

During this first worship service in our new church building, I want to preach the text that is behind the choice of Riverside for the name of our congregation. You might have thought that the name "Riverside" has something to do with proximity to the Grand River. There are a number of businesses in town that have the word "Riverside" in their name because they are located along the Grand River and there is a Riverside park, but the fact that we are called Riverside Church has nothing to do with the Grand River. The name "Riverside" was chosen by the founders of our congregation to associate this congregation with the words of Jesus in John 7:38, "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." By choosing the name "Riverside" the original members of our congregation were expressing their hope that the truth of this text and the passage in which it is found would be a living reality in the life and worship of the congregation. I think we can say that they were expressing both their need for the rivers of living water that Jesus is speaking about and their hope and trust that through the life and ministry of the congregation they and those who would later join them would experience the reality of the rivers of living water that Jesus is speaking about in this passage.

The name "Riverside" is an allusion to the "rivers of living water" that Jesus promises will flow from the hearts those who believe in him. And it is an allusion to the passage in which this phrase is found and which gives it its meaning. The original members of our congregation were hoping and praying that through the ministry of this congregation thirsty souls would drink the message of Jesus and that through faith in Jesus, rivers of living water would flow from their hearts.

So we are going to look at this text this morning during our first worship service in this new church building. This is a significant moment in the life of our congregation and it is fitting that we mark it by looking at this text which is the source of our name and which reflects the hope of the founding members of our congregation that whatever is meant by the flowing of rivers of living water would be a strong reality in the life and experience of Riverside Church until the end of time.

So we will look at the passage in which these words are found, verses 37-39. One of the things that we must know by way of background is that John, the human author of this gospel, teaches us about Jesus by presenting him as the fulfillment of a number of the OT feasts. What that really means is that one of the ways that Jesus taught us about himself and his significance is by presenting himself as the fulfillment of some of the feasts of the OT. And so our text passage begins by saying, "On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'"

The feast in question was the feast of booths or the feast of tabernacles. This was both a feast that celebrated the harvest and that remembered the Lord's provision for the people of Israel during the years that they travelled in the wilderness on their journey between Egypt and the promised land. During this feast, the

people would sleep in booths or tents made out of large leaves to remind them of the time that their ancestors lived in the wilderness as God was leading them to the land he had promised them.

During the feast of tabernacles there was a ritual performed that used water as an important symbol. This exact ritual was not mandated in the OT but it was based on the importance of water as a symbol of God sustaining the lives of his people. Every day during the feast the priests would take a container of water from the pool of Siloam and there would be a procession from the pool to the temple where the water would be poured out before the altar. This ritual was based on the connection between water and life. The idea of water as a source of life is often found in the OT. In connection with the time that Israel spent in the wilderness there is the story of God providing water for the people out of a rock by means of a miracle. You may remember the story of the people needing water and God causing water to flow from a rock in the wilderness.

The water symbolism during the feast of tabernacles also pointed to the relationship between water and the harvest. But more importantly the OT often uses the symbol of life-giving water in its prophecies concerning the coming salvation when the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon the people. Isaiah 12:3 says, "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." Isaiah 55:1 says, "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money come, buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price." Isaiah 58:11 says of Israel in the coming salvation, "you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail."

So you see how the OT uses the connection between water and life to symbolize the abundance of life in the coming age of salvation which the whole OT looks forward to. In many different ways God promised his people that at some point in the future, they would experience an outpouring of blessing that would lead to great joy, the satisfaction of their spiritual thirsts and fruitfulness like a well-watered garden. The OT also makes the connection between the symbol of life-giving water and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Isaiah 44:3-4 says, "For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams."

It is in the light of verses like these that we must understand Jesus standing up the last day of the feast of tabernacles and crying out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" John makes the connection to the Holy Spirit clear in verse 39, "Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."

Now that last bit requires some explanation. The Holy Spirit was active in the OT period, but as we have seen the OT looks forward to a time when he would be poured out in a way that he had not been poured out yet in the history of God's dealings with his people. The prophecies that we have looked at point to a future of great

blessing and fruitfulness. When John says that “as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” he means that the promises concerning the future outpouring of the Holy Spirit had not yet been fulfilled. They would be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, after Jesus had died and rose again and ascended into heaven.”

Acts 2 tells that story. In Acts 2:4 we are told that the followers of Jesus were filled with the Holy Spirit. And in Acts 2:16 Peter explains, “[T]his is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: ‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh....’”

This is what John is referring to when he says, “for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” For those OT promises concerning the coming salvation to be fulfilled, Jesus had to die for the sins of his people and be raised to life having defeated sin and death and rise into heaven from where he would pour out the Spirit on the basis of what he had accomplished by his life, death, and resurrection.

So that gives us the basic explanation of what is going on in this text. Jesus is promising that those who believe in him will receive the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit in them will be like rivers of living water flowing out of their hearts. And all of that points to abundance of life and fruitfulness. Water is life-giving. Without water everything dies and shrivels up. With abundant water you get abundant life – fruitfulness and the satisfaction of all our needs.

This is what the name “Riverside” is alluding to. It expresses the conviction that the preaching of the gospel of Jesus according to the Scriptures and embraced by faith will result in fullness of life through the live-giving ministry of the Holy Spirit. The name “Riverside” expresses the conviction that through believing in Jesus rivers of living water flow out of our hearts – which means that we experience abundant life through the ministry of the Holy Spirit who dwells in the followers of Jesus.

Let’s now consider what this means for us in our experience as followers of Jesus. First of all notice Jesus’ reference to thirst. “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.” We know what it is to be thirsty. We know what it is to satisfy our thirst by drinking. Jesus is saying that we also have thirsts that are satisfied by coming to Jesus and drinking. He is saying that through believing in him and receiving the Holy Spirit we experience the satisfaction of a deeper kind of thirst than physical thirst – a spiritual thirst.

Thirst is a symbol for a longing and need. If we are thirsty we need water and we experience that need as a desire or a longing and when we drink we experience the satisfaction of that longing. This is what Jesus is speaking about when he uses the language of being thirsty and drinking. He is speaking about spiritual needs that we have as human beings and their satisfaction in him.

Now it is clear that not everyone is thirsty for the water that Jesus gives. That was true in Jesus’ day and it is still true today. So we need to think about that for a few moments to connect what Jesus is saying with both what we experience and what we observe in other people. The Bible teaches that we have spiritual needs and

spiritual longings that are based on the fact that we are made in God's image which means among other things that we were made for a relationship with God. This is the most important characteristic of us as human beings made in the image of God. We are designed to experience life and blessing in knowing, loving, and serving God.

But not everyone is aware of that. The Bible teaches that apart from salvation we do not want God in our lives. We are sinners which means we want to live according to our own rules instead of God's rules. Such people are thirsty in that they have needs and longings, but they try to satisfy their spiritual needs with God-substitutes which the Bible calls false gods or idols. And those false gods or idols are the regular things that the people of the world live for – money, comfort, reputation, pleasure, power, and influence – any way they fill their lives with things besides God.

Such people have a need for a relationship with God, but they try to satisfy that need with other things. The Bible describes this in Jeremiah 2:13. Many of the people of ancient Israel were trying to fill their lives with God-substitutes in OT times as well. Jeremiah 2:13 says "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters and hewed out cisterns for themselves broken cisterns that can hold not water."

Here God is saying that if you reject God and try to fill your life with other things instead of God it is like trying to hold water in a broken cistern. The idea is that God-substitutes do not really give true and lasting satisfaction. They do not meet our deepest needs as human beings. We cannot experience fullness of life by living apart from God. God refers to himself here as the fountain of living waters. He is like a spring of water that never runs dry. He is the one who fills our deepest needs and satisfies our souls.

So we have this need for God whether we know it or not. But some people know it. Some people know about their need for God because God opens their eyes to see it. This is a mysterious thing. It happens largely through the teaching of the Bible which tells us of our need for God. The Holy Spirit is involved in this in a secret and mysterious way. And because of that there are people who experience spiritual thirst for God and thus also for Jesus and for what Jesus provides.

So Jesus says, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink." Jesus calls us to come to him and drink because he came to satisfy our great spiritual need for God and for life in relationship with him and in his service. That means first of all that he came to deal with the reality of our sins. One of the things we thirst for, if we are spiritually thirsty is the forgiveness of our sins. We know that we are sinners. We know that we have a heavy load of guilt and the removal of that guilt and being made right with God is something we thirst for if our hearts have been opened to our real need. We long to be right with God. We long to live in the favor of God. We long to know God's love and to love him in return. This is the kind of thing that Jesus is speaking about when he says, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink."

There is much more as well. We thirst for righteousness. In Matthew 5:6 Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” If God by his word and Spirit shows us what it means to live a life that is pleasing to God, then we begin to thirst for righteousness – we begin to see the rightness of right living – the joy and fulfillment it give us to seek to please God in our lives.

We thirst for peace. We thirst for love – love for God and love for other people. We thirst for living lives that matter to God and others. We thirst for ourselves mattering to God and others. We thirst for eternal life – for life beyond this life. We thirst for hope in a world where there is so much hopelessness. And all of those things are rooted in a right relationship with God that Jesus came to earn for us and to give to us.

So Jesus says, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.” And then he describes how that thirst will be satisfied. “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” And this refers to the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is like a river of living water flowing from our hearts. That refers to life. It refers to fruitfulness. It refers to refreshment. It refers to everything the Holy Spirit does when he dwells in our hearts. It is important that we understand that the Holy Spirit comes from Jesus. We believe in Jesus and he gives us the Holy Spirit. It is through believing in Jesus that the rivers of living waters flow out of our hearts. In John 15:26 Jesus tells us that he sends the Holy Spirit from the Father. And many times in the NT the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of Jesus.

There is one thing that we must understand about this and that is that the Holy Spirit is involved from the very beginning of our salvation. Apart from the Holy Spirit we do not thirst for God and for Jesus. We are dead in sin. And faith is a gift of God. But as far as our conscious experience is concerned, we thirst, we come to Jesus and we receive the rivers of living water – which is the Holy Spirit.

So how is this living water flowing from our hearts experienced. Galatians 5 has a number of references to the Holy Spirit. 5:16 “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” The Holy Spirit enables us to fight against sin. The imagery of rivers of living water point to fruitfulness of life and that fruitfulness comes as the Holy Spirit enables us to fight against sin which leads to death and to grow in obedience which is true life and blessedness. Galatians 5:22-23 says that the “fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness [and] self-control.

Romans 8:2 says that “the law of the Spirit of life has set [us] free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” The Holy Spirit gives life and that life gives us freedom from sin which is the way of death and misery. The Holy Spirit is also called the “Spirit of adoption” who gives us the confidence that God is our loving Father. He bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

All of this is summarized by the symbol of rivers of living water growing out of our hearts. Jesus satisfies our spiritual thirst by giving us the Spirit as a constant flow of life and power and vitality flowing from our hearts.

We trust in Jesus. Our sins are forgiven. We are adopted as God's children. And the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to enable us to live lives in fellowship with God and to live lives in the service of God. Living that kind of life is possible through rivers of living water flowing from our hearts.

Now you might think that this means that the Holy Spirit kind of takes over and it is suddenly easy and effortless for us to live fruitful and holy lives. Thankfully, the Bible informs us that the Holy Spirit does not carry us along so that we can just coast our way to greater fruitfulness and godliness. The fact is in most things God involves our own efforts even when he is working powerfully in us. The Christian life still involves effort. It involves struggle. Galatians 5:17 gives us the picture when it says, "For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other to keep you from doing the things you want to do."

This is very important. It is easy to get discouraged if you think that having rivers of living water flowing from your hearts means that all of a sudden it becomes easy to live a life that is like a well-watered garden. The Holy Spirit usually does not work in us that way. Even if the Holy Spirit is like a river of living water flowing from our hearts, the life that follows from that usually feels quite normal. The kind of life that the Holy Spirit enables us to live happens through reading and hearing and meditating on the Bible, spending time in prayer, being influenced by other Spirit-filled people, being involved in the life of the church, and serving other people and growing toward maturity through experience and suffering. There are all kinds of ways that the Holy Spirit fulfills this image of rivers of water flowing from our hearts and usually they did not feel especially dramatic.

But his work in us is very real for all that. We experience real blessings as a result of his ministry so that we do experience the reality of rivers of living water flowing from our hearts. We experience reconciliation with God through faith in Jesus. We have a real relationship with God in which we experience God's love for us and we love God in return. We are learning to live lives of love and obedience. We experience satisfaction to a greater or lesser degree in worship, in delighting in Jesus, in resting in his love and favor. We experience peace and joy and love. And through the ministry of word and Spirit our lives slowly become more fruitful.

Psalms 1 gives us a good picture of how this works. It says of the man who meditates on God's word day and night, "He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season...." So when we believe in Jesus and rivers of living water flow from our hearts, the fruitfulness that results is very real and the satisfactions that result are very real, but we need to know how to recognize them in the light of Biblical teaching.

So the name Riverside for our church represents the conviction that through the life and ministry of this church our spiritual thirsts will be satisfied through faith in Jesus and through the same faith the Holy Spirit will work in our hearts and lives to fulfill the symbol of rivers of living water flowing out of our hearts.

The name Riverside represents the conviction taught in this passage that what we really need to satisfy our spiritual thirst are these rivers of living water. As we have seen the world seek to find satisfaction in God-substitutes, but Jesus' mission was and is all about bringing us into a saving relationship with God which satisfies our true spiritual needs and our longing to live in a loving relationship with God.

The name Riverside reminds us that a life of fruitfulness and satisfaction comes through Jesus and the Holy Spirit whom he gives to all who believe in him. The symbol of rivers of living water flowing from our hearts points to refreshment, fruitfulness, and fullness of life. May we always have that thirst as members of Riverside Church. Let us not be like those who have "hewed out cisterns for themselves broken cisterns that can hold no water" And let us quench our spiritual thirst from the "fountain of living waters" (Jeremiah 2:13) Let us always seek to live up to the name Riverside and be those who are constantly coming to Jesus with thirsty souls who come to him and drink and who live out the reality of the symbol of rivers of living water flowing out of our hearts.