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Holy Faith, Santa Fe  
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Pentecost – Year A  
Acts 2.1-21  
Psalm 104.25-35, 37  
1 Cor. 12.3b-13  
John 7.37-39

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Water. Spirit. Life. These are the elements – the themes – of this great festival day, the Day of Pentecost. Water. Spirit. Life. In today’s Gospel Jesus says, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” Water. Today’s Gospel tells us that “[Jesus] said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” Spirit. And from the opening prayer for this Feast of Pentecost: “Almighty God, [who] on this day didst open the way of eternal life to every nation and race by the promised gift of thy Holy Spirit.” Life.

But Jesus talks about this water, spirit, and life, in today’s Gospel not on the festival of Pentecost – fifty days after the festival of the Passover and the festival of his resurrection – no, he is already ascended into heaven and another Advocate, the Holy Spirit, has descended to leave us not comfortless. No, Jesus talks about water, spirit, and life on another great festival, the Festival of Tabernacles, a harvest festival ostensibly celebrating the arrival of the new rains after the hot summer by the drinking of the new autumn wine, but really looking toward the end time and new life. On the Festival of Tabernacles the priest would make his way from the Temple to the pool of Siloam, where healings were known to occur, and draw up a golden flagon of water, then process through the Water Gate, up a ramp to the altar and proceed to pour the

water into one of two silver bowls positioned there. Into the other bowl, the priest would pour a libation of wine. Spouts in each of the two bowls allowed the water and wine to flow out onto the altar.<sup>1</sup> The crowd was so thick that it has been compared to the National Mall in Washington, D.C. on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July<sup>2</sup> – complete with Washington’s own Watergate complex at one end, I suppose!

In the midst of this stupendous scene, as the priestly waters and wine pour over the ceremonial altar, Jesus stands up and cries out to the crowd, basically: “Hey, if you’re really thirsty, I’ll give you living water that will quench your thirst forever.” Jesus has said the same thing to the woman at the well: “[T]hose who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” Jesus has already changed water into wine at the wedding in Cana. But here, in front of the crowds, in the midst of the temple ritual, Jesus is saying that he is the replacement for the old rites. Only he can give living water that leads to eternal life. And in this crowd, it’s enough to get him eventually killed. It’s no coincidence, I think, that when Jesus is hanging on the cross, his last words are “I thirst,” and then after being teased with a moistened sponge, he says, “It is finished,” and he bows and gives up his spirit. From that act, and by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus gives us eternal life. Water. Spirit. Life.

Water, spirit, and life have been with us since the beginning of creation. In the beginning, when God created life, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters. Water is

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<sup>1</sup> Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994, 174.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 184.

necessary for life. Nearly 80% of the body of an average adult consists of water molecules.

Think of the properties of water. Not only is water necessary for life, but water is also used for cleansing. It washes away the dirt and the grime. It refreshes and restores. We use water to relax and sooth, by showering or by swimming. We use it to exercise and rejuvenate. But too much water can destroy crops and take away life, as we have seen with the floods in the Upper Midwest. If you don't know how to swim, too much water can result in fear and drowning. In Jesus' time, it was believed if you sailed westward on the waters of the Mediterranean, you would eventually drop off the edge of the known world. So water can represent danger, foreboding, and even death.

It's no wonder that God takes ordinary water and through the Holy Spirit transforms it into the life-giving water of baptism. Our liturgy of Baptism expresses the deep truth of this understanding of God. As Anglicans we pray what we believe and we believe what we pray. Listen to the prayer of thanksgiving over the water at baptism: "We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation, or as the great Navy Hymn, 'Eternal Father, strong to save,' puts it, 'Most Holy Spirit, who didst brood upon the chaos dark and rude...'. [The prayer over the water continues:] Through [your gift of water] you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In [your gift of water] your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life." Water. Spirit. Life.

At baptisms here at Holy Faith, until this point in the prayer the flagon of water has been raised in full view of the congregation, but then it is poured into the font to show that it is living, life-giving, and not stagnant water. The prayer of thanksgiving continues:

“We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By [the water of Baptism] we share in his resurrection. Through [the water of Baptism] we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. [When we are submerged and go under that deadly property of water at baptism, through the Holy Spirit we surface and come up on the other side into newness of life, just as Jesus did when he passed over from death to life.] Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Now sanctify this water, we pray you, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior.” Water. Spirit. Life.

Of course, water is a primary element of any baptism – it’s the one that we can see! After each baptism, the blessed water remains in the baptismal font, and is replenished each week with holy water so people may dip their fingers in the font to make the sign of the cross and to be reminded of their own baptism. But listen for all the invocations of the Holy Spirit in the baptismal prayer of thanksgiving: “Over [the water] the Holy Spirit moved...Jesus...was anointed by the Holy Spirit...we are reborn by the Holy Spirit...by the power of your Holy Spirit...you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism...by water and the Holy Spirit...Sustain...O Lord, in your Holy Spirit.” And, of

course, the result is new and unending life in Jesus Christ, our Risen and Ascended Lord.

Water. Spirit. Life. Come renew yourself at this font and drink at this table from the source of living water by which you will never be thirsty again. Amen.