

“Filled to the Brim”

In 2010, I was honored and blessed to attend the General Assembly Meeting for the Presbyterian Church (USA) as a Commissioner from this Presbytery. It was both a daunting task and a rewarding experience. I was assigned to be a member of the Social Justice Committee and we met for several days, once for ten hours, in order to make our recommendations with regards to overtures that had been sent from the various Presbyteries. Then the actual GA meetings began, sometimes going on until 2 in the morning.

One thing that made the experience so meaningful was the amount of time we spent in prayer, both as committees and as an Assembly as a whole. We truly sought the counsel of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in everything that we did.

The other thing that made my time there such a beautiful week was that we began every morning by worshiping together. The meeting was held in Minneapolis, MN, the state that is called The Land of 10,000 Lakes. I suppose it is this fact that helped the planners choose as our theme for the week the verse that you just heard from the Gospel of John. “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

The stage of the auditorium was set up to look like a chancel. There was a large cross, a pulpit, a table with the elements for Communion and a baptismal font all up front. The baptismal font was the most unusual I have ever seen. It was made completely of glass so that you could see through it all, including the large stem that held it up. Try to picture a bird bath made entirely of glass. Before leaving home, we had been contacted and asked to bring a jar of local water from our own hometown. All of this water was combined and put into glass pitchers.

Every time we worshiped, we concluded by reading together “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water” as the leader for the day added our mixed waters from home to the baptismal font.

It was a powerful visual aid. Each day, the level of water grew higher and higher as more of our hometown waters mixed together. To me, it represented the influence that we can have in our world when we come together and blend our hearts, our minds, our missions into one as the body of Christ on earth. As we remember the day that the Holy Spirit came and stayed on the believers at Pentecost, I thought this text is a good reminder that it takes the work and worship of EVERY disciple and our individual gifts, blending together, to continue to share the Good News.

It is a curious passage if you don’t understand the context in which Jesus said it. Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, a time to celebrate the gathering of the harvests. Many Jews came from all around and lived in hastily built huts around the Temple during the Feast. These huts were much like the ones that Moses and the children of Israel lived in when they fled Egypt into the desert.

On the seventh day of the festival, water was gathered from the Spring of Gihon, believed to have been where David anointed his son Solomon as King. People crowded into the streets to see the reenactment of the rock-giving-water miracle of Moses when the people complained about their hunger and thirst. It was a powerful reminder of God’s constant care for us all.

The priest circled around the altar seven times, pouring water onto the altar to wash away the blood of the week’s sacrifices. The action was also reminiscent of Isaiah’s prediction that when the Messiah came, water would pour forth from the altar. This is why the prophet wrote: “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” (Isaiah 12:3)

It is at this moment that a rabble-rousing rabbi from Nazareth stood and made the claim, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and let the one who believes drink.” Now as modern day hearers and readers of the word, this sounds completely reasonable. After all, WE know that Jesus is referring to Spiritual thirst – the thirst that we all have. We know that Jesus offers to quench the thirst that parches us when we are imprisoned in unhappy lives, meaningless jobs, dissatisfying relationships. We know that his living water soothes the pain of injury and illness and disagreement and war. We know that because Jesus lived and died and conquered death that, even when life is hard, we have a future filled with the cleansing waters of hope.

However, to those celebrating at the Temple that day, such a claim would have been scandalous! Heretical! Because Jews in Jesus’ day knew their Scriptures much better than we do. So they would have immediately thought of Isaiah’s promise and wondered why *this* man was basically claiming to be the Messiah.

But the really radical thing that Jesus said is the claim that the living water would flow from the hearts of the *believers* and friends that means you and me. And we, like the first hearers of this promise, may wonder how this is going to happen. It is one thing to know that Jesus can quench our Spiritual thirst, but can *we* really be empowered to do the same?

Being filled with the Spirit was not a completely new idea. In fact, the Old Testament words that we just heard are a story of the Spirit being sent to quench a different thirst. This passage reminds us of how tired and fed up and burned out Moses was with leading the people of God. And who can blame him? I told our Bible Study group the other week that, when I read the stories of the Israelites in the desert, I am reminded of taking a long trip with young children. Not mine of course, THEY were always perfect! I am talking about the ones that say “When are

we going to get there?” “How much longer?” “Can I have a Coke?” “He’s on my side – don’t touch me – Mommy- he’s looking at me!” You may have heard about children like that.

When Moses expressed his exhaustion with the whining people of God, God told him, “Choose some helpers, call them elders if you like, and I will fill them with my Spirit so you will not be alone in your work.” And there are other places in the Old Testament where we read about God sending His spirit to rest on people for a time.

But Jesus is talking about a different age. He is promising a time when the Spirit of God will come down and stay until Christ comes again. And the living water which was poured INTO Jesus became available once and for all time only when Jesus ascended into Heaven. With the vulnerability and loss and sadness of Jesus death and his leaving again after his resurrection, the Spirit came into the believers’ hearts and stayed. That is what we celebrate today on Pentecost. And how blessed we are in this body of Christ to be so filled with the Holy Spirit.

That Spirit, that living water, is what fills the Presbyterian Women when they collect Christmas gifts for the residents at the Clinton Presbyterian Community and White Gifts for the children of Thornwell. That Spirit is what stirs someone to use their gifts arranging and delivering flowers from our morning worship into the homes of members who are no longer able to come to their church home. That Spirit is what makes a meal for a grieving family who has just said their last good-byes to a loved one.

The Spirit went with the young people yesterday as they traveled to Montreat to grow in faith and fellowship with one another. The Spirit lends a hand as a meal is given at the Soup Kitchen or a bag of groceries is shared at Carpenter's Table. It will be with us during Vacation Bible School as some little ones get their first taste of what it means to be a child of God. The

Spirit guides our Session, our Pastoral Nominating Committee and those who will choose our Elders as they wrestle with hard decisions and on and on and on. The work of the Spirit flows from the believers' hearts at Nazareth.

You see, what Jesus meant that day at the feast is that since each of us is created in the image of God we are connected with that image through the Spirit. And when the Spirit gives birth to what is within, God flows out of us. We are empowered by the Living Word, Jesus Christ to follow his actions of caring and teaching and preaching and even admonishment. Indeed, it is through the Holy Spirit that God infuses the heart, the mind and the will of this church and the world.

And this takes me back to that glass baptismal font at General Assembly. Without every drop of water from every believer that was there, the worship and work of the body of Christ would not have been the same that week. It took water from Spartanburg, SC and Reading, PA and San Francisco, CA and Omaha, Nebraska to fill that basin with the collective work of the Spirit poured out in God's church. And so it is with Nazareth Presbyterian Church.

Friends, the Spirit is not dependent on ONE person. Finding someone to fill the Christian Education Coordinator spot will be very helpful to your Installed pastor but ONE person cannot do all the work. The Spirit may be calling you to help with that privilege so *that* person is not as worn out as Moses. Making disciples of each other is best accomplished when it is a team effort. It might mean leading Youth Group although you've never felt called to do so before. Or volunteering to feed the Youth even though you are young enough to be their sister or old enough to be their grandfather.

The Spirit does not live in ONE group. The Presbyterian Women have always been and will continue to be a vital part of the body of Christ at Nazareth but the role of women has

changed drastically. Therefore, the Spirit may call the Presbyterian Women to look and function in a way that is different than they have ever looked and functioned before.

The Choir is a vital part of our worship. Yet when they take a much needed rest for the summer, the Spirit will fill others to share their gifts to the glory of the Lord. The Friendship Club and the Sailing Club and the Ladies who eat together once a month are all vital parts of our discipleship and are gifted by the Spirit to fill a specific need in God's kingdom on earth.

Pentecost is a wonderful day to remember that it takes the Spirit flowing from every believing heart that is here and more for the body of Christ to respond to the need of this community and the world. And when we respond to our living savior by bringing him our deepest wells, the world knows that we belong to Jesus and we are willing to share that Spirit with them! And living water flows from our hearts!

Friends, this passage is a reminder to us all the when none of the empty promises of culture can quench our thirst, the promises of God, the sacrifice of Jesus and the living water of the Spirit can and will. And because we are filled to the brim, we are called to overflow with cooperation, caring and compassion until His Kingdom comes again.

So let us work and worship and laugh and fight and pray and play together as believers in the promise of God whose Spirit is a river of living water within us all. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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