

John 7:37-52 - Living Water
February 23, 2014

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To get what's going on behind the scenes so that we can understand what's happening in today's reading I want to tell you a story. It's about a rabbi named Eliezer. Eliezer lived around the year A.D. 200. He was brought to a law court for leading people astray in a matter that is central to Jewish faith, namely, that the LORD is one. His crime is that he said something nice about Jesus, whom Christians claim is also God. As Eliezer leaves the court, still troubled at the charge, Rabbi Akiba comes up to comfort him: He said to him, "Perhaps someone of the followers of Jesus told you something Jesus said which pleased you." He [Eliezer] said to him, "By heaven! You remind me. Once I was strolling in the camp of Sepphoris. I bumped into Jacob of Kefar Sikhin, and he told me a teaching of Jesus, and it pleased me."

Eliezer then confesses the rightness of his arrest, and is credited with teaching that one should avoid not only the disreputable but even the appearance of the disreputable. This brief tale conveys much about the dilemma of the Jewish teachers who were caught between admiring the teaching of Jesus (it was, after all, very much like their own) and keeping *Torah* intact by not admitting any breach in the hedge they had newly erected around the law. Valid ideas versus systems-in-place is among the oldest of human dilemmas.

That's the position Eliezer found himself in, and that's exactly what's going on in today's story. Some in the crowd think Jesus might be the long-promised prophet like Moses. Some think he might be Messiah. Those who are charged with keeping a hedge around the law are worried and upset by Jesus' claim that he and the Father are one. They want the Temple police to arrest him. But the Temple police aren't ready to do that.

What we maybe don't get from this story is how bitter this family fight is. And it is a family fight. Jesus is a Jew, all his followers are Jews. As are the religious authorities and the Temple police. And there's nothing more bitter than a family fight. The first hearers of John's Gospel knew this all too well. They had the experience of being thrown out of their synagogues because they followed Jesus.

OK. All that is a bit academic. Interesting to people like me, but only of rather limited value for daily living. So here's the "So what?" or to use Luther's phrase, "What does this mean?" that I take away from this reading. It's what Jesus does in this midst of this dispute.

Here's this really bitter dispute that will affect Jesus quite personally, and what he says is, "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.'" In the midst of this bitter internal conflict, Jesus does what he has come to do: invite people who are thirsty to drink of the living water that is the Spirit of God. As on so many other occasions, Jesus will just not let anything deter him from his mission of compassion, healing, calling people to live right, and bringing good news. "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me

drink.”

In this Scripture I hear God calling me to do the same: stick to what God has called me to do. I don't have the life-threatening distractions Jesus did, but I do have plenty of distractions. And so do you. There are a thousand things that could easily draw us away from joining in Jesus' mission of compassion, healing, calling people to live right, and bringing good news. I hear this Scripture calling me to stay true to my purpose as a believer in Jesus so that what Jesus says remains true, “Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

These days we're going to run into a lot of non-believers. Our job is to invite people who are thirsty to drink of the living water that is the Spirit of God. Belief, as it turns out, is a gift. The Spirit, as Jesus said to Nicodemus back in chapter 3, blows where it will. So when we meet persons who believe differently than we, or profess not to believe at all, perhaps the most fitting response is to welcome them as children of God anyway, praying to, and trusting in, the Spirit of Christ who grants faith in a way that is beyond our comprehension. Our actions toward them should bring honor to Christ and be consistent with Jesus' mission and purpose.

I've got two questions for you as this week's sermon challenge: first, how does living water flow out of your believing heart? What words, actions, gifts, prayers are *your* way that his happens?

And Second, what about your own thirst? How is your thirst slacked? What are the spiritual and faith practices that fill your thirst for God? Lent is close. Use it as a time of renewal so that your thirst is slacked, you are filled up with the living water of the Spirit so that it flows freely out of your believing heart.