

**RIVERS OF HEALING IN A DRY TIME; JOHN 7:37-39; JUNE 4, 2017; PENTECOST;
ANNUAL MEETING; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC**

The reading for Pentecost is admittedly obscure – but works well for our annual meeting and the times in which we live.

The scene is Jerusalem; the people are celebrating the Festival of Booths – commemorating Israel’s wandering in the wilderness. One of the rituals was carrying water in a golden pitcher from the Pool of Siloam to the Temple each day of the festival. The ritual recalls that moment when the people were dying of thirst in the desert and Moses banged his staff on the rock and water gushed forth giving life and strength to continue the journey.

The reading is appropriate for Pentecost because Jesus announces that he is the source of life and healing, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. For out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’ To which John adds, “He said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive.”

One of the great ironies about Israel running out of water is that they were literally standing on the solution to their problem – some shale like outcropping of rock thinly covering a spring of fresh water. Moses bangs his staff against the rock and water flows forth like half dollars from a Vegas slot machine.

Fear can blind you. Fear can shut down your senses – especially that sixth sense that opens us to the presence of God. Fear is the antithesis of trust.

The people had good reason to be afraid. They were in a desert with no sign of water anywhere. They followed Moses out of their oppressed but predictable lives in Egypt and were now staring at what looked like predictable death.

And who hasn’t been there – in the desert of fear, the grip of a diagnosis, a broken relationship, a victim of downsizing?

How many churches wander in that wilderness today pulling inward, isolating themselves from the very neighborhoods that need them and offer the answer to their shrinking purpose and dwindling membership.

To those in a desert of fear; to frightened and frail churches Jesus says, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and anyone who believes in me drink. For out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’ He said this about the Spirit which believers in him were to receive.

Christians are nothing without the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the “more” that makes our lives, our deeds, our faith *more* than we could make them on our own.

When we baptize a child or an adult the baptismal prayer is for the bestowal and reception of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit isn’t optional equipment for a Christian. The absence of the Spirit indicates a person or community too settled with things as they are rather than a person or church being pushed to God’s new heaven and new earth.

Even though we don't hold our hands in the air and sway back and forth the Spirit of God is at work in this congregation. Streams of living water are flowing out of more people in more ways than I have time to name today but here are a few examples:

It was none other than the Spirit of God that led us to explore how this congregation could serve our immediate neighborhood back in 2004 when the West Side Economic Initiative was born – we did a survey; jobs and education were the overwhelming needs of our neighbors; we were audacious in our faith to think we could do something about that; a decade later the living water of entrepreneurship and fifty new micro businesses plus an after school program for immigrant children to ensure their success in life and school flows forth!

It was the Spirit of God that led us to call a 26 year old organist and choral conductor to become our Music Director four years ago and through him has swelled the ranks of our magnificent choir, inspired seed funding for our Glynda S. Taylor Music Intern, given birth to the Westminster Choir School, weekly evensong, monthly Taize prayer and collaborations with Episcopalians and Roman Catholics. The Holy Spirit is by nature boundary-breaking. Spirit inspired worship has led to a mighty Mississippi of living water in this sanctuary every Sunday!

The Spirit of God led another family to seed fund a pastoral care minister and then led us to call Rev. Beth Hennessy to fill that position and to shepherd a large flock of seniors navigating the transition from independent living to assisted living, to memory care and to hospice.

Beth has cultivated a community of care among us along with Debbie Katz, Nancy Hanavan and the Passages luncheon group and Fran Holmes and the Tuesday night knitters, and Roger Seifert, Karen Keaton and Sawrie Becker and the Meet and Mingle volunteers and all of the behind the scenes reaching out that goes on in this church. You are the tributaries of care and compassion that flow into the living water of a more connected and neighbor-loving congregation.

And lastly it is none other than the Spirit of God that assembled a team of remarkable business talent and financial leaders who oversee our budgeting and finance, invested funds, buildings and grounds and generosity committees.

More money has been raised more quickly than ever before and more special and memorial gifts given over the past few years than I have witnessed in two decades. We can have the best strategic plan on paper and never see results like those. Something happens when the Holy Spirit takes over. We've been learning to go with the flow, double down on the metrics of sustainability, but also take some risks, and consider new boundary breaking ministry.

There's plenty of thirst and fear across the land; there is no such thing as a perfect church; but life is flowing out of this body of believers like a mighty river! Multi-faith relationships, opportunities for partnerships on the East Side, spiritual discernment groups precisely at a time when our national leaders embrace isolationism and xenophobia. What better time, what better place to be a river of living water! +