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Christ Our Anchor Presbyterian Church
February 20, 2022
John 7: 37-52

WHO WOULD THINK THAT WATER COULD BE SO CONTROVERSIAL?

According to the ClimateKids website of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, “There aren’t many qualities that are true to all of life on earth, but the need for water is one of them.

Water is in all living things, whether they live at the bottom of the ocean or in the driest desert. Water made life on earth possible. Water makes life on earth possible. Because of this, scientists who search for life on other planets think our best bet for finding life is to search for water.”

Water is a quality and a basic need we all have in common. It seems like it could and should bind us together, especially since we are told there is enough of it to go around.

I mean, we all get thirsty.

But, water can divide us into the “haves” and the “have-nots” Water can be controversial.

What comes to mind are communities whose main access are waters that have been polluted, too much toxic waste being dumped in a resource that communities depend on for drinking and farming.

Geographical areas that suffer from long, arduous drought whose water supply, so dependent on rainfall, has been depleted.

Since every living thing has water in common, shouldn’t water bind us together?

Once again, Jesus has made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a festival. Controversy is stirred and this time it is over water.

It is the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles.

There were three festivals during the year when the Jewish people would make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem: Passover, Pentecost and Booths. The Festival of Booths, also known as Tabernacles, occurs in the fall after the harvest.

A good harvest is what the people rely on to get them through the winter, and thanksgiving abounds because once again God has provided.

God has always provided. This sacred occasion commemorates the time when God got the people through the wilderness to the Promised Land. They were hungry. They were thirsty.

God's provided manna and water.

In the time of Jesus, the ceremony would last for seven days. The stories from the 40 years in the wilderness were recalled. Green ceremonial branches were waved in processions to commemorate the harvest's fruitfulness. Pilgrims set up booths along the perimeter of the temple to simulate tabernacles. They would camp out in these booths for seven days.

Remember that the presence of the Lord for those long ago in the wilderness was in the tabernacle that they carried with them each and every day, the ark of the covenant. That was their way of never being without God.

The main event in the Festival of Booths is the **water** drawing ceremony, which becomes a beautifully visualized prayer of thanksgiving. Everything is centered around this culminating worship service.

The priest of the temple goes to the river and draws water into a jar and brings it back, pours out the water from the altar and lets it flow to the people, speaking the words from Exodus 17:

"The people thirsted for water and complained to Moses, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children and our livestock with thirst?" Moses pleaded with God saying that the people were ready to stone him. But the Lord said, "Go ahead of your people. Take your staff. I will be standing there in front of you at the rock of Horeb. Strike the rock with your staff, and water will come out of it so that the people may drink."

It was living water, literally and spiritually.

Amidst this sacred water ritual, Jesus claims that he is the one who can quench thirst because God has sent him.

"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and let the one who believes in me drink."
Jesus's desire is not to abolish a sacred ritual commemorating a lifesaving event in their history. He is offering more because God always gives us more. We don't always receive "God's more" because it changes things and change, at times, is controversial and scary.

Jesus words are heard and the controversy ensues.

Some think Jesus is a prophet. Some believe that he is indeed the "one sent from God," the Messiah. Even some with religious authority are saying, "Maybe we should listen. Hear what he

is saying. We know of no one who has spoken like this.” Even Nicodemus, a Pharisee himself says that the leadership should not jump to judgment.

But the leaders are incensed and reply that Jesus has obviously deceived everyone.

“This guy is from Galilee. He can’t be the Messiah.”

Think about this. You are a professional, religious leader. You draw a salary, health care and a pension plan. If you discern that the Spirit is calling you to challenge the religious establishment that supports your living, you could lose your job.

If the Spirit of the living Lord is calling you to do something different and risky, and uncharted, you’ll be ostracized, lose the status you worked so hard to attain.

The blessing of an institution is that we can collectively pool resources, use our gifts and collaborate to support the mission of the institution. But this blessing might also be the very thing that makes us blind and deaf to where God is at work, and the more that God wants to give us.

Some of the religious leaders of Jesus day were not willing to think anything other than that they were right. It was too threatening.

Some want to arrest Jesus. “Get him out of here before he makes any more trouble.”

Some don’t want to lay a hand on him.

Controversy!

And yet doesn’t it seem like all of them were just **thirsting for God?**

Some were thinking, “Maybe??” Open to possibilities different than what they had previously known.

And others were thinking that their way was the right way, that their way was the whole story, and nothing was going to whittle that down.

In the book, “Wholehearted Faith” by Rachel Held Evans, that we will be discussing during Lent, she writes:

God seems rather adamantly committed to putting to death my notion that this life is all about being right-and especially that my life is all about being right

Water does indeed quench our thirst. The rock was struck, water came and the people in the wilderness drank.

As the one sent by God, Jesus promises to fill our thirsty souls and quench our spirits with living water.

Ahhh, if we could just stay here, quenched and comfortable, physically and spiritually.
Ahhh! The End! That's enough for today! Let us bask!

But water does more than quench our thirst.

Evans writes further:

*“Water is a force that does its steady work on even the hardest rock—reshaping it, eroding it, marking it. Even impermeable rock can be stained and changed by the minerals water carries. Over time, one way or another, you’ll be able to see the souvenirs of water’s presence, evidence that says clearly **“Water was here.”**”*

The action of water erosion can bore holes that form caves, new openings and when water breaks through the back of the cave, there is yet something new, it creates an arch. The arch may eventually fall, again creating something new, beautiful rock columns.

Water changes things over time, often in dramatic ways, sometimes even controversial ways.

As believers, Jesus, as the source of living water will change us, challenge us, erode us, re-shape us, transform us into followers who are constantly growing in faith, seeing God at work in new and surprising ways, open to receiving the abundance of God’s flowing rivers of living water whatever they may bring.

Bryce Canyon is one of the National Parks located in southern Utah. It’s an outlandish landscape, a place that looks like it has been gouged out of the earth filled with orange and red rock pedestals called hoodoos. Some of them look like people that you know or castles or bridges. People say that one even looks like Queen Victoria. The eastern side of the canyon is particularly vulnerable to the forces of weather, especially to the slow steady power of water. If you visit in the mid to late spring after the winter thaw, you can almost hear the grinding, groaning, and grumbling of water erosion at work. New paths of crevices are created, rocks tumble, gravel shakes loose and there are new formations.

You might think, **“Water is here!”**

Baltimore, MD is the city where I was born and raised, and I love that city. But in recent years, I have learned about harsh realities in the history of this city that I don’t love at all.

The Baltimore Sun was my introduction to a newspaper. It came to our home every day, morning, and evening. In fourth grade, I was selected to be on the journalism staff for the first publication of The Grove Park Elementary School Times. We came to know the Baltimore Sun from cover to cover. It was our prototype. We went on a field trip to the Office of The Baltimore Sun, and got to meet the reporters and the editors. It was such a proud moment. The Baltimore Sun could do no wrong. The masthead of The Sun was "Light For All."

Well, not really! Learning about the city that shaped me and gave me so much good has also brought me to my knees.

This past week in the February 19, 2022 edition of The Sun the editorial board published an opinion stating: "We are deeply and profoundly sorry that for decades The Baltimore Sun promoted policies that oppressed Black Marylanders. We are working to make amends.

As journalists, as the Fourth Estate, we at this paper have a public responsibility to confront and illuminate societal ills so that they can be addressed and eradicated. On race, The Baltimore Sun's history is one that we are not proud to share, and we need to warn you that this history is offensive to read. But addressing one's wrongs begins by acknowledging them. While we have taken great pains to highlight the paper's righteous actions through the years, we have yet to shine a light on our dark corners----- until today. Our accounting is incomplete and late. Nevertheless, we hope by revealing honestly our institution's past and present injustices, we might take at least a step closer to being as our masthead states, "Light For All."

I read that op ed this week. There's a long way to go.....but I could hear the grinding, groaning and grumbling of repentance and possibly transformation. New crevices, pathways being forged. Towers of injustices tumbling, old ways being loosened and washed away.

I thought,

"Living water is here. Please do your steady work."

Christ our Anchor friends, how often do we dig in our heels because we are right. How often do we highlight our righteous actions, our good deeds, but make sure that our dark corners stay in those corners? How often do we walk away from change because it's going to be hard and confusing and we won't understand or be able to manage or control?

But you see, our stubbornness, our skepticism and cynicism, our need to be right, our fear, it turns out.....

is no match for Jesus and the resilience of the steady work of living water, abundantly flowing, quenching our thirst, at times controversial.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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