

Revised from Pentecost, 2002, for SNC, June 08

FORGIVENESS: Streams of living water, flowing from the believers belly

John 7: 37-39; and (John 20: 19-23)

## INTRO TO SCRIPTURES

Tonight's scripture is an account of Jesus at the Jewish feast of Tabernacles. This is in John's gospel, chapter 7: 37-39. It's found on p 100 of the NT in your pew bible.

The feast of Tabernacles celebrated Moses striking the rock in the wilderness and bringing forth water. At this feast the Jews thanked God for providing water and looked forward to a time when water would pour forth from the temple in a stream that would become deeper and deeper and bring fruitfulness and healing wherever it went. This was prophesied by Ezekiel. (chapter 47)

At the feast of Tabernacles, the priest would take a jug of water and he would pour the water through a funnel on the west side of the altar and into the ground, as a kind of starter to that great river that would flow from the temple.

According to rabbinic tradition the temple in Jerusalem was geographically the center of the world, the navel, the belly of the world, so to speak.

In the reading we are about to hear, Jesus says that the source of these streams of living water is not geographical, but in a person. Jesus is that person, and anyone who believes in him will also have those streams of living water flowing from the center of their being.

Let us hear the Word of God now according to the gospel of John.

## SERMON, "Rivers of Living Water"

A man was traveling across Canada and he checked into a hotel in a small town in the prairies. But during the night a medical condition that he suffered from suddenly erupted and he called the manager of the hotel, and asked him who the best doctor was in the town.

Oh, said the manager, that would be Dr Smith, when he's sober.

Well the man didn't much like the sound of that. So he said, "Er, O.K. So, who is the second best doctor in town?"

The manager replied, "That would be Dr Smith, when he's drunk.

In a way each of us is like a one doctor town: We have our best selves and our less than best selves. And there isn't anybody else to live our lives. This is who we are. Each of us is a mixture of good and not so good.

Our challenge in life is to accept ourselves and others. To accept the whole person. Psychiatrists tell us that when we cannot accept our less than best selves, when we

reject that darker side of ourselves, we're likely to be more critical of other people and their darker sides- dark things are always easier to deal with in someone else.

But what this means is that not only we do we not have peace in ourselves but there's no peace between us.

God's great desire for us and gift brought to us through Jesus is the gift of a fresh injection of love- of peace, of acceptance. You remember the risen Christ coming to the frightened disciples, and his first words are Peace be with you. And then he breathes into them the power to be at peace - the power to forgive, if they choose.

Christ is still a living breathing presence, still breathing peace and the power to forgive. The degree to which we can receive this breath of Christ into ourselves, we can also breathe it out for others.

What we're offered is the power to bring peace in our midst. Put simply, we're offered the power to change the world.

I want to tell you two stories.

At a conference a while ago I heard a doctor tell this story. When he was quite a young doctor and before he became a serious Christian, he had this patient with an incurable skin disease- very rare, where the skin just falls off the body. There was no treatment, only bathing.

The woman was very isolated because she looked so horrible that no one could stand to be with her, including her family.

The doctor went in to see her one morning and discovered that she had not been bathed that morning. He was furious. This was the only treatment and it had not been done. He stormed into the nurses station and laid into the head nurse.

When he was finished his tirade, she didn't react defensively. She explained to him that. It took two nurses to bathe the woman and there just wasn't the staff available this morning. And yes, the nurses did find it very difficult to work with this particularly horrible skin condition. And yes, they did make themselves scarce.

But she said, the next morning she would come in early before she was due to start and she would take the time to find someone who would help her. Her soft and forgiving response to his anger, softened him.

He said, "Is that all that you need- someone to help you?" "Yes," she said. "Well, I can help you," he said. "I'm available now." It took a few minutes to prepare the bathroom, and by the time he came into the bathroom, it seems that word had spread through the hospital that a doctor was helping a nurse bathe a patient, and the bathroom was packed with all kinds of people who wanted to witness this.

So, he took the opportunity to talk a bit about this patient's condition and her isolation. It seems as a result of the demystification, staff started dropping in on her. Even her family started coming to visit.

Somehow this extra love and attention she received stimulated her own healing processes, and she was eventually discharged, but not without a party to say farewell- even the newspapers were there to photograph her as she was wheeled out with a large cake on her lap. This is not usually the way people are discharged from hospital. Something had happened.

There was a complete transformation of the person, the hospital, the community, all flowing out of one nurse's forgiving response to a doctor's anger.

The second story:

Debbie Parnham is speaking to a group of juvenile offenders in a detention center. She holds up a dollar bill and says who wants this? Hands shoot up. She then crumples the dollar bill, tosses it on the floor, grinds it with her shoe.

She picks up the mangled bill. Says again, "Who wants this?" Hands go up again. "Sometimes," she says, "our lives are like that, - crumpled, torn up, dirty. This dollar bill still has value. You have value"

This is part of a program Debbie offers in prisons called "Choices". She tells the young offenders that they have a choice in life: they can hurt the world or they can change the world..

She explains to them why she's there- because she made a choice. Her 17 year old son Brent was killed by a 19 year old gang member, Gabriel Nieto.

Debbie was a Christian. During Gabriel's trial passages from the bible about forgiveness kept coming to her mind. And she argued with what seemed to be God's suggestion. She said, "You don't understand, Lord. Gabriel killed my son. You gotta be kidding me"

And it seemed that God came back with, "Yes, I do understand. They killed my son as well."

The long and the short of it is that Debbie visited Gabriel in jail and befriended him and he desperately needed that mother love that she had to offer. And together with another victim's mother, Loretta, Debbie takes her program, Choices, into prisons everywhere.

She shows them graphic photographs of her son after he had been attacked. She is a dancer and she has made a video that she shows them of her dancing her grief and pain.

They get letters from the inmates indicating the impact that they have had: Bryan writes that he's going to stay away from gangs. Donald says he's going to get help for his drug abuse. Youngsters making new choices, one kid at a time.

Debbie's act of forgiveness is having a transformational effect way beyond even the young man that she forgave.

Two stories of healing. A hospital community. A prison community. Each one begins with an act of forgiveness. The first one, perhaps small, forgiving a doctor's anger;

the second one huge, forgiving one's son's killer. But both of them human acts of forgiveness.

Those acts of forgiveness are like the priest in ancient days, pouring a jug of water into the ground, in the faith, in the hope of beginning the flow of that mighty river, bringing healing to the world.

Each act of forgiveness from us is like that little jug of water poured out in faith, poured out in hope. As we choose to forgive, the Spirit that Jesus breathes into us does flow from the center of our being as a life giving river.

This flow of new life begins with our breathing in that spirit of forgiveness. Receive the Holy Spirit, Jesus says. Receive God's love and acceptance and forgiveness for yourself. For every part of yourself.

When we breathe in this love and acceptance, we receive power. Power that can start the flow of a mighty river, that will release and transform the whole world.

Jesus gives us a choice: he says, "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any they are retained. It's our choice: To forgive and change the world or to hold back forgiveness and keep the world bound.

It only takes a small action of forgiveness to begin the flow of those streams of living water. But the new life that those streams may bring is far beyond anything that we can ask or imagine.

To God be the praise the honour and the glory. Amen.