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The Day of Pentecost

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Jesus Sent the Holy Spirit to Empower Us for Ministry

The Day of Pentecost brings the season of Easter to a close. From Advent through Pentecost believers focus on Jesus' ministry to achieve and proclaim the good news, the forgiveness of sins. On this day we remember that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to authorize and empower believers to be his witnesses in the world. Our work as gospel proclaimers is filled with challenges—including challenges from our own sinful nature—but it is also filled with comfort and joy.

Sermon

John 7:37-39

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

Introduction – Jews celebrate the ancient Festival of Tabernacles every year in late September or early October. It's kind of a combination of Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July. It celebrates the bounty of the fall harvest and the end of Israel's 40-year journey through the desert. Jews call the festival Sukkot. A *sukkot* is a tent or a tabernacle; that's where people slept for those 40 years—in tents. The festival lasts for seven days. Some Jews back then and some Jews still today camp out for that week. On the eighth day everybody goes back to their homes just as their ancestors did when they finally arrived in the Promised Land. The most important symbol of Sukkot is water. When people were dying of thirst in the desert God performed a miracle and provided them with water from a rock. So, all of this—the crops and the tents and the water and the promised land—all of this reminded the people of Israel that the Lord is the giver of life.

From the time he was 12, Jesus almost always went to Jerusalem for the great festivals. But he was lying low at this Sukkot. The good times were gone. When he did show up, the confrontations with the Jewish hierarchy became more and more intense. There were serious plans to arrest him or stone him or execute him in some way. When his followers started out to Jerusalem Jesus stayed behind. He had his own timetable. He was going to die at Passover—the blood of the lamb time—and not on Sukkot.

About halfway through the festival he showed up. He went to the temple and started to teach. He was intriguing to some, but he infuriated others, especially leadership. This is where today's Gospel begins. **On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."**

So the first question is: What does this have to do with us here in Mequon this morning? A festival we've never participated in and a symbol we can't really identify with. And then there's the bigger question: What in the world do these words have to do with Pentecost. Pentecost has always been about fire and wind, not water.

When St. John wrote his Gospel years later, he must have anticipated that Christians would wonder about this and so he added an explanation: **By this Jesus meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given since Jesus had not yet been glorified.** There it is: What Jesus said at Sukkot has a connection with what Jesus did at Pentecost and the connection is all about us. This is the point:

Pentecost is the End and the Beginning

Jesus was teaching the whole time he was at the temple. Groups of people would gather around him to hear what he had to say. But he wasn't teaching here. He was announcing here; he was proclaiming. The temple courts were jammed with people that day. He found a place where people could see him, and then he spoke in a loud voice so they could hear him. He crafted his words in terms of what people were thinking. Every day of the festivals the priests would purify the sacrifices with water from a silver vessel. The people had water on their brains: water that made the crops grow, water that flowed from a rock in the desert, water from God that gave them life. And Jesus shouted: **Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.**

This wasn't the first time Jesus used the picture of water to describe his work. Remember the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well? He told her he was willing to give her **living water**. It's a great picture. Water does more than quench your thirst on a hot day. Water really keeps us alive. Adults like us are supposed to drink 64 ounces of water a day. People go to emergency rooms when they get dehydrated. Acute dehydration kills us. Prisoners of war could go without food for days and weeks, but without water they died within days.

And so we die without Christ. Without Jesus there is nothing to purify us or cleanse our systems, nothing to wash the diseases away. Sin sticks to us inside and out, grimy and gritty. Without Jesus we're on our bellies in the desert, grabbing handfuls of sand to find relief from the burning heat of God's anger, gasping for a drop of water to cool our tongues in the agony of Satan's fire. We don't always experience this thirst because we've been drinking living water for a long time. Maybe we should think more often about what excruciating thirst is like. Maybe we should try to imagine what life would be like without Jesus. People right here in Mequon—and maybe you know some of them—they know what it's like because they're dying of thirst right now. They don't talk about it but they think about it. And people all over the world are dying the same gruesome death.

Let everyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. The water of life endured the parching thirst of God's anger for us. The water of life shed his blood to cleanse us from all sin. The water of life pulses through our faith; he heals us and makes us healthy in God's sight. The water of life puts hope into our hearts and a glow to our smiles. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, and he says to us: **Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.**

So here Jesus was, on the last great day of the festival of tabernacles when everyone's mind was on water, saying this. The water you want, the real water, is not water that grows your crops or flows from a rock or purifies your sacrifices or preserves your nation. All that is past; it's all over, all unnecessary, all unimportant. I am the living water who quenches your thirst forever.

But not yet. On that day in Jerusalem the water of life was gathering but not flowing. Jesus had to compete what he had come to do. He said he would suffer and die, and he did six months later. He said he would rise from his tomb, and he did three days later. He said he would return to his Father, and he did forty days later, and he said he would send his Spirit to his followers, and he did exactly that on Pentecost. This is what John was explaining: the sending of the Spirit wouldn't happen until Jesus was glorified. Once Jesus rose and ascended it was time for him to keep the last promise. He sent the Holy Spirit to his followers on Pentecost and his ministry on earth came to an end. He paid the price; he gained the victory; he opened heaven; he sent the Spirit. What Jesus did he did once for all. We don't pay for living water. We don't dig for it; we don't drill for it. And now there's nothing more for us to do.

Well, there is something. At Pentecost our ministry on earth had its beginning. We know the story. **When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.** The Holy Spirit was active before Jesus came. The Spirit hovered over the waters at creation, he comforted Israel's good kings, and he led the people to be faithful to the covenant with God. But the prophet Joel saw something different. He was quoting the Lord when he wrote, **And afterward I will pour out my Spirit on all people.** This was new. St. John explained the Spirit had not been given like this before. At Pentecost the Spirit began to create faith in a completed Savior, not a coming Savior. He still does that. The Spirit explains to us the mysteries and the miracles of Jesus' redemption. He distributes gifts which enable us to take Jesus' good news around the world. He fills us with a desire and a passion to be what Jesus called us to be: his witnesses in the world. Jesus saw all this at the festival of Tabernacles: **Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."** Jesus knew that once the Spirit came to his followers—and he still comes to us today—the water of life would flow through us in gushing and surging joy so that others might be filled with the same water of life.

On the Day of Pentecost Jesus sent his Holy Spirit to authorize and equip the Church to carry the good news to the world. In the water of our baptisms the water of life filled us and joined us to the ocean of believers who proclaim the gospel. Now we are the rivers of living water: parents overflowing to children, grandparents to grandchildren, friends to friends, neighbors to neighbors, pastors and vicars to congregations, Mequon to the nation, and America to the world. Don't let your sinful nature damn the waters. Don't let it turn the flow of grace into a trickle or a drop. Don't let your well of water run dry. Keep the pipeline of faith open to the one who is living water and you will be a tsunami of living water wherever you go. Amen.