

STREAMS OF LIVING WATER

John 7:37-39; Acts 2:1-11

There's a yearning these days for spiritual renewal. You see it on the shelves stocked with religious books at book stores and in biblically themed movies like *Risen*. I was flipping through one of those free tabloids that lie around coffee shops and there was a column on spirituality – right after the ads for strip joints and dating services. You see it everywhere.

Frequently, I'll hear people say, "I'm spiritual but not religious." Even those who don't want to have anything to do with a church acknowledge there is grandeur and mystery beyond what we human beings can comprehend. There is a life giving force in the universe that cannot be contained by any creed or institution, a power that transcends every effort to define it or contain it. We know there is someone or something greater than ourselves. The apostle Paul begins his letter to the Romans in the New Testament acknowledging that we are capable of comprehending more than we do. "For what can be known about God is plain.... Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." (Romans 1:19-20) There is something greater beyond us, ready to fulfill our deepest longings and satisfy our desires. It's there, but we don't always get it. William Blake, the Romantic poet who had an uncanny gift of seeing things others missed wrote, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is – infinite."

There is spiritual thirst all around us, but if our spirits are going to be revived, we have to be in touch with the source of our renewal. It's not something we can construct for ourselves. It's not something we can pick off the shelf and carry home. After World War I T.E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, brought the chieftains of Arabia with him to the Paris Peace Conference. Those men of the desert were amazed at many things, but what amazed them most was the running water in their hotel rooms. In the desert water is scarce. They knew its value. Here it was at their fingertips, free and endless for just the turning of the tap. When the chieftains prepared to leave Paris, Lawrence found them trying to detach the faucets so they could always have water with them in their dry desert homes. He tried to explain that behind the taps were huge reservoirs. Without that supply the faucets were useless. But the chieftains insisted. They were sure they could disconnect the faucets, take them back to the desert, and they would have water forever.¹

What our spirits thirst for is the Spirit of God that flows from the source of life itself. That's what Jesus offered the crowds at the temple in Jerusalem. "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me," he said, "and let the one who believes in me drink." He is the one who satisfies our spiritual longings, our connection with the spring of life itself. He is the source of all we long for, the one who gives us truth and grace and life.

¹ Samuel H. Moffett, "Where's the Power," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. VI, Number 2, p. 66.

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In the Bible a stream of water is often used to describe the life-giving grace of God. The Bible was written in a dry land. People thought about water a lot because it was scarce. Here in Zurich we don't have that problem. The lake is a continuing and reliable source of water. It's always there and it never runs dry. All we have to do is pump it out, filter it, purify it, and deliver it.

But if the pipes get clogged, we don't have access to that abundant supply of water that flows right by us. A while back the water pressure in the shower in the bathroom at our house almost disappeared so that when you turned on the faucet all you got was a dribble of water. We called the plumber, and he discovered that debris had fallen into the pipe. To fix it he had to cut out a piece of drywall in the adjoining room, remove a section of pipe, and replace it. Then we had to replace the drywall and paint the room. It was a big job, but unless we did it, the water wouldn't flow.

Sometimes we need to tend to our connections to the water of life. Jesus was clear that there's more to the Christian life than just accepting him as Lord and savior. Those of us who have been Jesus' disciples long enough know that the life of the spirit has its dry moments. There are times when you find it hard to pray. There are stretches when you don't think much about God. There are moments when you wish God didn't know about some of the things you've done. We all have times like that, times when our connection to the Spirit seems clogged or disconnected. Growing in the life of faith is not something that happens automatically. We have to tend to it the way we tend to the plumbing in our house.

In his letter to the Colossians Paul says, "Let your roots grow down deeply in Christ Jesus and draw up nourishment from him. See that you go on growing in the Lord, and become strong and vigorous in the truth you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." (Colossians 2:6-7)

That spiritual renewal isn't something we can force. We can't program the Holy Spirit to work on our timetable or at our convenience. Belden Lane once wrote about stalking the snow leopard in the Himalayas. Their coloring is white with gray spots so they blend in with the snow of their native landscape. If you want to see a snow leopard in its natural surroundings, you can't go looking for it directly. It blends in so well that you'll never notice it. The way to find a snow leopard is to stalk its prey. You follow the rabbits and other small animals that it hunts, knowing it's nearby, until you catch a glimpse of it out of the corner of your eye. If you look for it too hard, you'll miss it. You have to let it come to you and then be ready when it comes.

That's often how we encounter the Spirit of God. We can't control the Spirit, but we can remove those things that distract us. We go to those places where we have encountered the Spirit before –in worship, in nature, in times devoted to prayer, in books. Or we put ourselves in new places where others have encountered God in the hope that we will experience him there too,

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places like a mission project or a Sunday school class or a home group. We open our hearts to prayer. We take time to savor the words of scripture. The Spirit can't be forced. It blows where it wills. But we can prepare ourselves for it. We can open ourselves to it. We can make sure that when the Spirit blows our way, we are ready for it.

That's why it's important to practice spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study and worship – not to force the Holy Spirit to pour out on us but to make sure that when it does, we're ready for it. The Spirit is active – sometimes in ways you just don't notice unless you're ready to see it.

Doug Baker has been a Presbyterian mission coworker in Northern Ireland for over 30 years, working to bring peace and reconciliation to that troubled land. Not long ago I heard him give a report on his work in Belfast. Lots of progress has been made in bringing reconciliation between the Protestant and Catholic communities. Historians and political scientists will focus on how peace came to Northern Ireland through negotiations and threats and political breakthroughs. But the most powerful force for peace may have been prayer and the work like Doug is doing through the churches.

A number of years ago Carol and I visited the Corrymeela Community where Doug was working at the time. It's in a beautiful spot on the Antrim coast that serves as a retreat center where Protestants and Catholics could leave the tensions of the cities and drink deeply from the waters of the Spirit together. While we were there, we shared the facility with a group of middle-aged women from Belfast. They were Catholics and Protestants, some of whom lived just blocks apart, and for most of them it was the first time in their lives they had sat in the same room with someone from the other side, let alone prayed together. They have been pipelines through which the Holy Spirit has gently watered the soil of Ireland so that the Spirit of Peace could take root.

Prayer changes things, but the thing that is most often changed when we pray is ourselves. Prayer is as much about listening to God as it is about talking. When we open ourselves to God in prayer, the Holy Spirit interacts with our spirits to make us more like Christ. I think that's one reason Jesus told us to pray for our enemies. Maybe not only to change our enemies, but to change us. Have you ever prayed for someone with whom you've had a conflict? I usually find that in praying about it, in lifting up the other person in prayer, I discover something I've done to contribute to the conflict. I often get some insight into why the other person has been so difficult, if not because of something I've done, then maybe because of something else going in that person's life that makes them hard to get along with. Or maybe I've resolved that the thing to do is to call them to account for some inappropriate behavior, not so I'll be vindicated but so that they can be true to their identity as a person created in the image of God. And sometimes the Spirit has led me

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to just leave it alone and let God take care of it. Prayer helps us look at others as God sees them. We can't completely shed our prejudices and preconceptions, but through prayer the Holy Spirit gives us a broader and more loving perspective on life. We can see things more the way Jesus sees them.

When we pray or read scripture or worship together we position ourselves to receive the Spirit of God. We open the tap. Jesus gives us streams of life giving water, flowing from the heart of those who believe in him. That living water renews and refreshes us. It lifts us up and gives us life. Drink deeply from that water and let it satisfy your deepest thirst.