

Let Loose

a sermon based on

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 and John John 7:37-39

and delivered on-
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Pentecost Sunday (Year A)

for

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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"Out of the believers heart shall flow rivers of living water." (Jn 7:38) "As it says in Scripture," Jesus says. But where does it say that? There's no doubt that this is an allusion to Numbers 20:2-13 in which we hear the story of the Israelites complaining once again in the desert (this time that they are thirsty); when God directs Moses to strike a rock with his staff so that water – life-giving water – sprung forth to meet their need.

But as for that exact phrase, "Out of the believers heart shall flow rivers of living water," it's not there. Instead, however, we hear the repeated voice of Scripture and likely an echo of Isaiah 12:3-4 in which we hear, "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted."

John tells us that when Jesus said this that he was speaking to that day when the Holy Spirit that believers would receive. (Jn 7:39) Today, is Pentecost: the day when we as the church remember that the Holy Spirit has come upon the Church. The danger is that we might think of it only as a day when the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles pouring out gifts upon them – gifts which were for then but not for now. The danger is that we relegate the God's pouring out of the Holy Spirit to a past time or past people or only people who are special in some particular way that we define as special.

That's not the witness of Scripture. In that passage from 1 Corinthians that I read a few moments ago, Paul says, "(N)o one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' except by the power of the Holy Spirit." (1 Cor. 3b) So let's try something: Shall we? Don't just repeat these words, but say them, own them. Ready? "Jesus is Lord."

If you said – not just repeated – those words but said them, the Holy Spirit just worked in you.

"Okay... Maybe in some ephemeral way," you may be thinking, "but who am I to claim that I am gifted by the Holy Spirit?" The truth is that a lot of the time we confuse gifts with talents or abilities: especially spiritual gifts. A talent may be an expression of a spiritual gift, but it is a different thing.

When we doubt, we're not alone. Back in Exodus when God said to Moses, "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Ex 3:10-11) Who am I? Then look what God did.

For the prophet Jeremiah we hear in his own words, "Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a boy"; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.'" (Jer 1:4-7)

Of course then there's Mary when the angel Gabriel told her that she would bear a child, she asked how that could be. Then when he told her, she said "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Lk 1:38)

Who were these people that God should use them? Moses was a murderer. He stuttered (that was part of his excuse). At the same time, he'd been raised as a prince in the greatest empire in existence at that time. Why did he doubt, whereas, Mary (a young girl from the middle of nowhere) said, "Okay."?

It's really rather simple when we think about it. Moses said, I don't have that skill and influence. Mary asked for an explanation, and when she was told that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her (Lk 1:35), she recognized that God wasn't limited by her talents, abilities or status. So it should be for us.

It's easy to be like Moses and to say, "I don't know how to speak." Yet sometimes – often – what we communicate comes from other places than our mouths.

Merle Franke tells the story about a manager at a stock brokerage firm and his pastor, Sarah Maguson. The pastor had led a retreat and the manager had been impressed by her incisive style. A few days later he asked for a meeting. He told her that he had a couple dozen stockbrokers who worked for him, and that each week he had a meeting with them, and from time to time he would bring in someone to speak to them who comes from an entirely different set of circumstances.

Not exactly sure but suspecting where this was going, she hesitated.

"I like the way you handled the material on the retreat. I'd like you to speak to my brokers. And by the way, attendance at these meetings is mandatory."

"What do I have to offer stockbrokers? I don't even know their language."

"You're right. These people are experts in what they do, but you know something that they don't – the Gospel. That's where you excel."

So she agreed and met with the stockbrokers speaking about ethics in the business world. Afterwards word in the office spread. "The boss picked a ringer this time." "She didn't pull any punches."

The next day, the manager called his pastor to tell her how impressive her impact was on his staff.

"Even though I couldn't speak their jargon?"

"You said exactly what they needed to hear, and don't worry – they understood you."¹

On that first Pentecost Sunday – the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples so that when they went out into the street proclaiming the Gospel, each person heard what they said in their own language. (Acts 2:1-12) Think about that for a moment. They didn't sign-up for Duolingo or Rosetta Stone and then spend months learning a new language, but the Holy Spirit working through them made what they said intelligible at least in that moment.

Not all of us will be gifted in that way. In fact, Paul tells us that there are a variety of gifts – not skills that we learn or talents that we develop, but gifts – by and through which the Holy Spirit speaks and acts. It springs forth from our hearts like living waters when we receive those gifts. That word *receive* is important – maybe *accept* would be better: I'm not sure.

Jesus promised that he would be with us and send the Holy Spirit. Each of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus – each of us who claim that promise of salvation – that promise of life that Jesus offered from the cross – has been gifted by the Holy Spirit for the benefit of one another and so that Gospel might flourish. We just have to say yes.

There are lots of spiritual gift surveys and tools out there. They can be useful, but God isn't restrained by our knowing exactly what gift he has bestowed upon us. Maybe sometimes that makes it more effective by keeping us from the temptation to make things happen rather than to trust God.

So how do we let loose with those gifts, if we're not really sure what they are? How do we proclaim the Gospel when we don't really understand someone's language or experience?

We say, "Jesus is Lord," trusting the words of Scripture that no one can say so except by the Holy Spirit, and then we act accordingly trusting him to do the rest yielding to God's will.

We have capacity to bring healing to our nation not only in the midst of flare ups but to alleviate and then eradicate the chronic disease of racism – not because we know others so well but because when we say, "Jesus is Lord" trusting in the Holy Spirit, rather than dismissing the

¹ Merle G. Franke, *Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit: For Cycle A* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Pub. Co, 1995) 65-66.

things that disturb us – not because we ourselves are hateful, but because the claims we hear are so foreign to our experience that they seem unimaginable – when we say, "Jesus is Lord" and live that out asking the Holy Spirit to help us hear so that we can speak to a better way, God will do wonders.

We have the capacity – each one of us and all of us together – to let loose rivers of living water where ever and whenever we are. Maybe you think that trickle that God work's in you is insignificant, remember that even the mighty Mississippi begins with a trickle from a spring up in Bemidji, Minnesota and that its might is built up by all those other little trickles joining it as it winds its way along.

God invites you to let loose, even if it's only a trickle, to claim your place in the river of life giving water that brings salvation to the world. AMEN.