

I had been wandering around rather aimlessly in the terrain of my sermon all day. I'd contemplated boundaries, structure, rhythm and discipline – which all seemed a bit incongruous for a sermon on the Holy Spirit – that uncontrollable, unpredictable, fluid, connecting, disrupting, disturbing, enlivening energy of God. I'd contemplated fire – being forged by fire, having a fire in the belly, scorching, death-dealing, life-giving, regenerative fire. And then there was water – streams of living water, and over the course of the day, I had an increasing desire to get myself to physically to water – to a body of water – to living, flowing water. To put my feet, my hands, my face in this living flowing water – to feel its movement and energy. As my compulsion grew to get myself to water, the pages of my sermon remained blank – empty – not a word to share save the scattered notes of my aimless wandering contemplation. I was running out of time, and as the day progressed and slipped away, my compulsion to get to water only grew. It made no sense, but my thirst for this living water simply would not be ignored.

As the tension was mounting between the blank page in front of me and my desire to make my way to the river, Alice, my pup, came up and nudged me. This is her “tell” – the way she communicates when I've let the water bowl run dry, and she wants a drink. But I am in another head space – reading, praying, contemplating, worrying about the blank page and scattered notes in front of me, and so I pet her absentmindedly as I often do on these days when I am consumed by the task at hand – usually a sermon – paradoxically scattered and focused at the same time. And then, with a start I remembered Alice's “tell” – the empty bowl and her thirst, so I filled her water bowl, knowing unequivocally that I must quench my thirst as well. As physical and spiritual thirst converged, I jumped on my bike, headed to the river, took off my shoes, and put my feet in to the rushing flow of the James – Richmond's living water – to drink it all in.

On the last great day of the festival, the Gospel of John records, Jesus stood up and shouted, ‘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.’”

Our Gospel lesson this morning is pithy, as Gospel lessons go – five short sentences – but those five short sentences contain threads to the essence of the entirety of John's gospel, weaving in themes from the beginning to the end. There are so many threads, we won't get to all of them today, but to grasp even some of them, there is a matter of interpretation to first attend to, and it has to do with the sentence, “Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

The word that is typically translated “heart” in this sentence, is not, in fact, the Greek word for heart. A closer translation might be “innermost being” — “out of the believer’s innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.” Yet closer still, it’s the same word found in the story of Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus when he asks, “How can a man be born when he is old? It’s impossible to enter the mother’s womb for a second time and be born, isn’t it?”

The word is womb – that fecund place in a woman’s body that nurtures and brings forth new life. “Out of a believer’s womb shall flow rivers of living water.” Jesus is pointing to the womb-place within his followers – that that place within them – within their innermost being – that has the power to bring forth new life – that bears the live-giving Spirit of Christ – the spirit that Jesus unleashed in the world from the cross after he said, “I thirst.” After he drank the sour wine, and said “It is finished.” Jesus gave up his spirit, not in death, but in life. He had birthed new life in his followers, and now gave up his spirit that they might birth new life in others – that they might become the source of living water, living ecstatically and passionately for the world that God so loved that God gave – and gave up – God’s only begotten son.¹

As then, there remains today so many parched people and places in this world – people and places that are crying out for living water.

I am thinking of a place in the Sonoran wilderness of Southern California and Arizona that a seminary colleague, Christiana Peppard, wrote about in her book, *Just Water*. There, she writes, “on the reservation of the Tohono O’odham (Toe-hoe-no Oh-ah-dam) tribe, are the remains of the 150-250 people a year who die of dehydration while trying to reach safety, their families, or economic opportunity. They are not US citizens. To many Americans, they are a threat and a scourge on the economy. To the government, they lack legal status. But they are also known, on both sides of the border, as mother, father, sister, friend. And so to relief workers – many of whom are Christian, many of whom have no religious creed – they are people who need help. In theological terms they are neighbors who deserve to be fed, clothed, and given water for the journey – *for as you did to the least of them*, says Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, *so you did it to me...* Humanitarian relief workers store caches of water in gallon-sized jugs in the Sonora in the hopes that immigrants will stumble upon them, their thirst momentarily relieved... It is impossible to say who will survive and who will not.”²

I am also thinking of the people of Flint, Michigan, who were for several years literally contaminated with lead poisoning and dangerous bacteria by water coming out of their taps – water

that their government officials assured them was safe despite the evidence from color, taste, smell, and skin irritations. Throughout all of this residents were required to pay for this contaminated water, and they residents still don't know what the long terms effects of the contamination will be on their children because there is no safe level of lead exposure. The impact can be both severe and irreversible.³ As the Rev. Dan Scheid, rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, has said, "As for the long-term health, educational and psychological effects on the generation of babies, toddlers and preschoolers, we don't know what that will look like..."⁴ What we do know was shared by Katie Forsyth from the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan, "The Flint Residents have been hurt emotionally and spiritually by a system seemingly built to marginalize the voiceless..."⁵

And I am thinking of the James River – Richmond's living water, that was once dangerously contaminated but that now teems with life, even as it is still threatened by an overload of human-made pollution every day.

You know, before I left the James River yesterday, I collected some water to bring with me. That water, the living water from the James, is now intermingled with the living water that was blessed here earlier – that was sprinkled over the chapel and doused on us as a reminder of our baptismal vows, as a reminder that we are children of God, as a reminder of Jesus' Spirit within our innermost being. I don't think it's too strong a statement to say that just as God so loved the world that God gave the world Jesus, God so loves the world that God gives us. We have received this spirit that we might live ecstatically and passionately, that we might choose to help birth new life in others, that out of our wombs might flow streams of living water into the parched places of the world. God so loves the world that God gives us. Receive this living water. Choose to give life.

¹ Reid, Barbara E. "John 7:37-39." *Interpretation* 63, no. 4 (October 2009): 394-396. *ATLASerials Religion Collection, EBSCOhost* (accessed June 4, 2017) and Fredrickson, David E. "Living as gods on our skin: the vigil of Pentecost and Pentecost Sunday (John 7:37-39)." *Word and World* 23, no. 2 (2002 2003): 210-215. *ATLASerials Religion Collection, EBSCOhost* (accessed June 4, 2017).

² Peppard, Christiana Z. *Just Water: Theology, Ethics, and the Global Water Crisis*. Orbis Books; 1 edition (January 10, 2014). Pp. 182-183.

³ "Christian Communities Call for Swift Government Action to Heal Injuries Inflicted on the People of Flint, Michigan." Released February 8, 2016 by Creation Justice Ministries.

http://www.creationjustice.org/uploads/2/5/4/6/25465131/christian_communities_respond_to_flint_water_crisis.pdf

⁴ Wilson, Lynette. "Church considers long-term response to Flint's water crisis." *Episcopal News Service*, January 26, 2016. <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2016/01/26/church-considers-long-term-response-to-flints-water-crisis/>

⁵ Katie Forsyth. "Flint Water Crisis: Episcopalians Respond in Faith." March 11, 2016. <http://eastmich.org/the-flint-water-crisis-episcopalians-respond-in-faith/>