

JOHN 7:37-39

On the last day of the Passover festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "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'" Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

JOHN 20:19-22

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

ACTS 2:1-12

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.

And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered because each one heard them speaking the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, “Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power. All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

John 7:37-39; 20:1-12
Acts 2:1-12

What indeed does this mean? Forty days had now passed since Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. The disciples, minus Judas of course (I wonder whatever became of Judas—the legend is that he committed suicide. But perhaps he put a downpayment on a camel ranch with his 40 pieces of silver—who knows?)...anyway, back to the other eleven...they were still very much clinging together for their safety. For they were hunted men because of their alliance with Jesus—even though they all ran away when he was arrested. But fear was not the only glue holding them together. It was their faith driven by several mysterious encounters with the Risen Jesus that became the cohesive force behind their unity.

For Jesus, however, the end of his earthly relationship to them had arrived. The time had come for his ascension into heaven. And yet, he had promised that God would not leave them alone when he departed. For all time hereafter, God would breathe out the Holy Spirit to empower them to become witnesses to God's continual presence, character, power and authority over the universe.

According to the Gospel of John, this spiritual gift was first made privately behind closed doors to the apostles. According to the Book of Acts, there was a much more public event involving Jews from the entire region during the Feast of Pentecost. For Jews, Pentecost was the annual Spring festival when thanksgiving was offered for the

harvest and new grain was presented as a sacrifice to the Lord. It was traditionally celebrated seven weeks after the second day of Passover. So God chose this event when a multiplicity of devout Jews would be gathered together to infuse the faithful with Spirit allowing them to praise God in their own native tongues and yet to be understood by everyone who spoke a different language as well. *And All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another. "What does this mean?"*

Indeed, what *does* it mean to twenty-first century followers of Christ? I am struck by two statements uttered by Jesus in relation to the Spirit's advent into the hearts of the faithful. In our first scripture which is set during Passover and features Jesus' initial predication of God's future activity he says, *"Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."* Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive. The second statement was voiced in the days following the resurrection in which Jesus appeared to his disciples behind closed doors. *He came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."*

What this means to me is that Spirit and peace are inseparably entwined. But we do not have a peaceful world right now—not that we are in conflicts around the globe, but we don't like each other very much and discord abounds everywhere, exacerbated by unemployment, restrictions on our activities, racial unrest, amounting death tolls from the virus, cultural wars over civil liberties, nasty rhetoric and finger pointing and a coming election that draws ominously closer. In such a turbulent climate, how is it we can seek to be peacemakers and to have living water flow from our hearts rather than malice and

darkness?

It is hard. But perhaps we can learn from a fable in which a king offers a prize for the person who can paint the best picture of peace. There were many entries into the contest and it eventually came down to two semip-finalists. In the first, the artist painted a picture of fluffy clouds hovering over wooded mountains surrounding a calm lake. The other painted an angry sky spewing lightning flashes above a gushing waterfall. Behind the waterfall, however, was a tiny bush growing from a crack in a rock, and upon it sat a perfectly calm mother bird in her nest. The king chose to give the prize to the second picture because as the artist said, "Being peaceful doesn't mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble or hard work. It means to be in the midst of these things and still be calm in your heart."

Spiritual peace does not necessitate withdrawing from the troubled world. On the contrary, it means being in the middle of it. Pentecost was very turbulent with the *rush of a violent wind and divided tongues of fire resting upon each of them*. While the Spirit produces calm in the center of the storm, it does not retreat from the storm. And neither can we.

Peace is only be sustainable when it arises in our hearts from which *rivers of living water flow*. And then from our hearts it must radiate outward into the world, into our institutions, into our social and political conversations, into our relationships from the bottom up. The Spirit is here to help us, not to do it for us. And that lays upon us who profess to be disciples of Jesus an enormous responsibility.

And where do we begin? With ourselves, of course. And we have to understand that

we all come to the table with our own version of reality which is based much less on fact than it is on a tapestry of stories woven into our consciousness which we have acquired over the years from many different sources—stories that elevate us over others; stories that demean those from different backgrounds and different regions of the world and different heritages. They tell us who to hate and who to be afraid of. If our version of reality is determined by tweets, memes and tropes, then we are not taking responsibility for our own biases and prejudices and dehumanizing ways they may come out in our language and behavior.

When push comes to shove, I imagine we fear that we would have to sacrifice too much to have peace. We would like to combat climate change so that those who come after us will have a livable and sustainable world, but not if we have to pay more taxes or see an increase in our utility bills. We would like to have an economically more equitable society where one percent of the population doesn't control 90% of the wealth, but not if we have to raise the minimum wage which might cause the price of a hamburger to go up. We would like to mitigate the spread of infections for this virus, but not if we have to sacrifice our freedom by wearing a mask in public.

Beneath these and many other issues are fear based narratives that are incompatible with the larger scope of reality. If we want to see a world that works for everyone, what is it we are willing to sacrifice to help it happen? Anything? We will never have peace until it does. And of course it comes with a price. What doesn't? It seems to me the price we are paying to keep a knee on the necks of the underprivileged is a lot steeper than building a stairway to a safer and more prosperous life. Wouldn't offering a helping hand

be a more effective strategy?

We cannot just wait for peace to happen. We have to *cause* peace to happen. The Spirit is here. The Spirit has been here. The Spirit is with us. And now it is up to us who believe to open our hearts so that they shall *flow with rivers of living water*. So let's get to work!

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