

May 31, 2020

John 7:37-39

“If Anyone Thirsts . . .”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

John writes in the second verse of the seventh chapter of his gospel, “Now the Jews’ Feast of Booths was at hand.” Our appointed reading begins at verse thirty-seven of the same seventh chapter and refers to “the last day of the feast.” As you can see, the Feast of Booths, also known as the Feast of Tabernacles looms large in this whole chapter. The more you know about the feast, the richer your interpretation will be in regard to our appointed gospel lesson and its connection with the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit at the time of Pentecost, which we are celebrating this morning.

In the Old Testament, the Lord God had instituted a religious calendar for the Israelites to follow, and it was a calendar that pointed to Jesus. The feast of Booths was the only feast where the people were specifically to “rejoice before him (Lev. 23:40).” And there was much reason to rejoice as the seven day celebration began after the fall harvest and when the olives hung heavy on the trees. The people were instructed by God to build and live in booths or tents that were made of olive, palm, and myrtle branches. The booths reminded the people of their forty years in the hot and dry wilderness where there was very little water. The booths were to remind them of their longing for the House of the Lord that Christ would make for his people to live forever.

Wandering in the hot and dry wilderness after the exodus, where there was so very little water, the people became exceedingly thirsty. Also, without water to grow food, there wasn’t much to eat. Nevertheless, the God of Israel provided for his people. And when the people moved into the promised land, they lived in a land that was dependent on seasonal rains. Fresh water was extremely important and a picture of a spiritual reality. Just as the people looked to God for water to drink, and for the land to produce their food, they were to look to God to quench their spiritual thirst and fill their spiritual hunger.

Since the Feast of Booths took place at the end of the dry season, there was a special element to the feast that involved fresh water. It was connected to Solomon’s prayer at the Feast of Booths at the dedication of the temple. Solomon prayed (2 Chronicles 6:26-27):

When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you, if they pray toward this place and acknowledge your name and turn from their sin, when you afflict them, then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel, when you teach them the good way in which they should walk, and grant rain upon your land, which you have given to your people as an inheritance.

No water means no life. So it is that spiritual life cannot exist without the Lord God. No water is connected to sins being retained. Water is connected to forgiveness. So the priests had a ceremony that included a prayer for rain. The prophet Isaiah writes (12:3): “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”

On each of the seven days of the Feast, a golden pitcher was filled by the High Priest with water from the Pool of Siloam and was carried in procession back to the temple, accompanied by flutes. As the

procession approached the Water Gate on the south side of the inner court, three blasts of joy from the shofar were sounded. While thousands of pilgrims watched, the priests processed around the altar with the pitcher of water while the temple choir would sing the Hallel, that is, Psalms 113-118. These Psalms are incredibly important. Psalm 113 says, “Blessed be the name of the Lord ... He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap ...” Psalm 114 says, “Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water.” Psalm 115 says, “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!” Psalm 116 says, “For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling; I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living.” Psalm 117 says, “Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord!” And finally, Psalm 118 says, “Save us, we pray, O Lord! O Lord, we pray, give us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord ... Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!”

When the temple choir reached Psalm 118, every male pilgrim shook willow and myrtle twigs tied with palm in his right hand (a sign of life), while in his left hand he raised a piece of citrus fruit (a sign of the gathered harvest), and all cried three times: “Give thanks to the Lord!” The water was offered to God at the time of the morning sacrifice, along with the daily drink-offering of wine. The wine and the water were poured into their respective silver bowls, and then poured out before the Lord. One who knows the Scripture can hardly keep out of the mind the record of John (19:34): “But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.” That brings us now to our gospel lesson.

On the “last and greatest day of the Feast,” most likely sometime after the wine and the water had been poured out before the Lord, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” To the Jewish pilgrims there at the Feast, these words would have been earth-shaking. To the Jewish mind, the water pouring ceremony at the Feast of Booths not only was about the Lord’s provision of water in the hot and dry wilderness and now in the promised land, but it refers to the messianic age in which a stream from the sacred rock, who is Christ, would flow over the whole earth. Remember Moses and the water from the rock in the wilderness? Paul writes, “For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ (1 Cor. 10:4b).” Again, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water, and John further comments, “Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

I hope that you can see just how packed this little section of Scripture really is. As we now move to make the necessary applications, we see that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Feast of Booths. He is the living water that imparts forgiveness and eternal life. From him flow rivers of living water - the Spirit with Scripture - who testify together concerning all that Jesus the Savior has done. In the Spirit and Scripture we have Christ and the quenching of our thirst that is also for the nations that are parched. The Jewish people knew from the Old Testament prophets that there would be a pouring out of the Spirit in the last days - Pentecost. Jesus is announcing all of these realities in our text for this morning. Jesus is saying, “whoever comes to me I will not only quench their thirst, but I will equip them in such a way that rivers

of my living water will flow from them to others. Not only will they be refreshed and satisfied, but by the Holy Spirit and the Scripture, great consolation and strength will go to many other people to serve them.” As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

**“If Anyone Thirsts . . .”** Luther correctly reminds us that this is not a physical thirst. It is only like it, as if we are in a dry and weary land where there is no water. He writes that what Jesus is referring to here is “a thirst for the soul, a spiritual thirst, a heartfelt desire, yes, a distressed, wretched, terrified, and aroused conscience, a despondent and frightened heart which longs to know on what terms it is with God.” Indeed, it is a soul that feels sin and death, and is thirsty for forgiveness and eternal life.

**“If Anyone Thirsts . . .”** Jesus says, “Let him come to me and drink!” As we can see, this is a thirst that cannot be appeased until Christ our Lord appears to us by his Spirit and Scripture and says: “If you would like to find relief from sin and death, if you would be content and enjoy peace of mind and a conscience where all is well, then you must come only to me. In my death is the death of your sin and your death. In my sufferings is the removal of the punishment that you deserve. In my life is a perfect life that I can give to you. ‘Believe!’ in my promise, for my promise of forgiveness will satisfy your real thirst and finally lead you to heaven.” I leave you with a portion of the words from Psalm 63, a psalm of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah:

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.  
2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,  
beholding your power and glory.  
3 Because your steadfast love is better than life,  
my lips will praise you.  
4 So I will bless you as long as I live;  
in your name I will lift up my hands.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott