



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**Drink!**  
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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*On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:37-39).*

In the scene from today’s gospel, it’s the Festival of Booths, or Tabernacles. Like many other holidays, this one has multiple layers of meaning. On the surface it’s a kind of Jewish Thanksgiving, celebrating the harvest, gathering grapes and olives and whatever else people are growing, and thanking God for the gifts of the fruitful earth. Families get together for the holiday over lots of food and drink, and everyone has a good time.

At another level, the festival conjures up memories of the Exodus, that great archetypal tale of deliverance. We were slaves in Egypt for a long, long time, the story goes. But one day God raised up Moses, and sent him to Pharaoh, saying, “Let my people go!” There were plagues and all sorts of signs and wonders, until at last God pointed us toward the sea, and parted the waters, and set us free, and then we were slaves no more. But we had to wander in the wilderness for a long time too, and we set up little booths to shelter us along the way. That’s why we call it the Festival of Booths. It’s a celebration of joy, because it reminds us that God is good all the time—even in the wilderness, even in those long, dry stretches between the end of our captivity and when we finally come to the Promised Land.

It’s here, at the Festival of Booths, that Jesus does another one of those strange things he does so often. Somewhere in the midst of the crowd he cries out, “Let

anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.” What on earth is that supposed to mean? People wonder, and they start talking. The first century equivalent of the Twitterverse explodes with #WholsJesusAnyway? All the booths are buzzing with speculation, and everyone weighs in on the controversy.

The pundits let loose and opinions start flying, and a debate breaks out among the people. Some of the crowd think Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. Others think he’s just crazy. The police report that he’s causing a disturbance, but when the Temple authorities ask why they haven’t arrested him, they say, “No one has ever spoken like this before!” Even for the police, Jesus is too hot to handle.

Most of the religious leaders scoff at the officers of the law. “So has this man deceived you too?” they ask. “Look, has any one of the *authorities* believed in him?”—the implication being that people in the know don’t fall for this sort of thing. But Nicodemus, who has actually met Jesus and had a long conversation with him one night when no one else was around, says, “Our law doesn’t judge anyone without first giving him a fair hearing, does it?” Then the rest of the leaders turn on Nicodemus. “Surely you’re not from up north too, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to come from Galilee!”

John tells the story and lets the irony speak for itself. In the prologue to his gospel John has already said that this man he’s going to tell us about is not just another rabbi, or even another great prophet, but the very Word of God through whom the world was made. He comes to his people and his people don’t recognize him. They think they know the way things are. They think they know the ways of God too, as if they were experts on what the Almighty can and

cannot do. And the experts are sure that no Messiah comes from Nazareth in Galilee.

Now we all know from experience that people can be absolutely certain and completely wrong at the same time. Certainty is just a state of mind, after all, and it may or may not have much to do with reality. Some people seem to be more or less impervious to facts, whenever the facts contradict their already made up minds.

It's easy for us to treat the Pharisees as foils, and make fun of their folly. We've read John's story and we know how it turns out. We know about Easter. But some of us have already made up our minds in other ways about Jesus. We have our own authorities to consider when it comes to making sense of Jesus. We think we know what we can and cannot expect from him, and we're inclined to put Jesus someplace where he fits comfortably with the rest of our lives. We hope he'll turn up if ever we need him, and we want him to prepare a place for us in heaven when we die, though not anytime soon; but in the meantime we'd be just as happy if he didn't interfere with any of our other priorities.

But against every effort to rein him in, or to keep him comfortably in his place, Jesus himself cries out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let anyone who believes in me drink!" John says Jesus is talking about receiving the Spirit of God. When people really come to believe in Jesus, and trust him with the whole of their lives, it's like drinking from rivers of living water. It satisfies the deepest longings of our souls. It quenches the thirst of our spirits with the Holy Spirit.

Then several things begin to follow. People who drink this living water learn to live without so much fear. There's an enormous epidemic of fear all around us these days. But people who drink from the living water are much less likely to be tossed about by the tumult of the world—either the stresses of their personal lives or the endless stream of scary, sensational headlines in the news.

People who receive the Holy Spirit work hard, of course, to be good stewards of their blessings and provide for themselves and their families. But they also look beyond their immediate circle and care for all who belong to the family of God—which Jesus says is a much wider circle than most of us are inclined to imagine.

People who drink from the living waters know that salvation is not just a matter of getting to heaven when you die but of finding a foretaste of heaven right here and now. We find it here in the beloved community; and in the exodus from our slavery to self, with all its incessant demands; and in the freedom that comes from looking beyond ourselves by way of loving God and loving our neighbors.

Some people think they already know the way things are, and what they can and cannot expect from God. But others have learned that God is not so easily hemmed in, or set aside, and the Spirit of Christ shows up in all sorts of unexpected ways whenever we watch for him and welcome him into the details of our everyday lives.

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper that we celebrate today is a sign and seal of the promise of the presence of Christ. It's a little foretaste of the great heavenly festival.

But we only come to know the fullness of Christ when we drink freely from the rivers of his living water—when we let the Spirit of God in to refresh our own spirits. That happens not just by spending an hour in church on Sunday, but when we spend more time in the Bible, the written word of God, and we learn from one another’s experience in Bible studies and small groups about all the ways that God is on the move in people’s lives. Then after a while even our prayers are transformed from timid and tentative whispers to the unknown, until they become more like a vital, ongoing conversation with the living Lord.

So here’s the invitation from God on this holiday festival weekend. Jesus says, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me. Come and drink, and I promise you, your soul will be satisfied.”





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