

THE DAY OF PENTECOST (A-RCL) – June 4, 2017

Acts 2:1-21; (Psalm 104:25-35, 37)

(1 Corinthians 12:3b-13) (John 20:19-23 or) John 7:37-39

Bread & Belonging Service (9:00 AM)

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Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord / with all your graces now outpoured
on each believer's mind and heart; / your fervent love to them impart.
Lord, by the brightness of your light / in holy faith your church unite;
from ev'ry land and ev'ry tongue,
this to your praise, O Lord, our God be sung: Alleluia! Alleluia!

[Text: German hymn, 15th cen., st. 1; Martin Luther (1483–1546), sts. 2-3; tr. composite *ELW*
#395:1; Tune: *Enchiridion*, Erfurt, 1524]

And when the day of Pentecost had come, they – the apostles, together with "certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus," [Acts 1:14, NRSV] and Jesus' brothers – they were all together in one place – when suddenly, they heard a sound like the rush of a mighty *wind*, and they saw tongues of *fire* resting on each one of them. "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit." In the Pentecost story recorded in Acts the elements of *wind* and *fire* are symbols of the Holy Spirit.

But today's *Gospel* lifts up an additional image for us: It is the last day of Sukkoth – the Feast of Tabernacles (also known as the Feast of Booths). Sukkoth (or Booths) was the festival that recalled the Israelites' wilderness wanderings. It was a harvest feast, occurring in the fall at the end of the dry season. It became the occasion of prayers for rain. The observance included a celebratory water-drawing and water-pouring ceremony: On each of seven days of the festival a procession would go down to "draw water with joy" [Isaiah 12:3] from the pool of Siloam. A priest filled a golden pitcher with water, which was then carried in procession to the Water Gate of the temple, where the people halted while the Shofar (ram's horn) was blown. The people then walked up the slanting bridge to the altar. The pitcher of water was emptied simultaneously with a pitcher of wine into silver bowls with small holes in the bottom. The libation of water was a reminder of the water from the rock in the wilderness. [Numbers 20:2-13] For each of the first six days of the festival, the people walked around the altar once, singing psalms, but on the seventh day, there was a sevenfold circling of the altar.

[<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14794-water-drawing-feast-of>, accessed 6.2.2017;
James Limburg, *Proclamation 5, Easter, Series B* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p 63;
<https://www.meaningfullife.com/sukkot-water-pouring-ceremony/>]

It is in the context of this feast – on this great day of the festival – that Jesus stands up and cries 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.' Now [Jesus] said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive ..." [John 37b-39a, NRSV] In this reading from John's gospel, the coming of the Spirit is associated, not with wind and fire, but with *water*. Thus, on *this* Day of Pentecost, I'd like us to reflect on the element of *water*. How is it a symbol of the Holy Spirit?

Water – in many creation stories, water is spoken of as the source of life. Tertullian – that is, *Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus* – Tertulian, "prolific early Christian author [c. 155 – 240 AD] from Carthage in the Roman province of Africa" [<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tertullian>, accessed 6.2.2017] wrote: "But we little fish, like our Fish Jesus Christ, are born in water, and it is only by remaining in water that we are safe."

[https://books.google.com/books?id=iZHYAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA46&lpg=PA46&dq=tertullian:++we+are+like+fish&source=bl&ots=U6W9nSJ8hS&sig=PGfUa1p3gi9v3AQiIT0nysbMpdA&hl=en&a=X&ved=0ahUKEwj50aHj05_UAhVB3SYKHfUVDJAJQ6AEIOjAE#v=onepage&q=tertullian%3A%20%20we%20are%20like%20fish&f=false, accessed 6.2.2017]

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, a wind from God – the Spirit of God – hovered over the face of the waters. [Genesis 1:1, 2b] The element of water is mentioned frequently in Scripture. **What are some biblical references of water that come to mind for you?** [*pause for responses*]

- 1) water for cleansing
- 2) water for testing someone's purity
- 3) water for blessing
- 4) water for baptism
- 5) water for transition from one stage of life to the next (sometimes described as a descent into the waters of the Deep)
- 6) water for refreshment
- 7) and, in a land where existence was often precarious, water for life

Our bodies are 90% water – it is an element that is essential for life itself. //

But what is it like to have *too much* water? [*pause for responses*]

- 1) flash floods (crops can't be planted)
- 2) homes destroyed, food sources ruined

Our bodies can become bloated, with fluid retention. We may feel that we are "in over our heads," that we are "drowning" – perhaps in a "sea of

paperwork." Our behavior may lead us not only into "hot water," but also into "deep water." Maybe we're just plain clammy or soggy – or maybe a bit mildewy.

Some of us fear water literally because we don't know how to swim! And some of us fear *drinking* water because we as humans have polluted our rivers with chemicals, our harbors with debris, and our oceans with oil. But we may *also* fear the "watery" side of ourselves; we may be afraid of the "feeling" function in ourselves. Betsy Caprio, in her book, *The Woman Sealed in the Tower*, a book exploring the legend of Saint Barbara, puts it this way:

. . . too often, we cut ourselves off from our ability to feel because it is so risky, so painful to do so. *Too much* water, we have reasoned at some unconscious level, will drown us – or, at the very least, release floods which may threaten to overwhelm both ourselves and others. . . . We even say, "I never cry, because I'm afraid if I start I won't be able to stop," and speak of seas or rivers of tears and waves of grief. [(New York: Paulist Press, 1982), p 24]

Sometimes when one person in a relationship feels unwilling or unable to cry, the other person may try to do the weeping for both of them. //

And what is it like to have *too little* water? [pause for responses]

- 1) drought - Dust Bowls
- 2) animals can't be supported on sparse vegetation
- 3) crops die
- 4) famine

A lack of water leaves us desiccated, dehydrated, dried up. Cut off from the source of life, we become parched and withered.

And Jesus says: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. Those 'who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.' [John 4:14a, NRSV] As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Jesus said this about the Spirit.

"Rivers of living water" – Jesus speaks of the waters that flow "like an everflowing stream." [Amos 5:24, NRSV] "Living water" is a phrase that refers literally to "those rivers, wells and streams in the desert world of Palestine that could be counted on to flow reliably even during the dry season. Such waters were more reliable than the numerous wadis, which flowed only

during the short rainy season or after a storm in the mountains." [*Homily Service*, May 1988, 34] Only the "everflowing streams," the rivers that flowed year round, could be counted on to sustain life. And in this "living water" we find an image of the Holy Spirit: The gift of the Spirit is reliable even during the dry season; "hot, drought-filled times will never dry up the river that is the Spirit." [*Homily Service*, May 1988, 34; c.f.: *Homily Service*, May 1994, 53]

Through the prophet Isaiah comes the invitation, "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters". [Isaiah 55:1a, NRSV] And through that same prophet the promise is given: "For I will *pour* water on the thirsty land, / and streams on the dry ground; / I will *pour* my spirit upon your descendants, / and my blessing on your offspring." [Isaiah 44:3, NRSV, italics added]

In today's First Reading, we hear Peter's reference to the prophet Joel: "In the last days it will be, God declares, / that I will *pour out* my Spirit upon all flesh, / and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, / and your old men shall dream dreams. / Even upon my slaves, both men and women, / in those days I will *pour out* my Spirit; / and they shall prophesy." [Acts 2:17-18, NRSV, italics added]

And perhaps here I could offer a word of caution: When we pray, "Come, Holy Spirit," do we know what we ask? Are we willing to let go of our dried-up hopes? Are we willing to give up the life that is flooding us and overwhelming us – but that is so familiar to us? Will we risk loss of control, our cherished dignity and propriety, the predictability of our lives, to experience the surprise of the Spirit? Will we say yes to new life, open wide our hearts and receive its abundance, then live with abandon? [*Homily Service*, May 1988, p 39] //

As an element, water is a mobile one. Thus water is an image of change. If we do not want our hearts to be changed, perhaps we ought not to pray the prayers of Pentecost. [*Homily Service*, June 1990, pp 9-10] //

Notice that in the Acts account the disciples were gathered together in one place. In the first chapter of Acts we read that they all "with one accord devoted themselves to prayer." [Acts 1:14, RSV] Thirsting, they took time to come to the waters of life. When the gift of the Holy Spirit became manifest among them, they did not rest contentedly in the room where they had gathered. No, they "took to the streets," as it were, sharing the wonderful news of the gift of God's Spirit. Remembering their encounter with the risen Christ, through the miracle of the gift of the Holy Spirit, they were pointed to

an uncertain future. Would they dream dreams and see visions? Would they be energized for witness and mission? Would they remain faithful in the face of persecution and trial? //

Jesus said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." In order for a river to be "alive," water has to flow both in and out: Water has to flow *through*. If we only have energy going *out*, without being replenished, we will become over-extended and dry up. If, on the other hand, we expect to only *receive* the gifts of the Spirit, we become like the Dead Sea, which has no outlet; we become stagnant and lifeless. "Out of the believer's heart" – although translated this way in the NRSV, Gail Ramshaw notes that the Greek in verse 38 "is ambiguous: is the source of the living water Jesus, or the believer? The sacramental Christian responds Yes to both. Christ the water, incarnating God's water of creation, flows continuously in the Spirit, who waters the believers, who themselves become the spring of living water in the world." Not only is water a symbol of the Holy Spirit, "water also functions," she says, "as a symbol of one another in the church. Filled with the Spirit, we nourish one another. We are a cup of cold water for one another." [Gail Ramshaw, "Water," *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, © 2002 Augsburg Fortress, p. 408-409.] //

This response is not only individual, not only congregational, not only synodical, but global. *Seeds for the Parish* is a paper published by the ELCA. In the words of the Spring 2017 issue: "This Pentecost Sunday, as we commemorate the year of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, congregations across the ELCA will pause to reflect on the global community of which we are a part – a community of people living out our faith, serving our neighbors and sharing God's love with the world." ["This Pentecost Sunday, lift up our Global Ministries," p. 3] As members together of the ELCA, we are springs of living water through, for example, Lutheran Disaster Response, where, in addition to responding to the refugee crisis and working to protect migrant minors, Lutheran Disaster Response works in places in the world with too much water; for example: in the Caribbean and the Southeastern United States after the major flooding from Hurricane Matthew; in the Louisiana Gulf Coast and in West Virginia where there was major flooding. And Lutheran Disaster Response works in places with too little water; for example, in response to the Africa Drought; and in South Sudan, where nearly 5 million people are food insecure in an internationally declared famine, our accompanying support includes providing water and sanitation to survivors).

[//">http://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Relief-and-Development/Lutheran-Disaster-Response?_ga=2.192111788.704545002.1496865214-1551911182.1492712070 //](http://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Relief-and-Development/Lutheran-Disaster-Response?_ga=2.192111788.704545002.1496865214-1551911182.1492712070)

"It is through water," writes Hildegard of Bingen – that 12th-century German Benedictine abbess, artist, author, composer, pharmacist, preacher, mystic, visionary: "It is through water that the Holy Spirit overcomes all injustice, bringing to fulfillment all [the Spirit's] gifts ... gifts, such that humankind might thrive in the moisture of justice and stream to spiritual things in the current of truth." [In Gabriele Uhlein, *Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen*, Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company, 1983, p. 120]

Paul, in his letter to the church at Corinth, writes: "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body –...and we were all made to *drink* of one Spirit." [1 Corinthians 12:13a, c, NRSV]

On this Pentecost Sunday it is appropriate to remember *our* baptism – when we were bathed in God's living waters. Bathed in God, we are washed from sin; immersed in the sea of God, we are cleansed and forgiven. Daily we are buoyed up by the waters of new life, accompanied by the continuing love of God and encouraged by the communion of saints.

On this Pentecost Sunday, although flooded with what seems to be a veritable torrent of horrific news, though overwhelmed with difficult issues, though drowning in a sea of worry or overwork, we are called, as Pastor Kari Jo said in her sermon last Sunday, to "drink more deeply from the Spirit's bounty" as we join others around the table of the Eucharist.

On this Pentecost Sunday, the invitation is extended: "Let anyone who is thirsty come and drink. Drink deeply of the water that satisfies. Splash in the cool, clear, refreshing stream. Receive – with joy – the gift of the Spirit of Life." Through the gift of the Spirit, the water becomes within a spring of water, gushing up; life-giving water pours out of the heart – spreading outward, providing free-flowing refreshment to those who need it.

And so we *plead*: "Come, come, / come, Holy Spirit, come." ["Gracious Spirit, Heed Our Pleading"; Text: Wilson Niwagil, tr. Howard S. Olson; Music: Wilson Niwagila, arr. Egil Hovland; *ELW* #401:refrain]



Gulf Coast Flooding



Hurricane Matthew

