

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Thirst”

Pentecost Sunday, 2023

“On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.’” (Jn. 7:37).

Have you ever been dehydrated? One of the surprises of ministry for me has been how often members are hospitalized even because of dehydration. Many have said to me, “I had no idea I wasn’t drinking enough water.” I believe them. It seems dehydration has a way of sneaking up on us, particularly as we age. This means thirst is not always a reliable indicator of the body’s need for water. Many people don’t feel thirsty until they’re already dehydrated.

One day Jesus stood and from the temple courts he cried out, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.” He was in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. Lasting seven days, the purpose of this festival was to remind the people of their time in the desert when there was very little water. The people grumbled and God gave them water. He told Moses to strike the rock at Horeb, and it gushed with life-giving water. The Feast of Tabernacles was a celebration of that gift, lest they forget. A daily highlight of this celebration consisted in the procession of the priests from the Temple to the pool of Siloam to retrieve water. They would carry this water back to the Temple, and while the trumpets sounded and the people sang, they poured it out onto the altar, a symbolic *trickle*, to remind the people of when life-giving water *gushed* from the rock in Horeb.

Picture the scene. White robed priests dipping their urns into the pool of Siloam while they chanted “With joy you shall draw water out of the wells of salvation.” Then, toiling up the pathway, the crowd in the court, the sparkling water poured out on the altar. Suddenly, there’s a stir in the crowd, and a Man who had been standing and watching cries out, “If anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink.” Strange words to say anywhere at any time. Audacious words to say there and then in the Temple courts! Jesus is laying His hand on that old miracle when the rock of Horeb gave water. He was asserting that it is repeated and fulfilled and transcended in Himself, and that it’s not just for a nomadic tribe in the desert. It’s for the world! The life-giving water flowing from the rock of Horeb was a shadow, but the substance is in Him.

He said this in a hot, arid climate where dehydration was an ever-present danger. Who’s not thirsty in that climate? Here in Watertown, who thinks they can ignore the need for cool, refreshing waters over the summer months? Who doesn’t need Jesus, the water of life?

When you came this morning, you came in thirsty. You long for something. Maybe it’s for meaningful work or more substantial pay. Maybe for a break from the daily grind. Freedom from the past. Justice in the present. You may not know exactly what you are thirsting for, but I’m certain you yearn for something. You may not explicitly thirst for forgiveness today but remember your sense of thirst isn’t always a reliable indicator of what you need. You may not have come in asking the Holy Spirit to help you better witness to your adult child, but who of us doesn’t worry about our children and their faith? You may not feel the need for more people in your life, but who of us doesn’t need brothers and sisters to love and support us? You may not have come in hoping for “restoration” but each of us deep down thirsts for things to be made new and right.

“If anyone thirsts” said Jesus, let him come to me and drink. There are about us and in us two powerful thirsts, a thirst for water and a thirst for the living God. If we neglect them, either one, we wither and eventually perish.

The Bible says it in any number of ways. Ps 63, “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you . . . in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” Ps. 42, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” You might try to quench this thirst with pleasure – things like food or drugs or sex or alcohol. They may distract you for a time, but they will not truly satisfy your thirst. They won’t hit the spot. We need the water of life. If we have one fundamental craving, an unuttered, essential desire of the heart that transcends everything else, it is the desire to know the living, loving God.

Let nothing replace Jesus, the water of life. When your child comes in from playing long and hard outside in the summer heat, with a big, angry, tyrant of a thirst, you’re not going to offer him a cup of hot coffee. Your child needs water. When after logging 20 miles on your bike, you’re not going to try to rehydrate with brandy old fashions. You need water. When you give of yourself through the week, empty and exhaust yourself serving others, you’re not going to recover with a ten-minute power nap. You need the water of life. If you happen to be a teacher, right about now you’re running on empty. You’re not going to be refreshed, reinvigorated, and recharged simply by taking some time during the summer. You need the water of life. “If anyone of you is thirsty, let him come to me and drink,” said Jesus.

There are no substitutes, though God knows we’ve tried them all. Consider three generations of one family. It begins with a man who buys into the American dream of providing the nicest home and lifestyle he can for himself and his family. That’s his number one goal in life. So, he works hard, very hard, sometimes at the expense of his family and his own health. But by gum he’s going to build that beautiful home and lifestyle. And he does and he enjoys it for a time, and his family does

too, but it's not as satisfying as he had hoped. He's still thirsty. Before he knows it, he has to downsize because he can no longer maintain the big house with a big yard. Then he has to downsize again because he cannot navigate the steps. His dream, his goal, his number one accomplishment is being dismantled, and it feels like the borders of his world are closing in on him. A few more years and he's down to one small room with a bed, a chair, a little T.V. and a call button. . . for when he needs a cup of water. On his last day, all those assets, the stocks and bonds and real estate and limited partnerships . . . on the last day, all that wealth won't mean a thing to him, won't do a thing for him. He'll still thirst. That idol cannot deliver what it promised him. We need the water of life.

Imagine his children who saw the folly of his ways. But they also have this thirst, this aching need for the infinite. So instead of devoting themselves to the material dream they pour themselves into excitements and experiences, licit or illicit. They don't buy or build, they rent so they can travel and party and see shows and enjoy fine dining and trendy mixology. But this inner emptiness, this longing in the heart for God, is not so easily satisfied. If they would only allow themselves a moment of reflective silence (which they seldom do), they might notice a still, small voice whispering, "Is this all there is?" They have only managed exchanged one form of slavery for another, the experiential for the material. Meanwhile, their inner spirit still thirsts for God.

Now, imagine their children, the original man's grandchildren, who are all wrapped up in sports. That's ok. Sports are good and teach many life skills. But it's over the top. It's all they do on the weekends. It's who they are and they're good. But there's going to come a time when they're not good enough, a time when they won't make the team. If their identity is all wrapped up in being an athlete, they may just lose their sense of identity and self-worth. Though warming the bench, or the bleachers, they're still thirsty, because they lack the cold, refreshing water of life.

In the book of Jeremiah, the Lord says, "My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jer. 2:13).

Spiritual problems demand spiritual solutions. A spiritual thirst will not be quenched by cheap or trendy imitations. In the 4th century Augustine wrote, "Thou has made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink." You don't have an artesian spring within you. You need life-giving water from outside yourself.

"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink." That's a daring thing to say, especially in that context. It's one of the things that got Him crucified. Some would call it arrogant, even delusional. But, if you can deliver what you offer, and if you offer it as a gift, and you offer it to all who ask – that's not arrogance. That's grace. And that is the forgiveness, life, and salvation that Jesus is offering to you and me today.

Condemned by your sin? Come to him and drink deeply from his forgiveness, for the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin (1 Jn. 1:7). Not content with who you are and what you've achieved? Come to Him and drink. "Now this is what the Lord says . . . 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name. You are mine'" (Is. 43:1). Disquieted by the direction the world is heading? Come to Him and He'll give you that peace that He alone can give that surpasses all human understanding (Jn. 14:27). Feel like life is passionless? Come to him and drink for He has come so that you may have life, and have it to the full (Jn. 10:10). Worn out? Tired? "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28). Is life slipping away like water between your fingers? "Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn. 4:14). Feel like you have no respite, no relief? Come to Him, He'll lead you beside quiet waters and green pastures where you can rest under his watchful eye (Ps. 23).

Verse 38 says, "'Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'. Now this he said about the Holy Spirit.'" That is, not only are you blessed with living water for yourself, but through the Spirit's work you are a blessing to others. Having the gift of the Holy Spirit there is within you a power of life that flows out of you, carrying life and refreshment to others, so they too can drink from the water of life.

Here's another way of looking at the work of the Spirit. The windows in here . . . they are sure pretty, aren't they? Each is meaningful. They don't teach stories, really, as much as they teach Christian doctrine. Each carries a message. On bright, sunny days, the windows light up with colors that make people who are mostly color blind think we can see all the colors in the spectrum. That's from inside the church.

Outside, it's a different story. Outside, these colorful windows appear dull and dark and meaningless. They aren't colorful at all. Outside, a person can't even venture to guess what the windows are trying to teach. They are meaningless and have nothing to say. Paul writes, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Luther wrote, "We cannot by our own reason or strength believe in the Lord Jesus Christ or come to him."

The work of the Spirit puts you inside the church, where all these teachings become meaningful and colorful and real. The Spirit enkindles faith in you through Baptism and puts you in the church. The Holy Spirit has called, gathered and enlightened you.

You are inside the church, and you are drinking from Jesus the life-giving water. . . cold clean water for thirsty souls . . . plenty for you and plenty to share with those around you too. Amen.