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Bridgeway Church
Gospel of John #23
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Sermon Summary #23

When the Spirit Flows out like Rivers of Living Water John 7:37-44

We are going to do something different today as we come to John 7. It is a long chapter of 52 verses. But I have decided that we will focus in on the most important section in the chapter and spend only this one week in our study of it. The reason for this will soon become evident.

Let me set the context for what is happening in John 7. It is time for the Feast of Tabernacles, or as the ESV translates it in v. 2, the Feast of “Booths.” I’ll have more to say about the significance of this feast in a few minutes. For now, we are told in John 7:1-14 that although the Jews in Judea were trying to kill Jesus, he eventually made his way to Jerusalem to be present for the feast.

John 7 is largely a study in the nature of unbelief. In fact, the entire narrative is somewhat repetitive. We are told in v. 5 that “not even his brothers believed” in Jesus. His “brothers” is, of course, a reference to his half-brothers, the natural born sons of Joseph and Mary (see Mark 3:21, 31-35). It was only after his resurrection that they came to recognize him for who he was and put their faith in him (Acts 1:13-14).

We read further in v. 12 that “there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, ‘He is a good man, others said, ‘No, he is leading the people astray.’” It got so bad that in v. 20, the crowd in Jerusalem declared, “you have a demon!” Because of his claim to have come from God the Father, “they were seeking to arrest him” (vv. 30, 32). Farther down in the chapter, we read that “there was a division among the people over him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him” (vv. 43-44).

Much of this chapter is the response of Jesus to their outrageous denials of him. Basically, they brought three charges against him.

First, they asked Jesus how he could teach with authority since he himself had never received the appropriate official schooling at the feet of a Rabbi. Jesus responds to this in John 7:16 by saying, “My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me.” In other words, he doesn’t speak on his own authority or on the authority of any human teacher, but solely on the authority of God the Father, the one who sent him.

Second, the religious leaders wanted to know where he came from. Some held to the superstitious belief that when the Messiah came, he would simply appear. We see this in John 7:27 where some in the crowd shouted out, “we know where this man [Jesus] comes from, and when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from.” Jesus responds by saying, “I have not come of my own accord. He who sent me is true, and him you do not know. I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me” (John 7:28-29).

Third, when Jesus declared that he would soon depart permanently and none of them could follow, they asked: “Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? What does he mean by saying, ‘You will seek me and you will not find me,’ and ‘Where I am you cannot come?’” (John 7:35-36).

It is in this context, *on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles*, that Jesus stands up in the Temple complex and makes one of the most astounding claims ever to come from his lips. So, let me again make it clear, that it is in the midst of widespread confusion about his identity and in response to many who insisted that he was demonized, that Jesus says what he does in the portion of the text that we are going to look at today.

The Feast of Tabernacles

We recently saw yet another Halloween come and go. Thanksgiving is right around the corner, and Christmas will be upon us before we know it. All of us have our personal favorite among the many holiday celebrations. Perhaps yours is the 4th of July. Others of you prefer Labor Day. For the Jewish people in our Lord's day, there was virtually unanimous agreement that the Feast of Tabernacles was the best of all.

This feast took place in the early fall, immediately after the harvest. It was celebrated after the crops such as grapes, olives, pomegranates, figs, and dates had been brought into the barn. It typically came five days after the Day of Atonement, and began on the fifteenth day of the month of Tishri.

Unlike the sober atmosphere of Passover or the Day of Atonement, Tabernacles was festive. Everyone was happy. It was a time of both relaxation and rejoicing. It originally lasted for 7 days in Jerusalem, but on the basis of the command in Leviticus 23:33-36 one additional day was added bringing the festival to 8 days. During these 8 days the people lived in "booths" or "tabernacles" made of leaves and branches. Residents of Jerusalem would build them on their roofs while pilgrim travelers built them free-standing outside the walls of the city. It was a time of joy and dancing and singing and shouting.

So let's go back, as it were, and put ourselves in Jerusalem on the last day of this feast. As I said, the atmosphere would have been happy and jubilant. The only sad thought that might have entered their minds was that on the next day they would have to pack up and return home.

If you were present on this final day of the feast, you would have carried in your right hand what was called a *lulav*, a branch from a myrtle tree, tied together with a branch from a willow tree and another from a palm tree (see Lev. 23:40). In your left hand you would carry an *etrog*, a branch from a citron which was a lemon-like fruit.

One of the priests would then take in his hand a golden pitcher and lead you and the others in a festive procession or parade to the pool of Siloam, all to the accompaniment of flutes and trumpets. The crowd would make their way dancing and singing and rejoicing before the Lord. By the way, during those years growing up, before he entered his public ministry, Jesus himself would have traveled to Jerusalem with his family to celebrate Tabernacles in this manner. It's captivating to imagine in one's mind the picture of Jesus dancing in celebration through the streets of Jerusalem!

The priest would then fill the pitcher with water from the pool, only to turn around and lead the worshiping crowd back to the Temple. He immediately would go to the altar where the sacrifice had just been offered and would pour the water into a funnel which led to the base of the altar.

Then, to the accompaniment of the flute, the people would shake the *lulav* in their right hand, with the *etrog* in their left hand. They did this while they chanted aloud, antiphonally, Psalms 113-118. It would climax with their public recitation of Psalm 118:24-29.

This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. 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. The LORD is God, and he has made his light to shine upon us. Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar! You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God; I will extol you. Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever! (Psalm 118:24-29).

The symbolic purpose of the water ritual, considered the highpoint of the festival, was to remind the people of the provision of water from God during the time of Israel's wandering in the wilderness (see Num. 20:7-11). In fact, the entire festival was designed to re-tell the story of desert life during Israel's wandering and both the victories and temptations they experienced. All this is explained for us in Leviticus 23:39-43.

On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the LORD seven days. On the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees

and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. You shall celebrate it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 23:39-43).

The climax of the feast occurred as the priest poured the water from the pitcher and the people cried out aloud the words of Isaiah 12:3-4.

“With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: ‘Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted.’”

On the seventh and final day of the festival this water ritual took place seven times, drenching the altar.

The Astounding Claim by Jesus

It was at this precise moment that a man from Nazareth stood up from a visible and prominent place and cried out aloud,

“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’” (John 7:37-38).

Try to feel the resounding force of what just happened. Jesus was saying to the people of Israel, in no uncertain terms:

“This feast is all about **me!** The water in the golden pitcher points to **me!** The water that flowed from the rock in the wilderness was symbolic of **me!** The promise of refreshing waters of salvation in Isaiah 12:3-4 refers to **me!** The water that I offer is better than the water that flowed from the rock, better than the water that falls from heaven to nourish your crops, better than the water you saw the priest draw from the pool of Siloam. I am the water that gives eternal life, eternal refreshment, eternal cleansing, eternal joy. Come and drink of **me!**”

What an incredible claim!

You and I are the recipients of countless invitations during the course of our lives, some of which we accept and others we decline. We are invited to weddings, birthday parties, banquets and dinners, concerts, sporting events, and political rallies. But here we find the single greatest invitation of all, and it doesn’t cost you a thing. There is no entrance fee, no monetary charge. But it does require an RSVP.

To whom is the invitation extended? Anyone and everyone! Jesus extends this invitation to atheists and Muslims and drug addicts and prostitutes and CEO’s of multi-billion dollar corporations and Democrats and Republicans. He invites those struggling with same-sex attraction and alcoholism and those who’ve had an abortion. He invites men and women, young and old. He invites the single person, the married person, the divorced person, the widow and the widower. He invites Baptists and Presbyterians and Methodists and Pentecostals.

And let’s not overlook the fact that this invitation from Jesus is being issued directly to the very people who denied him, who accused him of being demonized, and who were trying to kill him!

There is only one requirement for responding to this invitation. You don’t have to bring a gift or worry about whether or not you are properly dressed. The only prerequisite for accepting this invitation is *thirst*. Not physical thirst for physical water, but spiritual thirst for quenching the gnawing demands of your heart and soul. You have to know, sense, feel, and humbly acknowledge your need for spiritual cleansing and refreshment and that only Jesus can supply it.

Jesus doesn’t define or describe the nature of the thirst. The tragedy is that many are convinced they aren’t thirsty. That is because they continue to drink from the well of self-sufficiency and sex and corporate success. The point is

that you can never take the first step to salvation until you know full well how utterly lost you truly are. Heaven is for those who are thoroughly convinced they deserve only hell.

So, what is the “thirst” that Jesus has in mind? It is thirst for forgiveness, for cleansing, for healing, for a sense of value and meaning and purpose in life. It is a thirst for genuine, lasting love, a thirst for peace and joy and hope and reconciliation with one’s creator.

Jesus and all of Scripture regularly speak of our need for him as thirsting and hungering. That is why saving faith is more than a mere decision of your intellect to agree with the facts of the gospel. It is that, but it is far, far more. It is a feasting on Jesus. It is finding your soul’s deepest and most lasting satisfaction in Jesus. Think of how you feel after that soon-coming Thanksgiving dinner, as you sit down in your chair or couch or spread out on the floor, full of an exquisite meal that was prepared for you. That is what coming to Jesus does for your heart and soul and your affections.

That is also my task week in and week out. I don’t aim merely to educate you. I do aim to educate, but I aim for much, much more. I aim to set before you a feast, a gourmet meal consisting of everything God is for you in Jesus. And I invite you to come and eat. Come and glut your soul on his beauty, power, kindness, authority, and promises.

To each and every one of us here today, Jesus says, “Come, believe in me, trust in me, count me as your highest and most precious treasure, drink from me. I am a never-ending fountain of life-giving water, a mountain stream of joy and hope and redemption from which you can drink forever.” My mind is drawn to those many biblical references to water as symbolic of joy and forgiveness and peace. Let me mention just a handful:

“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price” (Isa. 55:1).

“Jesus said to her [the Samaritan woman at the well], ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life’” (John 4:13-14).

“The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” (Rev. 22:17).

Did you hear that in both the text from Isaiah and in Revelation? ***This water is free!*** Stop trying to purchase its blessings with your alleged good works and your good intentions and your promises to do better next time. This water is yours “without price”! You can’t barter for it, bargain for it, trade for it, buy it, or purchase it at auction as the highest bidder. It is free. The cost is all borne by Jesus. What it cost him to make this offer is incalculable. He had to pay the price of your sin and suffer God’s judgment in your place. But you simply have to take it and enjoy it and drink it in, for free!

Rivers, Floods, Overflowing Fountains!

Here in John 7 Jesus does not promise a few drops only, nor even a full cup, nor even a shower. It’s as if Jesus says, “When you come to me and drink, the water of the Holy Spirit whom I will give to you will bury himself deeply into your arid and sandy soul, only then to burst forth and bubble up and spill over as a veritable river of living water!”

But no! Jesus doesn’t say a “river” (singular), but “rivers” (plural)! A multitude of fast flowing, surging rivers of water converging as if to create a mighty waterfall. Think Niagara Falls!

I should pause here to point out something that most aren’t aware of. In v. 38 it says that “out of *his* heart will flow rivers of living water.” Who is “he” from whom the waters flow? Some believe Jesus is referring to himself. If so, he would be saying that he, Jesus, is the source or origin of the Spirit whom he gives to us. But I do think the traditional view is correct. The “he” or “she” out of whose heart the rivers of living water flow is the believer: you and me.

And how do we know Jesus is talking about the Holy Spirit? Because he tells us so explicitly in v. 39,

“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” (John 7:39).

In saying, literally, “for not yet was the Spirit,” Jesus isn’t suggesting that the Spirit didn’t exist. He is pointing out that the fullness of the Spirit’s presence in power is yet future: it awaits the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father and the Day of Pentecost when the followers of Jesus would be “clothed with power from on high.”

In other words, there are dimensions of our experience of the Holy Spirit’s presence and power that could not be known or enjoyed until Jesus had died and had risen from the dead and had ascended into heaven. Although Jesus is not now with us in bodily form, he is with us by and through his Spirit. Listen to what he said in John 14:16-17,

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you” (John 14:16-17).

Now, let’s return to v. 38. He literally says, “out of his belly” (not “heart,” ESV). Jesus is talking about the deepest and most essential core of our being; our inmost center of life and personal identity. Remember the promise of Isaiah 58:11, “and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.”

What happens when a fountain is filled to overflowing? First, the fountain itself is satisfied, refreshed, and replenished. Second, the fountain supplies others with its waters. The point is that the Holy Spirit is in you not only for your own satisfaction but also to enable you to provide a source of life and refreshment for others. Your life is to bubble up and spill out and overflow so that others can come and find refreshment. Question: When you are with other people, do they get wet? Do they walk away with a new sense of the Spirit’s presence and power in their lives?

O.K., but what does the Holy Spirit do?

- The Spirit provides us with the supernatural power to do what we otherwise never could.
- The Spirit supplies us with the incentive and strength to say No to worldly and fleshly temptations.
- The Spirit enables us to persevere through trials, not as mere survivors but as conquerors!
- The Spirit gives spiritual gifts to equip us to equip and encourage others.
- The Spirit works in us to reshape our character and our desires so that we look, think, feel, and act like Jesus.
- The Spirit sustains us in prayer.
- The Spirit reveals Jesus to us in ever more vibrant and vivid ways.
- The Spirit nurtures in us intimacy with God.

The reaction of the crowds is something we’ve come to expect. Look closely at John 7:40-44.

When they heard these words, some of the people said, “This really is the Prophet.” Others said, “This is the Christ.” But some said, “Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?” So there was a division among the people over him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him (John 7:40-44).

The reaction of people today is similar. “Jesus? Oh, he’s really good guy. I’ve learned a lot from his teaching.” “Jesus? Oh, he is the Messiah, the Savior and Redeemer of my soul! I love him!” “Jesus? Oh, he’s a fraud, a deceiver, who gives people false hope. There is no God. There is no Messiah. There is no sin from which we need deliverance. If Jesus were here on earth right now, we should crucify him again.”

Conclusion

I have two things to say by way of conclusion.

The first thing I want to say is directed to any here today who have not yet responded to the invitation. Please, RSVP! Come to Jesus and drink and find life!

The second is to all of us who have by God's grace responded to the invitation of Jesus. Ask yourself today, "How have I dealt with the gift of the Spirit? How have I treated him?" I suspect that some of you have grieved him by your unrepentant and high-handed sin. Or perhaps you have grieved him simply by your casual indifference. Or maybe you have let your worldly and monetary ambition dry up the flowing river of his presence in your life.

It may be that you have quenched the fire of his presence, as Paul described in 1 Thessalonians 5. You have despised the gift of prophecy or have even denied that the Spirit's gifts are valid and operative today. You have thereby capped the well and dammed up the river's flow; you have reduced the Spirit's flow in your soul to a mere trickle.

If someone asked you to describe your experience of the Holy Spirit, would you use the imagery that we find here in John 7? Would you speak of your daily experience of a life-giving, empowering river of refreshing waters, forever flowing and overflowing on yourself and onto others? Or does your heart feel desolate and dry with barely enough energy to put one foot in front of the other?

Hear the words of Jesus today:

"What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:11-13).

That being the case, let's ask him!