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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
December 23, 2012; 4th Sunday in Advent
“Advent Gifts: The Gift of Water”

John 7:37-46 | Read the scripture online <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=224579040>

I learned something unexpected this week: The writer of John’s gospel loves water. Whoever John was, I imagine that before he began to write his story of Jesus’ life, he collected his thoughts, probably said a prayer for inspiration, and paused to make sense out of a swirling array of remembrances about the One they had come to know as the Christ. And throughout the first seven chapters of his gospel, it appears that John really loved water. When you get home, flip through the opening chapters of John’s gospel and you’ll see what I mean.

John 1, after the famous prologue, is about John the Baptist, splashing water on people in the river Jordan. *John 2* is about the wedding in Cana in which Jesus turns water into wine. *John 3* is about the nighttime visit of Nicodemus, to whom Jesus said, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born anew, born of water and Spirit.” *John 4* is about Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, in which he promises to give her living water. *John 5* tells the story of the crippled man, who had been lying by the pool of Bethzatha waiting for the waters to be stirred so that he might be immersed in that water and be healed, until Jesus said to him “Take up your mat and walk.” *John 6* takes place by the shore of the Sea of Galilee, including an account of Jesus walking on the rough, sea waters.

And then comes *John 7*, which is about Jesus going to Jerusalem for Sukkot, the Festival of Booths. This is a fall festival in which the Jews remember that after being freed from slavery in Egypt, they spent years living in the wilderness. During this exodus period, they made temporary booths or shelters in which to live, and God cared for them with gifts of manna, quail, and water from the desert rocks. Part of the Sukkot festival involved binding together branches from four specific plants: the citron tree, the palm date tree, the myrtle plant, and the willow. Why these four plants? When asked this, the wise rabbis would say: “They represent the Jewish people. The citron plant has a pleasant smell and taste, and is like the Jew who knows the Torah and does good deeds. The palm date has a pleasant taste but no smell, like the Jew who knows the Torah but does no good deeds. The myrtle has a pleasant smell but no taste, like the Jew who does good deeds without knowing the ancient law. And the willow has neither taste nor smell, like the Jew who neither knows the Torah nor does good deeds.

Why are all four are bound together? So that the strengths of one can cover the weaknesses of another, and thus together they are all whole. It’s true: We are stronger together than we can ever be apart. Consider the different personalities that make up your family, your place of work, this church. Consider that perhaps we are bound together with all our differences as part of God’s plan, so that together we can be made whole.



Ah, but I digress. Where, you might ask, is the water in this chapter about the Festival of Sukkot? Well, the heart of the festival involved a daily ritual in which the crowds followed the priests as they filled a golden pitcher from the Pool of Siloam and carried it into the temple, pouring it out to symbolize how God miraculously produced for them water in the desert. It was also a reminder that the Messiah was coming who would once again rescue his people from oppression and lead them to a Promised Land. On the last day of this festival, Jesus cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me. Let the one who believes in me drink in my words, my spirit, the rivers of living water flowing from me." The crowd was amazed and called him a prophet, the Messiah. And when the temple officials asked the police why he hadn't been arrested for his words, the police answered, "Never has anyone spoken like this!"

Over and over again in these opening chapters: Jesus, the living water. Jesus echoing the words of Isaiah 55: *Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.* (Isa 55:1). Jesus echoing the words of Isaiah 58: "The Lord will satisfy your needs in parched places, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water that never fails" (Isa 58:11). In this season of expectancy, as we await the birth of the Christ child and the coming of his kingdom, Jesus tells us to remember how his love is like the gift of water. Water can do many things. It can quench our deepest thirst. It keeps us alive and sustains us physically each day. Water also washes us clean. Water can be calm like a quiet stream; it can make a way out of no way like a mighty river; it can fill all we see like an ocean stretching out to the distant horizon: God's love in Jesus Christ is all of that.

We talk water for granted, just as we take God's love for granted. Here are three spiritual exercises you could do, associated with water, that will strengthen your faith beginning today. When you are filling a glass of water, shut off the water faucet when the glass is half-full and imagine all that was involved in getting that water to you: the river where the water originated, the pipes and pumps and filtration systems that prepared the water to be delivered to your house, the workmen and plumbers that created the convenience of a sink with hot and cold running water. Imagine not having water so readily available to you; imagine how hard it would be if even one part of the process were disrupted. Then give thanks to God, and remember not to waste that precious water.

Second, when you have finished taking a shower or bath, and you're drying yourself off, notice how the water drops cling to your skin before the towel absorbs them as you rub away the moisture. Remember what it felt like to be dirty and what it feels like to be water-washed clean. Remember how Jesus took a bowl of water and washed his disciples' feet, turning the water black with dirt and dust from the world. By his loving touch, they were made clean. By his touch, we are made clean. Sin is washed away. We are new creations, like freshly-washed, baptized babies. All because of the water of God's love. So give thanks.

Or when you read the news, look for items in which water is mentioned. Notice how when disaster hits, you read about people asking for water, or emergency crews bringing in water. Notice also when articles herald the new jobs in our region thanks to drilling for natural gas, they rarely mention how much of this process, when it involves fracking, requires millions of gallons of water each day. One deep well using hydraulic



fracking needs an estimated 4.5 million gallons of water: fresh water from our streams and rivers that would have gone to our faucets but now feeds our addiction to fossil fuels. Remember that 70% of all freshwater goes for crop irrigation, so a shortage of water is automatically a shortage of food. Or note that the 2.5 billion gallons of water daily spent to keep golf courses green could provide the minimum water needs for 4.7 billion people—or over two-thirds of the world’s population. So as a spiritual discipline, offer a prayer when you read about water in the news.

When Jesus interrupted the final day of the Sukkot festival, saying “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me,” he was not arrested because, as the police said, they had never heard anyone spoken like this! When that living water of Christ washes over us and fills us, hopefully we, too, will speak with a voice that surprises and inspires others.

Hopefully we, too, will talk about the themes that have shaped our four week Advent journey together this year: 1) how Christian faith and works go together, just as Christ, the bread of life, nurtures both bodies and souls. 2) How peace comes on earth when we envision a world of peace and work backwards from that hopeful horizon to where we find ourselves today, trusting in Christ, the Prince of Peace, who says, “You ain’t gonna study war no more.” 3) How transformations are truly possible with Christ, just as light always casts out shadows. And when someone has the effrontery to suggest that the way to prevent gun violence in schools is to put more guns in schools, we are to challenge such dark foolishness with a renewed commitment to Christ, who is the Light of the World. And 4) by remembering each day that the water of the gospel of Christ quenches the thirst of hungry souls. How it washes away the sins of broken people like you and me. How it causes communities to thrive as they put down deep roots in the good news that can sustain and unite us, bound together as we are like clusters of citron, palm, myrtle and willow. And how it moves us to speak words of faith in ways that no one has ever heard before! For out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water. This day, this season, O Lord, may it be so.

AMEN

