jewish High Council was looking for an excuse to kill him. Jesus' brothers were giving him a hard time about not wanting to go. They were saying, "Listen, if you want people to believe you're the messiah, you can't be sneaking around like this. Go out there and show yourself to the world. Let them know

who you are.” They were actually teasing him because as verse 5 in this chapter says, “for not even his brothers believed in him.” Jesus said, “No, my time hasn’t come yet.” So his brothers said, “Hey, look ... we’re going to go to the festival. If you want to lurk around out here in secret, go ahead. You stay out of trouble there buddy.” But Jesus wasn’t very good at “staying out of trouble” and ended up going to Jerusalem for Sukkot anyway. And to no one’s surprise, he started teaching and preaching near the temple and folks started arguing about whether he was the messiah or not, which of course made a scene and drew the attention of the people who wanted to kill him. And in the midst of all the arguments and turmoil, Jesus made a statement. “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.” Then the gospel writer adds this commentary – “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.”

Remember, this was pre-Pentecost. This is before the disciples received the Spirit from the resurrected Jesus and it was before the Spirit had been unleashed on all the believers. Also remember that John’s gospel has a very different version of how this happened than Luke did in Acts, but that’s neither here nor there for us. The point is that the scripture that Connie read was the first time Jesus said

anything about *others* receiving the Holy Spirit. And to no one's surprise, Jesus used the image of water to describe the Spirit. And if you've read John, you know he's all about the water. In John 1, Jesus is baptized in water and receives the Holy Spirit. In John 2 he turns water into wine. In John 3, when he meets Nicodemus for the first time, Jesus tells Nicodemus, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." In chapter 4, Jesus tells the woman at the well that, "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." When the soldiers pierced Jesus' side on the cross to see if he was still alive, water flowed out, not blood. And here at Sukkot, a minor festival that started out as a simple, outdoor harvest festival then became a temple-centered spectacle, Jesus was saying that he was the source of living water, not a temple where water had to be brought in from a pool and poured over a rock. Jesus is the source of the spirit that will be poured out on the believers after his death, resurrection, and ascension.

His words caused quite a ruckus, and the temple police were called to bring Jesus in, but they ended up not making an arrest. The chief priests were not happy about this. They wanted him arrested so they could have an excuse to sentence him to death. But then Nicodemus spoke up and said, "Our law doesn't judge someone unless they've had a fair trial ... does it?" When Jesus had his encounter with Nicodemus back in chapter 3, John just kind of left it

hanging as to whether Nicodemus “got it” or not. According to our scripture today, it appears he did get it. That didn’t stop the chief priests from throwing a desperately corny insult in verse 52 to get to get the last word. “What, Nick ... are you from Galilee now or something?”

Here are some thoughts to consider on this day we officially celebrate the outpouring of God’s Spirit onto all believers -- Pentecost is about the gift of the Holy Spirit. When we read our typical Pentecost scripture from Acts, we focus on the wind and fire. Here in John, we focus on the image of Jesus being a font of living water for a thirsty world. As believers and followers of Jesus, *we also* become that font of living water for a thirsty world. Here’s a question for us to think about - What kind of living water is flowing through us? How are we providing living water for those who are thirsty? Who are the thirsty, and how do we recognize their thirst in the first place? Do they have to tell us they’re thirsty, or is there a way for us to be more proactive in determining their needs? Here’s another question that’s a little more personal: What is the good news or the living water of Jesus that’s flowing through you? Or is it? And if it isn’t flowing, what keeps us from drawing from that source of living water? What keeps us from receiving that life-giving Spirit? Is it prejudice? Stubbornness? Fear? All of the above?

A body can go without food for ten days ... maybe longer depending on the circumstances. But a body can only survive three days without water. We cannot expect the church to

live and breathe and grow and prosper unless the living water of the Spirit is present here in our midst. We cannot expect those who are thirsty for God's Spirit to be a part of a faith community that has dried up and has no water to offer. Last week, we gave testimonies about what God is doing in and among our two churches, and one of the things that I'm thankful for is that the Spirit of the Living God is present in both congregations, and we know this because look at all the folks gathered together last week! And it wasn't just for the burgers and hotdogs either. We were there, and you are here now because the outpouring of the Holy Spirit among God's people is evident. That's what we celebrate on Pentecost. It's not that we have a comfy building or a big fancy social hall or whatever. We are here because God's spirit flows like living water out of the hearts of those who have gathered to celebrate God's acts of kindness and mercy. May the Holy Spirit that was present on the day of Pentecost flow in us, among us, and through us both now and throughout the year ahead and for the years to come.