

"Streams of Living Water"
John 7:1-39
Pastor Rick Bartosik
Mililani Community Church
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I want to focus today on the magnificent invitation Jesus gives in verses 37-38: ***"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."*** To understand what Jesus was saying we need to know the historical context in which he was speaking. We read that Jesus spoke these words on the last and greatest day of the Feast. What Feast? Well, verse 2 says ***"the Feast of Tabernacles was near."*** So this morning, let's travel back to the land of Palestine in the time of Christ, and join the crowds that are going to the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. Imagine yourself there in the midst of the excitement and joy of this time of celebration. You are kind of like the Kid in King Arthur's Court, but instead of being "the Kid in King Arthur's Court," you are "the Kid in Jerusalem" in 29 AD on your way to the Feast of Tabernacles. It is the fall of the year. All the crops have been harvested. Now people from all over Israel are on their way to the most popular of all the annual Jewish festivals.

The Feast of Tabernacles was one of the three festivals every Jewish male was required to attend. Everyone who came was also required to build a little shelter to live in during that week. So there were little shelters springing up all over the place, on roof tops, in alleys, even in the court of the temple. According to the rabbinical building code the shelter had to be a three-sided structure with a roof (also called the Feast of Booths). The walls had to be extra-thin so that the light came through, and the roof had to show enough sky so the stars could be seen. These booths remind me of the little hideout my brothers and I built when we were kids, down by the creek on my grandfather's farm. They were to live in this little structure all week as a reminder of how their ancestors lived in tents for 40 years in the wilderness, and how the LORD faithfully provided for all their needs.

Jewish people still celebrate this Festival every year. This year the Feast of Tabernacles will be celebrated by modern Jews beginning on Thursday evening October 13th. This past week I called the Rabbi at Temple Emmanuel in Honolulu to ask him how they celebrate this Festival. He said they will build a shelter or succoth (as it is called in Hebrew) on the grounds of the Synagogue and have a congregational barbecue Thursday night. Then throughout the week they will have special worship services at the Synagogue. Many families will come during the week to eat their meals in the shelter. Some of the families will build their own little shelter in their back yard and eat their meals there. It is a fun time for the kids. Sometimes the children camp out for the week in their little family shelters. The Rabbi said that one year he tried to do this, when his kids were little. But a big cock-roach crawled over them during the night, and they all decided it was time to go back inside.

This feast in Jerusalem was a wonderful, festive time. People dressed in their Sabbath best for the whole week. They called it *"the season of our gladness."* It was a feast that not only looked back on God's past faithfulness during their wilderness wandering, and his present faithfulness in providing the rain that nourished the harvest; but it also looked forward to that glorious day when the Kingdom of God will come and all the nations will worship the Messiah. Zechariah the prophet foretold that in the millennial kingdom when the Messiah rules and reigns upon the earth, all the nations will come to the New Jerusalem every year to celebrate this Feast (Zechariah 14:16).

At the heart of this celebration there was a daily ritual. We need to understand this ritual to understand the meaning of John 7 and the words of Jesus in verses 37-39. The rabbinical literature tells us that each morning great crowds would gather at the Temple. They would each come with a citrus fruit in their left hands (called an *ethrog*). The *ethrog* was a reminder of the land to which God had brought them and of their bountiful blessings. In their right hands they would carry a *lulab*, which was a combination of branches from three trees--a palm tree, a willow, and a myrtle--emblems of the stages of their ancestor's journey through the wilderness.

Each morning the people gathered together (with their *ethrogs* and *lulabs*). The priest would hold out a golden pitcher. The crowds would then follow the priest to the Pool of Siloam, chanting some the Psalms and waving their *lulabs* in rhythm. As they approached the Pool of Siloam, the priest would dip his pitcher into the water, and the people would recite some beautiful words from **Isaiah 12:3**: *"Therefore with joy shall you draw water from the wells of salvation."* Then the crowd would march back to the temple, and enter through the Water Gate to the blast of trumpets blown by the priests. More than 400 priests officiated at the annual Feast of Tabernacles--so you can imagine the sound of all those trumpets. The priest with the golden pitcher would then circle the altar once, ascend with other priests to the platform, and pour the water out. The crowd would shout to the priest to hold the pitcher higher. It was considered to be the height of joy in an Israelite's life if he could see the water being poured out onto the altar. **The water reminded them of God's provision of water for the people during their forty years in the wilderness.** This happened every day of the festival.

All of this was going on in Jerusalem, **while** Jesus remained in Galilee **where** a conversation took place between Jesus and his brothers. Let's listen in on that conversation in vv. 3-4. **READ.** Jesus' brothers were egging him on to go up to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. If you want to be accepted as the Messiah, this is not the place to be--go on to Jerusalem and make a big splash and show yourself to the world. Put on a big public display and maybe they will believe you are the Messiah. The Jews were waiting there to kill him, and now his own brothers are urging him to go there at the risk of his life. Their words to him came from rejection--not faith. John tells us that his own brothers did not believe in him. Jesus said to them, *"The right time for me has not yet come; for you any time is right."* The Greek word for "time" here is the word *kairos*. This word carries the idea of an **appointed time**. Any time is as good as another for you, but I am operating on God's appointed time schedule. His appointed time for me has not arrived. It would come in about six months at the Feast of Passover when Jesus would publicly and dramatically enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey--and then go to the cross and die.

The thing that stands out to me in these verses is that Jesus knew what it is like to be rejected by his own family. This was prophesied in **Psalm 69:7-9**: *"Because for your sake I have borne reproach; shame has covered my face. I have become a stranger to my brothers, and an alien to my mother's children..."* If Jesus was rejected by his family, we shouldn't be surprised we also are misunderstood and rejected by our own family if they are not believers. Jesus says in **Matt. 10:34-39**:

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword. 35 For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, 36 and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. 37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 And whoever does not take up his cross and follow me, is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for me will find it."

If we become disciples of Jesus Christ, we may find that our own family does not understand us and doesn't encourage us, and may actually oppose us in our desire to follow Christ.

I just received a prayer letter this week from a girl who became a Christian in college. She now feels called of God to the mission field; but her parents are not Christians--and I get the impression from her letter that they really are not in sympathy with her. Here is an excerpt from her letter: *"I hope to honor my parents more than I have: specifically, I want to ask them to be praying for me. This may sound odd, but for years the biggest thing that I feel I miss from them is a sense that they are asking God to bless me & take care of me. For a while, I wouldn't have asked them to; now I've just been afraid to. I don't know how they'd receive such a request. I hope it would communicate respect for them & my desire for their blessing. This has become pretty important to me."*

You can feel the cry of her heart. She longs for her parents to share her joy in being called of God to serve him as a missionary. But they don't. The Lord understands her feelings. His own brothers did not accept him or believe in him.

After Jesus' conversation with his brothers, they went up to Jerusalem, but he stayed behind (verse 9). After they left, he also went, but he went in secret (verse 10). When Jesus got to Jerusalem he saw that there was a lot of commotion about him (verse 11). The Jews were on the lookout for him and asking, *"Where is that man?"* The verb tenses here indicate that the Jewish leaders had been continuously asking "Where is he?" not because they wanted to listen to his teaching, but because they wanted to put him to death. And even the crowds felt the tension: *"Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about him. Some said, 'He is a good man.' Others replied, 'No, he deceives the people.' But no one would say anything publicly about him for fear of the Jews."* (vv. 12-13). Controversy was raging about who Jesus was. But they were speaking in hushed tones out of fear of the Jewish leaders.

Halfway through the feast Jesus suddenly appeared in the temple, teaching publicly. We see this in **verse 14**. This was a bold and courageous move. Jesus knew the Jews are seeking to kill him. For the past six months he had stayed away from Judea to avoid arrest or death. Now, suddenly, he appears in Jerusalem boldly teaching in the temple. People realized that no one had ever taught like this. **Verse 15** says, "The Jews were amazed and asked, "how did this man get such learning without having studied?" They couldn't understand how someone who had not been educated by them could have such keen insight into the Scriptures. **Verse 16**: *"Jesus answered, "My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me."* **Verse 25** says, *"At that point some of the people of Jerusalem began to ask, "Isn't this the man they are trying to kill? Here he is, speaking publicly, and they are not saying a word to him. Have the authorities really concluded that he is the Messiah? But we know where this man is from; when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from."* **Verse 28**; *"Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, "Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me."* This is another clear indication that he is claiming to be equal with God--to be God.

Notice the results of his words: Some wanted to seize him and kill him. *"At this they tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his time had not yet come."* (v.30). If they had gotten their hands on him there, they probably would have stoned him to death on the spot. But God did not permit them to achieve their goal. In spite of the zeal of those who wanted to kill Jesus, there were **others who were drawn to Jesus** by the very same words: **Verse 31** says: *"Still, many in the crowd put their faith in him. They said, "When the Messiah comes, will he do more miraculous signs than this man?"*

Verse 37 takes us to the final day of the Feast of Tabernacles. That day the priest came once again to the temple followed by the great multitude chanting their Psalms and waving their **lulabs**. They came in through the Water Gate. The trumpets sounded. This time, on the last day of the Feast, the priest would circle the altar seven times--just like they did at the walls of Jericho. And when he came around for the sixth time, he was joined by other priests. They ascended the ramp of the altar together. There he held his golden pitcher high and began to pour it out on the altar. The eyes of everyone were on the priest with the golden pitcher and the water being poured out on the altar. The water reminded them of God's provision of water for the people during their forty years in the wilderness.

It was in that hush and at that dramatic moment that Jesus acted. *"On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him"* (37-38). He chose just the right moment. His words were precise and powerful. What a beautiful, powerful, dramatic presentation of tremendous spiritual truth.

- Are you satisfied in life or are you thirsty?
- Is God's life flowing out of your innermost being and bringing joy and satisfaction to others?

These are the questions Jesus addresses in this magnificent invitation.
First Jesus says...

1. "IF ANYONE IS THIRSTY..." (37a)

People in that day knew what it was to be thirsty. They understood what Jesus was saying. One of the tragedies of our age is that even if people realize they are thirsty, they use the wrong means to try to satisfy their thirst. **Jeremiah 2:13** says, *"My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns, that cannot hold water."* They twist a thirst for God into a desire for a new wardrobe or a new car or some new experience. But they never find satisfaction for their thirst

In the 1930s the most famous living author was William Somerset Maugham. He was an accomplished novelist and a great playwright and a short-story writer. His novel Of Human Bondage is considered a classic. He had everything the world could offer. In 1965 he was ninety-one years old and fabulously wealthy. Royalties were continuing to pour in from all over the world. He was experiencing incredible success. He was still receiving 300 letters a day from his fans. But how did he respond to this success? His nephew, Robin Maugham, records that although he was one of the most famous and feted men of his generation--a man who had everything: not just money but fame, as he came closer to death, he found life empty and worthless and he was afraid to die (see 201-202, Hughes, Gospel of John).

God has created us with a spiritual thirst, and only He can satisfy that thirst. *"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."*

Jesus' invitation is open to anyone who senses this spiritual thirst. If you are thirsty the next line in this verse tells you how to be refreshed.

2. "LET HIM COME TO ME AND DRINK" (37b)

Anyone can drink the water of life that Jesus gives. The offer is free and open to all, yet there are some terms to be met. C. S. Lewis in his children's novel, The Silver Chair puts his finger on this in the clearest terms. Jill, sees a lion, and is scared out of her wits. She runs so hard that she wears herself out and is just about to die of thirst, or so she thinks, when she hears the gurgling of a brook in the distance. She approaches it and is almost ready to go to the brook when on the grass on her side of the brook is the same lion. "If I run away, it'll be after me in a moment," thought Jill. "And if I go on, I will run straight into its mouth." Finally she was so thirsty that she almost felt she would not mind being eaten by the lion if only she could be sure of getting a mouthful of water first. Then she heard someone speak, "If you are thirsty, you may drink." She wondered who had spoken... Then the voice said again, "If you are thirsty you may drink," and she realized it was the lion speaking.

Are you thirsty? Said the Lion.

I'm dying of thirst, said Jill.

Then drink, said the Lion/

May I--could I--would you mind going away while I do? Said Jill.

The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic.

Will you promise not to--do anything to me, if I do come? Said Jill.

I make no promise, said the Lion.

Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer.

Do you eat girls? She said.

I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms, said the Lion. It didn't say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

I daren't come and drink said Jill.

Then you will die of thirst, said the Lion.

Oh dear! Said Jill, coming another step nearer.

I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.

There is no other stream, said the Lion.

It never occurred to Jill to disbelieve the Lion--no one who had seen his stern face could do that--and her mind suddenly made itself up. It was the worst thing she had ever had to do, but she went forward to the stream, knelt down, and began scooping up water in her hand. It was the coldest, most refreshing water she had ever tasted.

Do you see what Lewis is saying? When you come to the water, you are coming to a Lion, and you must come on the Lion's terms, and you have to yield yourself by faith in order to get some water. When we are so thirsty that we feel that we are going to die of thirst, we have to step out by faith like Jill did and yield to the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and receive the water of eternal life.

Finally in verses 38-39 we see...

3. THE SATISFYING RESULTS (38-39)

The Lord tells us here that not only will we be satisfied, but he tells us that we will be overflowing vessels--out of our innermost being will flow streams of living water. The point is that if we drink of him, our minds will not be on our own satisfaction but on the satisfaction of others.

I think this is where we see much of present day Christianity to be lacking. James Boice has written, "To hear most Christians talk you would think that the sole purpose of Christ's coming was to save them and to satisfy them. That is one purpose of course. But that is not the way in which I find the Christian life described in my Bible. That kind of Christianity--when not balanced by the truth of John 7:38--produces a shallow, experience-centered, introverted, and eventually selfish approach to life and to those around us. We are not called to that. Jesus did not die to give us warm feelings. The work of the Holy Spirit is to make you precisely as Christ was in this world. And that means getting outside yourself, getting interested in others, and becoming useful."

Have you entered into this promise? Are others experiencing abundance of blessing through you? If not, then you need to ask God to make you not only a satisfied believer who has drunk of Christ for himself and found his own needs met, but also a useful believer who overflows his family, neighborhood, and church with blessing. God wants to use you to be a channel of blessing to others.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon talked about experiencing a flood of God's blessing. He compared it to the incoming tides on the Thames, which lifted the great river barges. When the tide was out nothing could move those barges as they lay in the mud of the river's bottom and in the sand. A team of men could not move them. Machinery could never get them moved out to sea. But then the tide would come, and soon they would be floating. When the tide returned, even a child could move them with his hand.

CONCLUSION

Are there any boats here that need floating today? You have to admit your interest in the spiritual well being of others is not very strong. You do not really think seriously each day about witnessing to that person in the office next to you, or your neighbor, or your golfing buddies. You are like a barge stuck in the mud on the bottom of the river. You need a flood of God's grace to fill your heart and to make you once again a channel of blessing to others. That is what Jesus intended us to be. That is what he will make us when we come to him.

In the nineteenth century there was a man named Billy Bray who was a miner and a dynamic Christian. He so overflowed with Christ that wherever he went, men trusted Christ. Every day as he went down into the mines--and they were very dangerous in those days--he would pray with the other miners as he went down, "Lord, if any of us must be killed or die today, let it be me. Let not one of these men die for they are not happy and I am, and if I die today I shall go to be in heaven." It was rumored that at times when he got to the bottom of those mines, the other miners would all be on their knees. He was a great drinker. He drank long and deeply of Christ.

ARE YOU A GREAT DRINKER? Are you drinking long and deeply of that water that Jesus gives so that you are satisfied, and out of your innermost being are flowing rivers of living water pouring out of your life in blessing to others? Speak to him about it today.