

SERMON TITLE: "Living Water: Flowing Water"

SERMON TEXT: John 6:1-3, 5a, 10-11, 23-25a, 34-35, 53-55; and John 7:37-39

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: August 22, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

This week I discovered that the state of Utah has a webpage called "Slow the Flow; Save H₂O."

On that page is a heading that says, "Why water is amazing." Under that heading are these statements:

- Water makes us—Most of the human body is made of water.
- Water provides—Water grows the food in Utah's gardens and grocery stores.
- Water saves—Water is necessary to . . . extinguish fires [and] water regulates the temperature of our planet.
- Water is joy—From whitewater rafting to running through sprinklers.
- Water heals—Without it, dehydration causes headaches, illness, and organ failure.
- Water powers us—providing renewable electricity to our homes and industry.¹

While water is very important to us, however, it's also limited in quantity. So, as you might expect, Utah's "Slow the Flow; Save H₂O" website also lists "Simple ways you can conserve" like these:

- Quickly fix leaks [and] . . . keep your plumbing updated.
- Use more mulch around plants and shrubs . . . [and use] a drip system.
- Don't overwater.
- [Pull] your weeds [that] syphon water from other . . . plants.
- Adjust your mower to a higher . . . setting [because] longer grass . . . holds in moisture.
- Wash Fido near flowers [so your water can serve two purposes instead of one].¹

It's wonderful that we've had so much rain this week. But water conservation continues to be necessary in this year of drought. And, hopefully, with some efforts to slow the flow, we can get by until God replenishes our water basins and our streams are flowing fully once again.

Because of the drought, we've spent the past several Sundays focusing on "Living Water" stories from the Gospel of John. So far, we've considered stories about transforming water in John 2, birthing water in John 3, gushing water in John 4, and walking water in John 5 & 6. Today, as we consider the verses Charles read to us from John 6 & 7, I hope we will find ourselves refreshed and reinvigorated by some flowing water.

1—FLOWING WATER REMINDS US OF GOD'S CARE FOR OUR PHYSICAL LIFE

If the scripture reading sounded familiar to you it's because the story of Jesus' miraculous feeding of the multitude is told six times in the four gospels in various forms. But what's unique here in John is how this story of feeding the crowd with bread and fish is interspersed with references to water and drink. It's like flowing water is the signal for us to notice what's happening.

And, so this section of scripture begins with Jesus crossing to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which was also called the Sea of Tiberias. Because Jesus had become known for healing the sick, many people followed him there. When Jesus sat on a mountain to teach his disciples, a big crowd of spectators gathered around. They were looking for Jesus to do more miracles. And that he did. Since hunger was their primary need at that particular time, Jesus fed them by multiplying five loaves and two fish into enough food to feed about 5000 people.

So, today, when we read this miracle story from the Gospel of John, we see that flowing water reminds us of God's care for our physical life. So far in this conversation between Jesus and the people, everything is pretty much on the level of basic bodily actions and needs: Getting into and out of boats. Crossing the sea. Going up a mountain. Sitting down on the grass. Finding a boy who has some food he is willing to share. Distributing the bread and fish to all who were hungry. Feeling their hungers satisfied. Gathering up the leftovers, so that no food would go to waste.

The water that flows in this first part of the story is the water of God's abundant concern and provision for our physical needs. After all, God made our bodies this way. In fact, God even made Jesus that way. You may recall that it's the first chapter of this Gospel of John that gave us the cherished Christian belief that "the Word became flesh and lived among us." Flesh and blood that lives on this earth is physical. And, like Genesis 1 tells us, when God created things this way, God declared that it was good. Flowing water reminds us of God's care for our physical life.

2—FLOWING WATER REMINDS US HOW JESUS CARES FOR OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

Yes, indeed, God certainly does care about and provide for our bodily existence. But, as the Gospel of John is trying to teach us over and over again, there is more to life than just the physical. Humans do not live by bread alone. We also need life on a spiritual plane.

So this flowing water story takes us a couple boat rides farther. In John 6:23, we read that “some boats from Tiberias came near the place where [the crowd] had eaten the bread.” When they discovered that Jesus had moved on, they got back into their boats and sailed to Capernaum. They found Jesus there “on the other side of the sea,” and asked him to produce bread again, for them also. But instead, in John 6:35, Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” In verses 54 and 55, Jesus continued, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.”

Notice how we’ve moved on from bread and fish to Jesus’ flesh and blood. Obviously, Jesus wasn’t encouraging cannibalism. So we know this is symbolic and metaphorical speech with layers of meaning. Jesus’ “flesh and blood” referred to his very physical death on the cross that had huge spiritual implications for our salvation.

If we jump ahead to the crucifixion story in John 19, we read, “But when [the soldiers] came to Jesus . . . they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out” (vv. 33-34). A traditional Good Friday hymn puts it this way,

See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?²

The living water that flowed from Jesus’ side was his compassion, forgiveness, and love. The flowing water was his concern for his disciples near and far who would come to believe in him for eternal life that begins now and will raise us up on the last day.

3—FLOWING WATER REMINDS US HOW TO LIVE IN THE SPIRIT

Besides the fact that God cares about our physical bodies, and that Jesus gave his flesh and blood for our spiritual life, flowing water reminds us of one more thing. It reminds us how to live in the Spirit.

In John 7:37-38, while Jesus was teaching in Jerusalem, he said, “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.’” Then verse 39 tells us that Jesus “said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive.” In other words, the flowing water would be the Holy Spirit moving into and out of the Christian believers. This would be how Christians would maintain their faith in Jesus and continue to follow him even after his death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven. As the Gospel of John tells in later chapters, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit as a comforter, guide, advocate, companion, and source of strength.

If you’re wondering how to receive this flowing-water-Holy-Spirit, consider the sacramental imagery that flows out of John 6 & 7. Every time we gather with other Christian believers and eat and drink of the bread and cup, we participate not only in Jesus’ death on the cross but also his life in the Spirit. It isn’t some kind of magic trick. It isn’t a chemical reaction. The power of Holy Communion has much more to do with the repetition of the spiritual discipline. Whether we’re gathered here in the sanctuary or come to worship by Facebook Live, we come with devotion and purpose. We come not just on our own, but with other disciples who are likewise doing their best to learn about the Bible, grow in Christian faith, and become better servants of God in the world.

Holy Communion and its companion disciplines of singing hymns, praying prayers, reading scripture, and learning about Jesus turn us into a river channel for the Holy Spirit to flow into our hearts and then to flow back out into the world. In all these water stories in the Gospel of John, there’s no

indication that the water should come into us and stop. Living water can't become stagnant. To be living water, it has to be flowing into us, through us, and then out of us to the benefit of others.

This idea that rivers of living water will flow out of the hearts of believers and into the world reminds me of the description of heaven in Revelation 22. It says, "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God." As the description continues, it doesn't talk about a river that flows just into me or just into you. It flows down a street and into a city—into a society where many people live—into a place that has trees with plenty of fruit for food and with leaves that provide healing for the nations.

In other words, a sign that the Spirit of Jesus is flowing out of the hearts of us believers is if we are helping the world around us to become a better place like that. Flowing water that both comes into us and goes out of us reminds us how to live in the Spirit.

CONCLUSION

There's a fun song that goes like this:

I've got a river of life flowing out of me;
 makes the lame to walk and the blind to see,
 opens prison doors, sets the captives free.
 I've got a river of life flowing out of me.³

Whether we're crossing a sea on a boat to ask Jesus for bread to feed our bodies or quenching our spiritual thirst in the cup of Holy Communion, may we get to the point where the living water of the Holy Spirit flows into our hearts *and* back out into the world. That's the goal and purpose of flowing water.

¹ <https://slowtheflow.org/?gclid=CjwKCAjwgvilBhBkEiwA10D2j1be0-ly28CcBD8oShN9uzQwNZGvLtNqWRLndK9fftzfbY4SQpsrxoCqKQQA vD BwE>

²Isaac Watts, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," 1707.

³Author unknown. "Spring Up, O Well," in *The Group Songbook* (Group Publ: Loveland, CO, 1991), #18.