

THE NEW COMMUNITY: EXPECT TO CHANGE THE WORLD
JOHN 7:37-39, PENTECOST
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I remember one summer afternoon making the long walk home from my Little League practice. The field was two miles from my house.

It was a hot day. This was in the days when water bottles weren't considered personal accessories. Hydrating was a red pipe on the street that belonged to the fire department. What I remember is how thirsty I was. Dusty, tired from a long practice, parched to the bone I walked the last mile wondering if I would make it.

I kept picturing holding a large glass under the faucet of our kitchen sink, filling it with cold water, drinking it and filling it again and again and again. Which is exactly what I did when I stumbled into the house.

There have always been thirsty people in the world – particularly in the arid climate of the Middle East. Water in the Bible is a precious commodity associated with life.

In today's reading Jesus says, "let anyone who is thirsty come to me and out of him will flow streams of living water."

What I want to talk about this morning is, essentially, a plumbing problem. How do we as a congregation get the living water of Jesus into our community and world? How do we irrigate with the living water of God the many places and people who thirst in our world?

Today is Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit to the early church. We celebrate today the Holy Spirit as the source of life, of living water.

We are in week six of a sermon series on the missional church. We are talking about a new way of being church. We said missional churches practice authentic living, high expectations for membership, send apostles into the world, value obeying Jesus' commandments as much as knowledge of God, and measure success by the ability to release people and resources into the world.

Today's missional church practice is the expectation to change the world – an expectation that gushes forth from the living water God gives us.

Examples of small groups changing the world are not restricted to the church. In the 1980s the future of Steve Jobs' upstart Apple computer company was thought to be no more promising than a bug on the windshield of the speeding monolithic giant IBM.

But one Apple insider said, "our fundamental purpose was to innovate, invent, and lead an entire cultural revolution...all the people I met there, passionate young people, believed they were changing the world, not selling computers."

The boarding school our son attended in Bath Maine, the Hyde School, was founded in 1962 by a man whose vision was and still is to transform American education. Today the school is working with the Gates foundation on a business plan for five small high schools in the New York City area. If you look closely, it is small groups that start movements that change the world.

Surely, a computer company or high school possess no more capacity to effect world change than the Body of Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Two thousand years ago the twelve disciples had fewer material resources than a small company or high school. But after Easter, after Pentecost the living water that flowed out of their lives started a movement that transformed the world. Following the great commission – to go into the world making disciples of all nations and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you – those twelve uneducated followers of Jesus changed the world.

Missional churches call disciples to do exactly the same thing; to fulfill the great commission, to “make disciples” and to “teach Jesus’ commandments.” We are talking today about the expectation to change the world. For Christians, it lies in our taking seriously and living out the great commission of Christ.

What would this look like at Westminster? We’ve been talking about a big audacious goal for mission. Does it fulfill the great commission? Will it change the world?

Last week I said this vision for mission, which will soon be presented to the congregation, includes transforming a neighborhood on the West Side by working with Habitat for Humanity and offering a mentoring program for small businesses and entrepreneurial leadership.

Add these two projects to our ENERGY tutoring program and we will be focusing on housing, jobs and education – probably the top three areas of need for our city or any urban area today.

But even if we rebuild a city street, enable some new businesses to start up, and continue our tutoring program a key ingredient required to change the world will be missing – living water.

The great festival John refers to in today’s reading that serves as the backdrop for Jesus’ invitation to come to him for living water is the festival of Sukkoth or the festival of booths. This festival was a seven day ceremony that recalled Israel’s erecting temporary shelters as they wandered in the wilderness.

The Sukkoth festival culminates on the last day with the ‘water-libation’ ritual. Worse than a long walk home from summer baseball practice, the people of Israel wandered and thirsted in the desert until God provided for them. The water-libation ritual recalls God’s relief and the subsequent joy of their salvation by God.

Jesus’ invitation and promise to those who wander through life’s wildernesses and who come to him will never thirst because they will have living water, this invitation is the fountainhead of our expectation to change the world.

The rabbis commenting on the ‘water-libation’ ritual at the end of Sukkoth said, “anyone who has thirsted and not experienced the joy of being given water has not experienced joy in this life.” What I am saying today is that we can change a neighborhood or two if we want to but if we aim to change the City of Buffalo and offer a model for struggling urban communities across America we will need to tap into the streams of living water Jesus offers to us and those to whom we reach out.

Let me share a story. When I was in divinity school I debated between pursuing the practice of law and the ministry. In my first year, I took a course in the law school and worked for a neighborhood legal aid association.

My responsibility as a paralegal was to assist residents of the projects where the office was located to do things like get divorces and court orders for protection against abusive spouses and angry utility companies.

What I realized was that the legal solutions to these problems important as they were did not begin to address the clients' needs in the spiritual wildernesses they faced. What they needed was living water.

Like those Apple computer employees who had a different vision for their work, I began to see my work differently. I realized I was not just providing legal band aides to human problems but I could offer something much more important – the source of hope amidst despair, wholeness amidst brokenness that I had found in my own life.

That's when I realized that I would probably be more effective working in a church than a law office. But over the years, I have come full circle. I now realize that it is lawyers and teachers and clerks and executives who, in the course of their daily work, have as great or greater an opportunity to offer the living water of God to others. And this is the power of the church to change the world.

We are all ministers or wilderness guides if you will. Yet, it raises an important question. Have we found the living water of God and are we ready and willing to share it with others? I suspect some of us have and some haven't. The important thing, the only thing required if you haven't tapped into the living water of God is the simple willingness to do so. Today's lesson from John is the invitation. Our job is to go to the party. The rest is between Jesus and us.

Let's think out of the box. What would it take not only to create better housing and jobs and education for our city – but to add to that vision, sharing with others the living water we have found in our faith? A few thoughts: first, it is important to say mission is not about geography. Missional faith sharing is relation-based. We share faith best not with those we don't know but with those we know. Knocking on doors to talk to strangers about Jesus is not a highly productive strategy for sharing your faith.

Second, missional faith sharing has to do with being authentic. It means being transparent about what transforms our lives, gives us peace that passes understanding, hope amidst our despair. We share our excitement about gardening or opera or diets, why not our faith? I urge you not to paralyze yourself wondering how in the world you would ever share that with someone else. The reticence we feel to do so is either a garden variety White Anglo Saxon Protestant fear of getting too close or personal with anyone or our reacting against some stereotypical image of knocking on doors for Jesus. Watch and pray for the opportunities, says the bible, and they will come, as will the words.

Third, missional faith sharing means being able to confess that as someone sharing what we have discovered are answers for our lives we have not always lived like we trusted or believed in those answers. Sharing the living water of God begins in honesty, humility and vulnerability.

Finally, missional faith sharing means identifying a mission field. That is, the arena of relationships of influence and mission.

Perhaps it will be our family members. Parents raising children, children inspiring and encouraging their parents. Maybe our mission field is among our co-workers or neighbors.

I venture to say that our primary mission field as a church is certainly the city of Buffalo, especially the West Side but in no way is our reach and influence confined to this city or its neighborhoods.

Last week I was coming home from an event at Auburn Seminary in New York and was one of nine passengers on the JFK shuttle. It was fascinating to watch who we picked up to take to the airport in that upper West Side neighborhood.

One woman said she was going to Utah; another, an employee of Nike born in the Virgin Islands lived in Paris and was going home after a stay in Manhattan. The woman next to me was an Israeli. A couple in the back seat was from Australia.

Our lives are no longer confined to a few blocks or the city we happen to live in. As Westminster identifies our fields of mission our reach will extend around the world.

Some of us will even shift our work from what we have done for a profession or career and we will respond to a calling as volunteers or missionaries taking Westminster's good news to places like India or Africa or Central America.

If you have experienced the joy of being given the living water of God after wandering one of life's deserts it is not only a responsibility to share the source of that water with others, it becomes a calling to do so.

There are as many different ways to deliver that message as there are people here today.

When we add living water to a new house or job or the hope of an education – God will start a movement among us that will change the world. Amen