

Storytellers: The Waterboy
By Jason Huff
October 24, 2015
Jeremiah 17:13-14, Revelation 21:1-7, John 7:37-43

Friends, our final Scripture reading this evening comes from John 7:37-43. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “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.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. On hearing his words, some of the people said, “Surely this man is the Prophet.” Others said, “He is the Christ.” Still others asked, “How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?” Thus the people were divided because of Jesus.”

In American sports, there’s no lower job at the bottom of the ladder than the team’s waterboy. It’s a cultural joke. There’s a movie by the same name starring Adam Sandler, a far-too-old waterboy who’s mocked until the team figures out he can tackle people much larger than he is, mostly by accident. The first thing on the internet on the term “waterboy” is a true joke that the San Diego Chargers cheerleaders have a waterboy who has the best job in the world.

But in a striking way, our job as storytellers for the Kingdom of God is to carry living water. As tonight’s passages indicate, Scripture uses living water as a metaphor for eternal life. One of our roles in the Kingdom is to spread word of this water, to offer it to anyone who might be interested. That’s what we’ll explore tonight.

Over the last few weeks, we’ve found our center in the gospel – God created us to honor and enjoy Him. But we are lost in sin and inclined to wander further into the forest rather than to come out into the light of God’s truth. But through Jesus Christ and the salvation He achieved for us through His perfect life and sacrificial death on the cross, we can be found. All who truly believe upon Jesus for salvation and repent of sin are rescued by Him. The chief sign of that rescue, that salvation, is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

That’s what Jesus is talking about tonight in John 7. It’s the end of the Feast of Booths, the celebration focused on God’s deliverance of the Jews out of Egypt. Jesus says, “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.”

The people didn’t understand everything He was talking about, but they knew this: He is calling Himself the messiah. Jesus moves the focus away from the ancient rescue of Israel out of Egypt to His own rescue of sinners out of slavery to sin and death. He offers the living water – the Holy Spirit who comes to counsel us, the Holy Spirit that is one with Christ and allows Him to live within us – to all who come to Him.

Let's look closely at Jesus' exact words here. He says, "Whoever believes in me...streams of living water will flow from within him." That's the promise of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit, the living water, will flow from within the believer. The stream isn't just in us. What does stagnant water do? It gets diseased; it's dangerous to drink. Instead, the living water flows from within us, able to overflow to others. Once the Holy Spirit is given to us, when we genuinely believe Jesus is our Savior and Lord, we can offer the new life the Spirit gives us to others by introducing them to the source of the river – Jesus Himself.

But what doesn't Jesus say? "Whosoever has a college degree will receive the living water." He doesn't say, "Whosoever studied theology will have it." He doesn't say, "Come back ten years after believing in me and we'll see if you're ready for the living water." No! He says, "If you are thirsty, come and drink!" Anybody can come to Jesus: rich, poor, young, old, those who fit the world's standards and those who don't. Brave and cowards, the sick and the well, the liar and the cheat, the porn addict, the drug addict, the soccer mom addicted to clothes and the businessman addicted to wealth...all are welcome to come if they are thirsty to meet Christ and be changed from the inside out!

Everyone who comes and receives the living water can spread it to others. When I talk with other pastors, we agree it's not usually the theologically astute who bring tons of people to faith or teachers or officers in the church. It's ordinary people who finally get it. When they finally turn to Jesus and receive His living water, they're like the soda fountain at Burger King – no matter who you are or what you're looking for, they're ready to pour it out for you.

Now I'm going to be honest, because most of us know one another at CrossWay. We have one core issue to overcome if we are to become the church Christ intends us to be. We're mostly introverts. Now a few of you extroverts are ready to stand up and tell everybody, "I'm not!" The introverts won't say anything but they're thinking, "Yep." For whatever reason, God made most of us on the introverted side. A small church is nice because we're not overwhelmed. But we must grow, not because it's a duty, but because as followers of Jesus, we want more people to know His love, to have His Spirit, to be rescued and live the new life He offers us.

So how can we rely on the Spirit to get past our natural shyness, our inclinations away from lots of people, and still share His living water? We'll get direction from Luke 10, where Jesus sent seventy-two disciples out to tell about His arrival. The parallels aren't exact – the disciples had slightly different roles than we do – but the ideas still resonate.

First, *we present the living water of Jesus to anyone who will listen without bias or prejudice.* Everyone should have the chance to hear the good news of rescue. Jesus told the disciples in Luke 10 to go wherever they were welcomed. When someone encouraged a disciple to stay with them and were people of peace, the disciple was to root themselves there a while.

How does that play out for us? Simply put, we disciple those God gives us. When I say "disciple" as a verb, I mean we work with them as they grow in faith. Even if we're new believers, we grow together as we support other new believers. We read Scripture together, pray together, encourage them. When they have questions, we do the legwork. In the midst of it all, I am here to encourage you, guide you, and help you find those answers.

The disciples weren't to move from house to house to get their pickings of better accommodations or easier people to disciple. For us, not moving from house to house means not picking and choosing who you tell about your faith for your own benefit. There's wisdom in being discerning as to who is interested and who isn't.

Yet we often don't share our faith for impure reasons. Churches often run ads aimed at Christians on the fence about their current church, not unbelievers. Churches do that because it's assumed that long-time believers are easier to deal with and give more money – and yet it leaves a gap in the church those people leave, and the people needing God's rescue aren't reached.

We often do not share the faith with people who are not believers because it's hard. New believers, or believers who haven't been taught much, have lots of questions, lots of problems, lots of things to sort through. They take time and effort, and we might not have a lot to show for it other than the fact that we did what God asked us to do – to offer His living water.

We don't like having to share our faith with the busybody or the loudmouth at work who might actually respond. We might not share our faith with our friends down the street who go to church twice a year because they have a church, right? We pass up people who don't fit our paradigm of a good person and people we doubt will respond. But Jesus brings tax collectors and prostitutes into the Kingdom. He brings in religious people who qualify as "good people" in our eyes when they realize that only God can save them. We offer the living water to everybody.

Second, *as living water carriers, our job is to offer the gospel compellingly, but not to make others drink it.* Jesus told the disciples they would not always get a warm welcome. He told them in Luke 10:10-11, "But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.'"

Some people reject faith. Yet our job is not to be convincers. As we've learned the last several weeks, only God can turn on the switch of faith. Only God rescues. But as we are obedient and share the gospel, God does at times see fit to do exactly that. We tell the story in a winsome manner. We must. It's a winsome story. But we cannot force belief on anyone. The old proverb is true: "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."

It doesn't mean we don't make multiple attempts to share the gospel. The disciples didn't have time to live in each town long to get to know everyone personally and convince them that Jesus was the true Messiah. We have that opportunity. Some folks don't immediately respond, and we don't give up on them. We never write anyone off. And yet, is it responsible to force the gospel on the uninterested when others we haven't yet reached?

Eventually, we move on...not from friendship and a listening ear and a readiness to share God's story. But we don't let our disappointment that some don't respond keep us from sharing the story with others. As Jesus said, "He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me." It isn't about us; it's about Him. And would it make sense for the waterboy to keep going back to benched players when the quarterback is dying of thirst?

In Matthew 13, Jesus tells a parable about a sower sowing seeds in all sorts of places – amongst weeds and thorns, on the path, on rocky ground, and in good soil. Only one set of seeds is fruitful, but the sower sows the seeds anyway. Jesus never says, “What a dumb farmer!” Instead, He explains that each kind of terrain is a specific kind of person – for different reasons, different folks reject the gospel. Yet some respond. We don’t know what people are which kinds of terrain – so we plant everywhere. We are not responsible for whether or not the seed grows. But we are responsible to plant. That’s what we do. And next week, we’ll learn how best to plant. We’ll come back to that.

A couple more thoughts before we close...next, *we don’t drown people, but give them what they can drink now*. Do you remember the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge a year or so ago? Remember how everybody was collecting money for research by posting videos getting doused with ice cold water? It was funny, right? Except when it wasn’t! Or have you ever seen a coach who wasn’t too thrilled at the end of the game getting soaked with the 50 gallon jug of Gatorade?

Sometimes, that’s the way we handle the gospel – we give anyone who shows interest so much all at once that they shut down for fear they’ll drown. In Mark 4:33, Jesus teaches the people in parables – “as much as they could understand.” He knew the limits of His audience. He broke those limits occasionally to separate out those who were truly interested in God’s Kingdom from those who hung around for the miracles, for the cool stuff Jesus was doing, for the free meals! Jesus offended sometimes. But He did not overwhelm the disciples. It took Him three years to give them the fullness of His teaching; it took them long beyond that to fully get it.

We have to be sensitive to other people and their responsiveness to Christ. I’m reading the autobiography of Rosaria Butterfield, a pastor’s wife who was for over a decade the head of gay and lesbian studies at a major university. She wrote major articles on the subject and was fully immersed in that lifestyle. She was befriended by a man who wrote to her about an article she had written for a local newspaper. This man and his wife worked with Rosaria for years as she gradually came to embrace Jesus as Savior and Lord.

It was a hard road – she had to turn her back on her career, and her faith shocked and infuriated her entire circle of friends and all her students who saw her as a traitor to the cause. She writes that had her friend invited her to church the first time they’d met, she would have shut down that friendship and never looked back. She came to Christ kicking and screaming against her old life, and it took a long time of processing, asking hard questions, and being loved. Had her new friends pushed her instead of loving her into the Kingdom, she wouldn’t have had such a radical turnaround.

Sometimes it seems like a never-ending process...we work with someone a long time for them to take baby steps in faith. Progress is so slow sometimes. But you don’t feed a baby steak, and you don’t expect them to be able to eat it, either. If you are dehydrated, it can be dangerous to drink too much water too fast – it’ll make you sick, and you’ll get rid of what you just drank. Slow and steady is the way it works best. And the same is true of faith.

This last weekend, I got the chance to go to the Reformed Forum conference. Reformed Forum is a weekly online broadcast on theology from a Presbyterian perspective. And the conference was basically five guys with Ph.Ds in theology talking really quickly about Christianity at a Ph.D level without any regard for the audience's knowledge level. As the founder of Reformed Forum said after the first presenter spoke, "That was like drinking from the fire hose!" For those of us who went, it was fantastic – but we were ready for it. We knew what was coming, and most everyone I met loved it. But for someone not ready for it, it would have been a waste of time and money.

We'll talk next week about listening, about meeting people where they are at. We're going to learn some of the art of discernment, of listening and gently pushing people forward in faith, offering them the living water of Christ and helping them drink what they can. But don't worry if the approach God leads you to take with someone showing initial interest in the faith is slow. That has been the pattern of the faithful church throughout the centuries.

Final thought for tonight: *don't let anything distract you from your role as the waterboy.* Once again in Luke 10, Jesus warned the disciples, "Don't take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road." Jesus isn't telling them to be unprepared or to be rude. Instead, He was guarding them against distractions. If you have food to eat and shoes to wear or a tent for shelter in your bag, you don't have to go into a town and meet people. Greetings in the ancient Near East were long and complex, and the disciples didn't have the time for trivial socializing. They had a job to do – to spread the word that the Savior had come!

This is my biggest problem, and it might be yours too. We are easily distracted from our job. Our conversations are typically inconsequential. We talk about the weather and who won the game and what cool movie is coming out. That's not awful in and of itself. But how often do we leave it at that? How often do we never get to the heart of the matter?

If you'll follow the analogy, we can be water experts. We can know about PH balance and hydration and salinization and never actually drink any water or share any water. In the same manner, we can know the Holy Spirit; we can know about God; we can talk about Him and read His Word and gather information. But we cannot neglect our obedience to God to share Him with those who are growing thirsty for Him.

Next week we'll start to look at some practical sides to sharing the gospel. But for now, let's commit to our job. It might not seem glamorous or exciting, but being water carriers for Jesus is an awesome job. God wants to use us to bring people into His Kingdom as His love overflows from within us! There's no job on earth more important. Let's commit to doing that job well, and we will find joy as we see God working in us.