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## From the Dry Bed to Living Water

Primary Scripture: John 7:37-44

Secondary Scripture: Psalm 78:12-31

Subject: Transformation

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In this passage Jesus invites those whose hearts were divided to come and drink, to partake in him because he is “Living water.” Jesus boldly claims that he is the most basic need we all have: water.

Therefore, today I want us to consider, how might we be thirsty? How might our hearts flow with the living water of Christ for others?

### 1.

We live in a post-need culture. For the first time in human history, many Americans and most of us, live in a post-need culture: we no longer have to struggle for food but can choose from multiple fast food chains; homes that were once made for families of 5 are now considered starter homes; and water has been infused with vitamins to make *SmartWater*.

In a post-need economy, we no longer buy necessities, but things that improve image, that create status, and form a lifestyle. As one sociologist said, “We buy things to say something about ourselves.”<sup>1</sup>

I have been reading an interesting book called *Everything But the Coffee: Learning about America From Starbucks*. In it the author Bryant Simon discusses how our consumption habits and preferences in general mirror that of Starbucks. He argues that Starbucks rose quickly because it built itself upon a post-need economy. The comfortable chairs, the wi-fi and the light Jazz all create a culture.

The 4-dollar Latte is not a need, but an image builder, a status purveyor. A humorous story Simon shares says:

...a marketing executive worked on Madison Avenue and every morning watched fresh-faced interns and junior, junior executives come strutting through the office carrying bright white Starbucks cups. She knew that these just-out-of-college twenty somethings made next to nothing. Why would they spend so much of their salary on overpriced coffee?

One day, Post posed this question to one of her younger colleagues.

“Oh, I don’t buy it every day,” he answered. “I get a cup of regular coffee—the cheapest thing on the menu—on Monday, and then I save the cup for the rest of the week. I fill it up every morning in my apartment before I leave the house.”

“How come?” Post wanted to know.

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<sup>1</sup> Bryant Simon, *Everything But the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks*. (University of California Press: Berkley, 2009), 7.

“It looks Good,” her coworker declared.<sup>2</sup>

Now while that may seem rather extreme and ridiculous, how many of us have done similar things to make ourselves look good. What things do we carry around hoping that it makes us look better?

In a post-need culture, we can obsess about appearances, status, and power because we no longer have to worry about basic needs.

Bryant says, “America has staged a revolution not of necessity but of wants.”<sup>3</sup>

What is unfortunate is that in doing so, we have masqueraded some very deep needs.

The problem is we are filling ourselves with stuff that does not satisfy, and while we may be able to fool ourselves and perhaps our neighbors, God knows our true selves. As the author of Hebrews says, “before God no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:13)

God knows that we have deeply hidden secrets and needs, but in our post-need culture we have sought to cover them up, or at least distract our attention from the true depth of the problem.

We struggle with our need for identity and meaning, for status and esteem.

Deep below the surface the truth remains, we are all needy people.

A colleague who does prison ministry once told me, “Prison ministry is a lot easier than congregational ministry because most people in prison don’t have to be reminded that they are sinful, broken people. The prison bars do a pretty good job of that.”

## 2.

It is into this brokenness and need that Jesus Christ stepped into our world. He ministered to the poor, the blind, the rich young man and the woman at the well. He encountered everyone because he knew that all were in need of him. So, we may be able to take comfort from the fact that this is not anything new.

While Bryant Simon argues that the Starbucks phenomenon is the result of a post-industrial, self-gratifying culture, Scripture shows us that people 2000 years ago were struggling with this same deep issue of need way before \$4 Lattes could cover it up.

The reading from Psalm 78 is the retelling of the Exodus story in song. It retells the Israelite escape from slavery, and would have been a song that would have passed from generation to generation for hundreds of years because it tells about the human heart. It resonates within us because it touches upon the human heart.

God helps them escape from Egypt. A country far bigger and more powerful than this small little band of Israelites. He frees them.

Then he leads them by a pillar of cloud and fire through the desert. He is with them day and night, at every moment of their journey. He protects them.

When they get thirsty, God opened up the rocks so that “they could drink abundantly” (v. 15). He “caused the waters to flow down like rivers” (v. 16).

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 37.

He provided their most basic necessities—freedom, protection and water.

Yet, the Scriptures says “They still sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert. They tested God in their heart by demanding the food *they craved*.”

They wanted more from him!

Amazingly, even though they were unsatisfied, even though they were testing God and demanding more, even though they acted like ungrateful children, God’s love abounded and he gave them more food than they could stomach.

Still this was not enough for the Israelites. Over the entire Psalm, it describes how God gets frustrated, they demand more, he protects them, they are ungrateful and around and around and around they go in vicious cycle.

This is the cyclical story of the Bible. Being in relationship with God, feeling far away, back and forth back forth. We see this in occur first in Genesis. Adam and Eve were provided everything in the Garden of Eden, yet they demanded more. Amazingly, as Adam and Eve were being led out of the Garden of Eden, God’s protection and love abounds once more and he kills the first animal in order to provide clothing for Adam and Eve.

This cycle is witnessed in Cain and Able, in Moses, and King David, all the way to our personal dance with God. God’s love abounds, yet we wonder “what have you done for me lately, Jesus?”

In asking this we are like a dry river bed. A parched land that sucks up the water. We consume more and more, demand more and more. Ignoring the personal ramifications and the impact it has on the world around us.

We hoard. We isolate. We become self-consumed. All the while, dying of thirst.

As the Psalmist writes,

“O God, you are my God, I seek you,

my soul thirsts for you;

my flesh faints for you,

as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (63:1)

### 3.

This is why Jesus’ use of the image of Living Water is so powerful. Our souls thirst for God, and in this passage from John’s Gospel, Jesus is promising that if we drink of his water, we will become like flowing, living waters. The Holy Spirit will be active and alive within us.

This is a bold claim of Jesus’, which he is making at a rather dramatic time and place.

John says Jesus has gone to Jerusalem for the festival, which is understood to be the Tabernacle Feast (or Booths). Jesus’ analogy makes more sense if we understand the Tabernacle Feast. During the 7th day, water would be taken out of the Pool of Siloam, paraded before the crowd and taken to the altar to be poured out in a very ceremonious fashion.

The Pool of Siloam, where this water originated, was a major gathering place for people on religious pilgrimages because it was one of the few freshwater pools. It was a place that could fulfill one’s thirst, and one’s personal desires.

Jesus is therefore, contrasting himself to this water. Unlike this cultural water that makes a flashy promises but will leave us thirsty and unfulfilled, Jesus is inviting us to

come drink from the living water—where we will experience the twofold promise of God.

That we, ourselves will be satisfied, but also, that we will become a refreshment to other people.

Unlike the Pool of Siloam's waters that do not fulfill and do not last, or our post-need cravings for temporary stuff, these living waters will not only satisfy us but also flow out of our hearts.

The promise of God is that we will find personal fulfillment in Christ, and that by participating in the life of the Christ we do not become bloated, self-consuming, but instead we become living water that goes forward into the world.

This is the balance we must find as Christians.

We must drink—but we must also pour out.

First we must drink. We must engage our faith. The question becomes how do we drink of Christ? It means that we participate in the life of Christ—Paul says that the Church has become the Body of Christ. It means we participate in the life of the church.

If we look at the early church we notice that they gathered for worship, for prayer, for teaching about the Bible and for service (Acts 2).

This is what Jesus Christ invites us to come and drink from: a community of faith. Where we gather for worship, to learn and to read the bible, to pray.

I have found that for many of us, we realize the importance of prayer and scripture when things suddenly get really difficult, when we feel out of control, when our family is struggling or our health is ailing. It is actually more important, however, to pray and to engage scripture when things are going smoothly.

While we often approach God in the middle of our chaos, in the middle of the problem, we suddenly find that prayer and scripture can be very confusing, or aren't sure how to hear God from in the midst of all the noise. To only approach God during times of chaos is like trying to drink from a fire hydrant.

If we, however, had been coming to drink of Christ during the relative calm of life, we will be building that reservoir. Filling ourselves, so that in the midst of the crisis we could draw upon the living waters that flow within our hearts. Finding the refreshing voice of God saying, "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

So the first question this passage raises for us: how have you accepted Christ's invitation to come and to drink?

Then he immediately follows up, asking what ways are we being called to pour out our faith? Jesus was very intentionally about the structure of this analogy. First you have to drink. First you have to come and participate with him... then you must pour out.

If you don't drink of his living water, you won't have anything life affirming to give and you will quickly dry up and burn out yourself. However, if you just absorb and consume don't do anything, you will become a stagnant pool of water; like a cesspool.

To drink and pour out.

This is what a thirsty world is watching and longing from us. That is why the earliest description of Christians by someone outside the church—Lucien in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century—said you would know the Christians because of "their absurd generosity and their sacrificial concern for others, whom they didn't even know by name."

Generosity, sacrifice and love are all hallmarks of a life overflowing with the living water of Christ.

Consumption, self-preservation and criticism are the hallmarks of a life self-absorbed in a post-need culture.

Drink and then pour out. To miss either is to miss the call of Christ.

#### 4.

Finally, notice that even in John's Gospel immediately after this statement, there is a division. Some people feel inspired and view Jesus as the Messiah, the prophet, and the Son of God. (John 7:40-41).

Others viewed him as just another person, a Galilean—some intriguing speaker but nothing really to commit your life to. “What has he done, really?”

Don't mind the fact that Jesus has already turned water into wine by this point in John's Gospel, or healed a blind person, or fed 5000 people...or that Jesus would be crucified as a sinless and innocent man, taking upon the sin of the world not to condemn the world but so the world could be saved through him.

In our culture of consumption, our hearts, like theirs, like those of the Israelites in the desert, demand more and more from God.

For others, this is the spring from which living water flows. And so they were willing to look deeper into their hearts and realize they have this deep need that cannot be filled by \$4 lattes or the Pools of Siloam, but by a living and loving God. So they chose to come and drink, to follow Christ, and to demonstrate their faith to a thirsty world.