

Mutterings, Misunderstandings and Division

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Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 00] Well, it's good to be able to preach here on Pentecost Sunday, but I'm a little bit worried about the sermon title that we have there in the bulletin.

It's called, Mutterings, Misunderstandings, and Division, Dan Gifford. So it looks as though I get lumped in with all those things. We are on John 7, and I think it probably might be better to call it Living Water, and that makes me look a little bit better as well.

But this is a lot about water in this Bible reading that we heard today, and it's because it takes place in the context of this massive festival in Jerusalem called the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles.

And this was one of three feasts, the others being Passover and Pentecost, that all Jewish males were meant to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts.

And that meant that there were up to a million people in Israel during this reading that we heard today. It's a festival that took place in September or October, depending on the year.

[1 : 16] And it was a joyous festival. It was a time of giving thanks for the harvest, a time of giving thanks for what God did in sustaining them in the wilderness after fleeing from being rescued from Egypt and sustaining them with water from a rock in the wilderness.

Also looking ahead to a day when the temple would be rebuilt and waters would flow in a big river out from that temple and bless the world around it.

And so there was this feast with seven days of sacrifices. And on these days, there would be water taken from the pool of Siloam, which, by the way, they found the real pool where it was located just in 2004.

And it would go up these steps that have been excavated up to the temple. And there, the chief priest would pour water out in a silver basin, as people sang, Psalms 113 through 118.

We did 118 today. And then he'd pour out that basin of water at the temple, giving thanks for water that God gives.

[2 : 27] It was a joyous and very powerful scene of thanksgiving. And this year, in this big, big festival that we see in chapter 7, the big topic of conversation was Jesus.

And that's because he had become well known by now by his miracles and his teaching. And remember last week that David preached on, Jesus said, I am the bread of life.

If anyone eats this bread, they will live forever. And then he said, the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. It's shocking teaching.

It's a shocking teaching that divided people. Some left, many left who were disciples. And you can see in verse 12 that there's a real difference of opinion about Jesus among those many, many people in the crowd.

Some said he's a good man. Others said, no, he's leading people astray. And we get these same sorts of conjecture and debate today in Vancouver about who Jesus is.

[3 : 36] Who is he? And in this passage, a couple of times it says the people were muttering, which means they were whispering because they were afraid of the official reaction to Jesus, which was they wanted to arrest and kill him.

And so it was a dangerous place for Jesus to be. And there was lots of wondering who is Jesus. And in the middle of that festival, Jesus stands in the temple grounds and he begins to teach.

And so, of course, the crowd gathers. And what he taught them was that everything he said was actually not his own teaching, but it came from God.

It was God's teaching. And God had sent him with that teaching for a reason. And there's no falsehood in God. So if you think about what Jesus is saying, it's very, very powerful.

Because if it's true, then God himself that day was teaching people. And God is actually teaching us this morning as well. They are his words.

[4 : 41] And the words that God has sent Jesus to bring are words of life. You see this throughout the Gospel of John. John believes with all his heart, he knows from God himself, that the words in John give life when people believe it.

And what this is summarized by Jesus is just really, really wonderfully done very, very clearly. He says, I came that they, meaning you and I and each person in the world, that they might have life. And that they might have life abundantly. That's the purpose for Jesus' words. That's why he speaks to us today as well. There are many good words in our world.

Words that we hear and read that can excite us for good. That can give us knowledge. That can save us. That can give us great blessing in our life. There are books that are just beautiful. They have goodness in them. And you don't want them to end. I remember when I was very young going through the Chronicles of Narnia for the first time and coming to that last book and being very sad that it ended.

[5 : 57] He wanted many more in that series to go on. And so you reread. But the one thing about words in this world, as beautiful and good as they can be, is that none of them can give life.

None of those words can give eternal life. And that's what's unique about Jesus' teaching. They are words from God to his people for the purpose of giving life.

Remember what Peter said last week. Jesus said, are you going to forsake me as well? And Peter said, where would I go? Where would I go in all of the world?

You have the words of eternal life. You are Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. He has words of eternal life. Now, the amazing thing about this passage is those words of life that Jesus is giving, that we're going to hear, they are words that prompt a reaction.

And the reaction is incredibly mixed. It is different. In fact, they are opposed. The first response to the word of life is to keep him and his words at a distance.

[7 : 13] And the crowd does that. They're easily distracted. They do it by theological debate based on where Jesus came from in verse 27. And certainly that happens today, doesn't it?

Many debate who Jesus is. And there's lots of statements of ignorance, of misunderstanding and conjecture. We're going to see this later in the passage. They say nobody good can come out of Galilee as a Messiah.

But of course, Jesus didn't come from Galilee. He came from Bethlehem. Indeed, the city of David. There's lots of ignorance. There's conjecture. It's a way of not dealing with Jesus' words.

And not really considering what they might mean. And I think we do that. And our society does. It's our culture. Because we don't want God meddling in our lives.

There is a risk in allowing God, if he truly is real and giving life, to give a deep change from the inside out. So we do keep God at a distance.

[8 : 13] But God cuts through this. Jesus cuts through it in verse 29. He says, I know God, for I come from him, and he sent me.

He sent me to you. And so Jesus is saying, you cannot, those words are not meant to be kept at a distance, because they come from the living God into your life now.

So don't keep your distance. And in fact, he says in verse 34, to those seeking to kill him, there will come a time when you will seek me, but you won't find me. You won't be able to come to me.

That distance becomes permanent. You miss out on the word of life. So Jesus didn't come to give the world another interesting option to sort of consider.

He actually claims the ultimate place. That his words are God's words. He alone gives life. That's the power of those words.

[9 : 12] So if you are here today, and you are keeping Jesus at arm's length, and by the way, this is something that we Christians do in our lives from time to time, as well as those who don't know Jesus yet.

This is the day to consider Jesus' own words, not arguments or theological theories about him, but him and his words to consider him.

I remember a conversation I had many, many years ago when I graduated from high school, and I went on a class trip, and we went overseas, and on this trip, one of the girls that was on it was going through some difficult things, and she was considering, well, what is life about?

You know, these ultimate questions she was thinking about. And so it was very natural for me to say, you know, have you considered who God is? Have you considered about who Jesus is?

And she said, you know, I was thinking of doing the religious thing in a couple years. You know, when I get my life more together, and I've experienced life a little bit more, get things sorted out. [10:18] And I said to her, I said, this is actually what God has to say is so relevant to you, and it is, now is the time to look into it.

And she said, well, maybe I will do it a little bit sooner than two years. And, you know, I still wonder whether she did. What happened with her, with her relationship with God and his words? And I hope that she did consider Jesus' words, but it is so easy to keep your distance. Well, John tells us this morning, God the Father has sent Jesus to you, for you. And you will, you are, the only response is really to take his words seriously, to consider what is being said. Well, there's a second response, and that, and that, that is a response of belief, actually. You look at verse 31, it says, many of the people believed in him that day. Many of those people, those thousands, and up to a million people, there were thousands hearing him, and many believed.

[11:20] Now, we know that this is a belief that was a real, sort of, beginning belief. Just the smallest beginnings of faith. Because it was based on the signs that Jesus said, in verse 31, that he did, the signs that he did.

But what this meant, is that people were beginning to take Jesus seriously. thinking that perhaps he is the one who gives life. That his words give eternal life.

And so wonderfully, on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, in verse 37, if you look there, Jesus very simply, and very clearly, tells everyone, no matter what their situation is, their spiritual place in their life, he clearly tells them how they can have life with God.

So, on a day, when the chief priest has poured water out in the temple grounds, from the pool of Siloam, and people are singing, have sung joyfully, these psalms, that God, God save us.

This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice, and be glad in it. On that day, Jesus stands up in the crowd, and he cries out, if anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

[12:38] And people must have wondered what that meant. There must have been silence. What does that mean? Because being thirsty, is a critical thing that we all have in our life.

And Jesus is just saying, there's two things you need to do. Be thirsty. In other words, what are the things that your inner soul is asking? The questions of why are we here?

What is the meaning of our life? What is our future? He says, just be thirsty. Know your need of God. Very simply, that's what it is. And we see this in people in our world.

This is the last day, you may know, or may not know it, of the Cannes Film Festival in France. And a reporter asked Woody Allen about why is life worth living?

The great philosopher Woody Allen, right? And his answer is worth quoting here. I'll read it. He says, no matter how much the philosophers talk to you or the priests or the psychiatrists, the bottom line is life has its own agenda and it runs right over you while you are prattling.

[13:48] He said, we're all going to wind up in a very bad position one day. The same position, but a bad one. And then he went on to say that the function of art, as he sees it, is to convince people otherwise.

He says, but you can't really do that without conning them. He said, because in the end, life has no meaning. We live in a random universe and you're living a meaningless life and everything you create in your life or do is going to vanish and the earth will vanish.

And the sun will burn out and the universe will be gone. There you go, the life of the party. That can. And he said, the only way around this, he concluded, is if you turn on a baseball game or you watch a Fred Astaire movie or you do something that distracts you.

It's very searching. He says, and that is somebody who is thirsty. That's somebody who is seeing a deep lacking in life without God.

He's describing it very well. It is indeed meaningless and it is temporary. Now the problem for Woody Allen is that he is distracted from true grace and from having an appetite for the life of God.

[15:04] You know, where does that thirst turn to? Is it just turned to a distraction and something in this world? Or does it turn you to want what Jesus alone can give? Well, so Jesus says to the thirsty, don't be distracted.

Know your deep need for God. And the second thing he says in order to have life is to come to me and drink. It's an incredible claim.

Come to me and drink and this life is going to come to you. So he's saying, Jesus is, that all those questions about meaning and future, about life, is found in him.

That he is that life. He gives the life of God and what he does is he implants that life into ordinary human beings. It's not people who are incredibly deserving in any and every human being that comes and is thirsty and drinks from him.

And it's as simple, that giving of the life is as simple for him as filling a glass of water and drinking it for us. This is what he's teaching today.

[16:13] And so the question that we ask is what does it mean to drink of Jesus? Well, he tells us in verse 38, it's whoever believes in me, as the scripture says, out of his heart will flow rivers of living waters.

And Jesus is saying, he's not saying believe something about me or have the right theological construct. He says, he says actually to believe in me.

It means committing ourselves to him. It means trusting that he is the only one who can give the life of God. He alone can satisfy our hearts.

Who else can I turn to hear and to know eternal life? That's the essence of being a Christian. It is drinking of Jesus. And I think on this day of Pentecost, it is so wonderful that Jesus gives a really clear and powerful promise.

He says of the Holy Spirit, he says, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

[17:25] Well, brothers and sisters, on this Pentecost, we know that Jesus' words are true. The gift of God the Holy Spirit today is that the gift of his life is planted in us.

It's a deeply personal gift. It's not an impersonal force. It's about being brought into the relationship of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It's about this Holy Spirit giving you a thirst for Jesus, for that life.

It's about the Holy Spirit helping you to understand Jesus' words, and that those words change you as you obey them. It is about the Holy Spirit opening your heart to his love, his real and powerful love.

It is the living God, the Holy Spirit, telling you continually, you are the child of God. God is your Father, and he loves you.

The Holy Spirit bears witness in us that this is true. And then he changes us from the inside out. Now, I want you to notice that Jesus gives this gift.

[18:37] It's a curious thing. He says he gives this gift only after he is glorified. John makes sure we know that. Why? Well, the word glorified that John uses always has to do with the cross.

It's there on the cross that the work of salvation, of saving and giving life, is given to us as Jesus dies in our place for our sins. And then he rises from the dead and ascends to show that in power he has accomplished it, that he indeed brings us through death into life, into his very presence. And so, the certainty that every believer, everyone who comes to Jesus, is filled with the Spirit, that is as certain as Jesus dying for us on the cross.

And we need to know that, that each of you have the Holy Spirit in your life, the life of God, as you have believed in him, as you have thirsted and drunk of who Jesus is.

Now, I want you to notice something. We're going to close with this. Is that there is a movement of the Holy Spirit in that little verse that we saw there. When you read it in verse 37, you naturally would think that if you drink, then in verse 38, the living water would be poured into your life.

[20:02] But it doesn't say that, does it? It says, whoever believes, out of his heart will flow streams or rivers of living water. And what that means is that there is blessing that comes from you to the world because you are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Do you remember way back when we did the series on Ezekiel? At the end of Ezekiel, there is that beautiful vision of the temple. And in the temple, water comes out of it, as I said at the beginning, and the river turns to be a huge river that affects the whole world.

And on the banks of the river are trees that have fruit for food and the leaves of the trees are for the healing of nations. And there is a deep blessing that happens in the world.

Well, Jesus fulfills this when he gives us the Holy Spirit. He said that I, that he is the temple, the new temple from which the Holy Spirit is flowing into our lives.

And so the Holy Spirit makes your life a channel of that river, in a sense, through which other people experience the life of God that he has given to you. Other people receive food for their souls and healing that only God gives as his life overflows in our lives to the world.

[21 : 26] So the image of Ezekiel is that the world we live in is a parched world, that people are thirsting for the love of God, for his life, for his meaning, and for his goodness.

And it can be hard for us to see this because our world around us is very good, especially here in Vancouver, at disguising the fact that we are a parched land spiritually.

A few weeks ago, I went to California with my family. And California, as you may know, has a terrible drought right now. But going there and where we were, and maybe it had something to do with Disneyland, you never knew that there was actually a drought.

You know, there's fountains, there's beautiful flowers, there's even some grass you see here and there that's green and you see palm trees. But the fact of the matter is, behind the scenes, since January, California has been in a drought state of emergency.

And that means that there are more and more drastic measures of conserving water, that that water will run out. And there's pictures of reservoirs that look grim.

[22 : 31] They are just almost dry. And that's our world in a sense. Many people in your office or your neighborhood or your social life or here at church need the life of God, but we present really well.

We present as being self-sufficient. We have fountains and flowers and palm trees in our lives. Like Woody Allen, we can distract ourselves. But there is always a need.

There is always a true thirst that is there that may be ignored. And the Holy Spirit is moving you to bless people in your life. When we talk, I talked with a number of people this week about what does it look like for streams of living waters to overflow out of your heart.

What does that look like in your life? And you know, usually it's not incredible emotional experiences of God, God's love for you or his presence in your life, although that is part of it.

But most often, it has to do with serving God. That you have experienced living water in the serving of God and sometimes you don't even notice it.

[23 : 38] And what I mean is what I heard is people say, I experienced this overflowing water as I shared with my child. There was given a moment where I could talk about who God is and teach them and I was able to take that opportunity.

It's people talking about praying for their unbelieving spouse and children that in that praying, God's spirit was overflowing. Or we talked about struggling with sin and that as the Holy Spirit is overflowing, there was an ability to say no to sin, to not say the thing that I was going to say or do what I was going to do and instead to bless.

We talked about serving Jesus, many people, in their place of leadership at work or in their profession where they are seeking to really be faithful to God in the decisions and the way that they are treating people and they felt that the Holy Spirit was working there.

And then it is the ability to give money joyfully, with a joyful heart. How can that happen? Well, that is the overflowing river of life of the Holy Spirit in us.

And then finally you see Nicodemus at the end of verse 51 and he takes a stand by the power of the Holy Spirit and he says as the Pharisees want to arrest him and he is one of them, he says, don't you know that we need to give Jesus a hearing and learn what he does first before you arrest him.

[25 : 11] And I think that is the power of the Holy Spirit in us as we are to ask people consider Jesus, consider his words, they are life-giving, they are for you.

Learn what he does, who he is in the Bible. So today, Jesus invites you and me to be thirsty, to come to him to drink, to believe in him, to entrust our life to him and really know that his words are words of life and the Holy Spirit that he gives will overflow into the world around us.

So let's pray now for the Holy Spirit to come to us as we go into the prayers of the people. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.