

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
20 February 2022

10:30 a.m. MT Worship  
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

## ***“Spirit of Questioning”***

Seventh Sermon in the Eight-week Series: *What Jesus Serves Up*

*John 7:37-52*

New Revised Standard Version

Throughout the season of Epiphany we’ve been dining our way through John’s gospel on what Jesus is serving up. And so far what Jesus has served up has been a pretty well-rounded meal (and an enjoyable one at that) – we’ve had some water, wine, and bread and sure there was a moment where the tables were turned, but there was a moment of beautiful healing as well.

But now we’re at the point in the meal where everyone starts to shift in their seats. You know this moment. The day is catching up with you, you’re tired and you’re slightly fuller than you’d like to be – your waistband a tad uncomfortable. The kids are long gone from the table, and you can hear them running around in the other room, overtired and wound up. People have had one too many drinks and their guards are down. Your partner squeezes your leg under the table and gives you “the look” – you know the look that signals “it’s

time to make a move and get outta here.”

And it’s just at this point, when you are folding your napkin on the table, and pushing back your chair, just about to give your thanks and gratitude to the host and take your plate to the kitchen, that all the sudden somebody says something that sucks the air out of the room, taking the conversation in a whole new direction (SIGH) and you sink back down into your chair. It’s no longer appropriate to get up right now. You’re just gonna have to ride this moment out. And it’s uncomfortable. Not necessarily because of what other people are saying, although their words do make you cringe at times, but mostly because of how the conversation makes *you* feel on the inside – conflicted and uncertain and just uncomfortable. As you start to think about whether you’re going to contribute to the controversial topic at hand or just be silent, or how you might say what you want to say

without offending anyone, your mind also wonders if you can just use the excuse of needing to use the restroom or go check on the kids as an excuse.

Sometimes we can't even pinpoint the moment when the dinner table discussion flips from casual conversation to controversial debate, but when it does you wonder – Why didn't you leave the first time your partner gave you "the look?"

But imagine a meal where this is happening and your host, is just sitting at the table, observing everything go down. He's listening to all of you talk, and actually talk *about* him as the controversy at hand. And as people discuss where he's from and what credentials and authority he has to even be living in this house or hosting this meal, you wonder what he is feeling. How can he stand all this talk 'about' him while no one is talking 'to' him? Yet he seems to be unflappable. At one point he walks around the table with a pitcher, offering to fill everyone's glass, saying something about living water – but no one really pays attention to him. But he keeps the water close at hand, and keeps filling the glasses as the conversation continues.

Because you see, not just in this text, but in the midst of all of our conversations and confusion about who Jesus is, in the midst of our arguing about his authority and identity, in the midst of our uncertainty about his intentions and motives, in the midst of our mixed emotions – sometimes being so disappointed by him and other times being over-the-top grateful for him – Christ is. Christ is with us. Christ is among us and around us and beside us. Christ is in front of us and behind us, above us and below us. Christ is within us. And yes, Christ is beyond us...and beyond all of our debates and discussions about him.

I know that today's text is all about a certain debate and disagreement about Jesus' identity 2,000+ years ago, but can we just acknowledge that we've been debating and discussing and doubting who Jesus is for 2,000+ years and he's still with us?! Unchanged, unmoved, unbothered. Not disheartened, even if discouraged at times. Sure maybe angry and annoyed, but never absent. Christ is with us! We can debate his existence or we can feel him walking with us

every day, we can disown him or can claim him as our own, we can love him or loathe him, we can follow him or forsake him – and he is here. With us. Hosting our lives. He never excuses himself from the Table – no matter how heated the conversation gets or how awkward the silence sits.

It doesn't matter how confused or controversial or contrarian we are – Christ just keeps coming around the table with a question and an invitation: Thirsty? Yes? Then might I offer you some living water?

It's ironic perhaps. The more we argue and debate over Jesus, the thirstier we get.

And trust me, at the time of this exchange and conversation, the people were thirsty.

Similar to Jesus using imagery last week from the Festival of the Passover when he talks about bread, today he's using imagery from the Festival of *Sukkot* when he talks about water. This is the Festival of Booths or the Feast of the Tabernacle or Tents – which remembers God's presence with

the wandering people of Israel in the desert.

So for this festival, which was held in the fall after harvest, people would pilgrimage to Jerusalem and of course it had been dry all summer long.

In this procession people would gather in the temple holding leafy branches (as a sign of greenness, fertility, hope of life), they would hold a piece of fruit in their hand (symbolizing fruitfulness), and everyday a priest would go out of the temple, march down to the pool of Siloam and scoop up water in a golden pitcher and carry it back to the temple and make procession around the altar and pour it onto the altar.<sup>1</sup>

The pouring out of the water became a visible petition that God would send the life-giving rain for their future and it reminded them of God's provision in their past. Water was a symbol of this feast because of the memory of the water miracles that manifested God's protection and care in the wilderness: the parting of the Red Sea and the life-giving water that came from the Rock

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<sup>1</sup> Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, & Kathryn Schifferdecker, "NL Podcast 483: Living Water - Feb. 20, 2022," *Working Preacher* (14 Feb. 2022), accessed

on Feb. 20, 2022 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/483-living-water-feb-20-2022>.

when God commanded Moses to strike it providing drink to the thirsty people and their animals in the desert wilderness journey (Exodus 17, Numbers 20).

And so when Jesus stands up in the Temple and says *“let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink,”* he’s positioning himself within the context of this festival where they are praying for water! These thirsting people are looking for a sign of the grace of God, the favor of God, the life=giving rain and nourishment that comes from God. And Jesus is there to provide it,<sup>2</sup> whether they know it or not. In this moment Jesus is connecting his very presence to God’s ever-lasting provision. Jesus himself is like the water from the rock, giving life to the people.

Now this is our third passage in this Epiphany series that deals with some aspect of needing our thirst quenched – from Jesus turning water into wine at Cana – to the water Jesus offers to the woman at the well in Samaria – to the living water of Jesus’ very authority and presence that we read about today – John’s gospel knows that the spiritual

state that we find ourselves most frequently in – is that of being thirsty. Jesus himself will say later in John’s gospel, as he hangs on the cross dying, “I’m thirsty.” We are all thirsty.

Thirst is not something to mess around with, is it? Thirst is something to quench, because by the time we feel thirst, doctors tell us, we are already dehydrated. Just this week there was a tragic report about a family – a mom, dad, infant, and dog – who died of overheating and dehydration on a hiking trail near Yosemite last August. It was just a day hike, and they were just over a mile from their car.<sup>3</sup>

Thirst is real. Thirst is the one of the foundational human physical needs, second only to air. We need water to survive. And so just as Morgan said last week that Jesus calling himself the Bread of Life is a reminder that he is as necessary to our lives as something we eat every day, so too, as Jesus offers us Living Water, he’s telling us that he’s essential to our survival. We will fall faint without him. We need his presence, and we can debate all we want about who he

<sup>2</sup> Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Alisha Ebrahimji, “An unsent text message and desperate phone calls detail California family’s last moments before they died while hiking,” *CNN* (18 Feb.

2022), accessed on Feb. 20, 2022 at <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/18/us/california-family-yosemite-final-moments-trnd/index.html>.

is or isn't, but we can't debate our *need* for him. It's not about believing the right or wrong things about Jesus. It's about learning that through Jesus' love we *belong* to God...and everyone else belongs to God too. And Jesus is 'oh-so-patient' with us as we figure this out.

Today's passage is such a good example of this. We have all these people who have different opinions and thoughts about who Jesus is; you could say they are at different stages of the spiritual journey in recognizing who Jesus is – and they're stages we can probably all recognize ourselves having been in at one time or another, or even perhaps being in today.

First we have those who come to **Easy Acceptance & Sure Belief** of who Jesus is. In verse 40 we read about the crowd, who after hearing Jesus' speak said, "*This is really the prophet...This is the Messiah,*" (vs 40-41). They are convinced. They have seen and heard, and so they believe. Sometimes when our belief comes easy like this it's because of where we are in our lives. We are ready to believe. We have an open heart, and we are emotionally poised to be moved to something new. We need, perhaps, something to

come into our life and bring us hope, and when we experience even just a bit of Jesus – we say – that's it. I knew I was thirsty, and now I know what will quench my thirst. Sometimes we criticize these folks as naïve or easily persuaded, but truthfully, this kind of full-on acceptance and belief can be such a good feeling to have. When you are sure of your faith, sure of who Jesus is and what he means to you...even if it's just a mountaintop moment...we remember these times of closeness and hold them close.

So that's one part of the crowd, but then you've got other people in the crowd who hear people saying so assuredly, "*This the Messiah,*" and they say, wait a minute, "*Isn't the Messiah supposed to come from Bethlehem? This guy's from Galilee! Surely the Messiah is not from Galilee, that's not what the Bible says,*" (paraphrased vs 41-42). The irony, is of course, that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but these folks haven't taken the time to get to know Jesus and ask him where he is actually from, not to mention that Jesus has already said in John's gospel that the birthplace and identity source that matters most is that he is from God; just a few verses

before this Jesus says, *“I know [God] because I am from [God] and he sent me,”* (vs 29). But of course, if these folks heard Jesus say this, it went in one ear and out the other because they came **Ready to Argue, Ready to Defend What They Know to To Be True.**

They are not very good at listening to new perspectives or new information because they are so sure that the information they already have is true and certain and it’s all the information they need, “thank you very much.” They are full of pre-conceived notions and assume a lot, and can’t really acknowledging that they may not know everything. They are ignorant and uninformed; they jump to conclusions; they assume they know more than they do; they are ready to find fault with those who think or believe differently than they do.

Perhaps you know people like this, or are sometimes are this way yourself. It’s very human. Often we are in this stance when we are feeling threatened or fearful. Maybe a lot is changing in our lives, or a lot is changing in the world around us, and so clinging to a belief we have always held, even when new information that might

contradict that belief is right before us. It’s almost as if that belief is a security blanket to us. We just can’t let it go – and so we defend it all costs. Even at great cost to ourselves. These folks were so hung up on the fact that they thought Jesus was from Galilee and that the Messiah couldn’t be from Galilee that they missed the Messiah’s very presence in their midst.

Then we read this statement: *“So there was division in the crowd because of Jesus,”* (vs 43). Thank you John for pointing out the obvious.

Well, sure there was division in the crowd, because there is division in the world. But do you ever wonder if our external divisions are just mirroring our internal struggles...because we’re ALL struggling and often we don’t acknowledge each other’s struggle?

I’m not sure any of these folks were really certain about Jesus. He was such a new thing to them. So of course they are **Unsure and Uncertain.** They were trying to work out who he was in real time, and they were conflicted about him and what he meant to their society and religion and sphere of politics.

And often when we are in the place of trying to sort through some kind of new learning or truth in our life – as all that is churning under the surface gets going inside of us – what ends up getting projected to the outside world is either a hardlined perspective that shows we are ‘strong’ and ‘unshakeable’ in our old system of belief OR that we are ‘gung-ho and on fire and 100% absolutely sure of’ our new system of belief. We can sort of cling to one of these extremes and project that to the world when the truth is, we are ALL really struggling on the inside to make sense of all the new information we are processing. This is true whether we’re talking about faith, politics, COVID, or church.

But we see an example of what can happen when we pay attention to this internal processing in verse 44: “*some of them wanted to arrest Jesus, but no one laid hands on him.*” The people in authority, with the power to arrest, are grappling with what they have been taught and trained to do, against what they are hearing and seeing in the person of Jesus. They are trained to see Jesus as a threat to their power, and therefore a threat to society – and yet, and

yet – something in them restrained their training. Some gut instinct held them back. This perhaps is a beautiful picture of authority tempered by humility. Might there be something about this person that we don’t know? Might there be a different way to see this situation than how we have been taught to see it?

Instead of there being a right way or a wrong way, might there be a third way?

This moment leads us into the exchange between the temple police and the chief priests and Pharisees. Both of these groups have religious power and political power. But they are seeing things differently right now. The chief priests and Pharisees are seeing things from a literal, theoretical understanding of the Law (or so they think) – basing their decisions on what they think the Torah tells them is right or how they perceive Jesus is threatening the Law, and the temple police are seeing things from the ground level. They are not as focused on the theoretical, as they are on the man right before them. They say, “*Never has anyone spoken like this!*” It’s actually really refreshing, isn’t it? Imagine what our world would be like if

we humanized people and listened to them before we arrested them or accused them or blamed them or unfriended them or talked a bad about them?

You see, to me, these temple police represent, to me, those who are **Open to Change & New Ways of Thinking**. Not that they're there yet, but they are open to it. They are willing to take in new information and let it change them. They are open to letting someone's story (their words) change them. What they are learning gives them cause to pause. They take a breath. Step back. And wait before acting.

But of course, the Pharisees' reply is emblematic of those who continue to **Cling to Power No Matter What**. It's not that they should be faulted for knowing the Law and trying to uphold it, it's that they have lost sight of the heart of what the Law is trying to say. They are in a mindset driven by fear. They are obsessed with their knowledge and authority and they actually say things to demean those who disagree with them, *"Surely you have not been deceived too, have you?"* It's a form of gaslighting. Telling people that the truth they see

and know is not the truth – when in fact, it is. These folks who are Clinging to Power are offering some pretty low blows, touting their authority over the people's witness: Verse 48:

*"Has any one of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd who does not know the law – they are accursed!"*

It's a disheartening moment. And when we encounter people like this in our lives – or when we see ourselves in a moment where we are acting just like these are acting – we must ask: what is driving this reaction? Because at these moments when we seek to demean another's humanity or experience or belief or truth, we're also demeaning our humanity too.

But – just when we are at a low point in this text – enter Nicodemus. The man who came to Jesus in the darkness of night, and was fed the gift of Spirit of Truth and Light by Jesus (though he didn't fully understand it at the time). Nicodemus, also a Pharisee, is on his own journey of discovery. And perhaps because he is one of them he can speak to them. And he offers a simple question – *"Our law does not judge people without first giving*



*them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?"* (vs 51).

Boom. It's a mic drop moment. Nicodemus counters the Pharisees' claims of the law with the Law itself. Nicodemus does not claim certainty, he offers curiosity. An openness of spirit. Nicodemus, as we see his progression through John's gospel, is a great example of how many of our faith journeys unfold. Gradually. Slowly. He is a Seeker of Truth. He's standing up to those in his peer group, those in power. He is beginning to show some real courage. And he's doing so not by claiming to have a clear answer but by asking a clear question!<sup>4</sup>

And sometimes that's all it takes to shift a conversation.

Nicodemus' question is an invitation to let Jesus tell his story in his own words, instead of us trying to tell it for him or guess it about him. Nicodemus is asking us to set aside what we think we know to be true and to explore whether there might be a new truth that we are missing.

And during all this controversy, debate, and curious questioning

– what is Jesus doing? He's walking around with a pitcher of living water, offering us a drink to quench our thirst.

Division and dissent and disagreement, controversy and conflict – these things are not going away. Our internal questions and doubts of faith – they remain. And that's okay. But can we find the presence of Jesus and hear the invitation of Jesus in the midst of all the chaos?

Because the Good News in this passage is that while all of the people around the Table are arguing and dealing with internal and external conflicts and stirrings about who Jesus is – while they are all trying to kind of work out this new information in a new way – whether they have **Easy Acceptance & Sure Belief** or whether they are **Ready to Argue, Ready to Defend What They Know to Be True** or whether they are visibly and vocally **Unsure and Uncertain** about what to believe or whether they are **Open to Change & New Ways of Thinking** or whether they are **Clinging to Power No Matter What** or whether they are a

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<sup>4</sup> Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

**Seeker of Truth with a Spirit of Questioning – Jesus’ invitation is the same to ALL of them. “Are you thirsty?”**

*“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me.” (vs 37-38)*

And it’s the same invitation that Jesus offers you and me.

Having clear answers about Jesus does not change our thirst or need for him. Having all kinds of questions about Jesus, faith, or the world, does not change our thirst or need for him. Belief of no belief, we are all thirsty.

Perhaps you can relate to the confusion and conflict and questioning in this text. Whether it’s having conversations with people who understand Jesus in a different way than we do, or the internal stirrings we feel when our own belief system shifts because of new learnings or new questions we start to ask – sometimes faith is complicated. And most certainly – life is complicated!

We can get lost in our heads with theological questions or try to make things fit in a neat and tidy theological box. Sometimes our heart leads us in one direction and our questions lead us in another. Or sometimes our

faith makes sense logically, but people who share our faith confound us or hurt us.

It is true that some of the parts of our faith journey can keep us thirsting – but what Jesus serves up to quench our thirst is not Exact Belief in him, but rather, a spirit of questioning, or perhaps even, the Spirit of a single question, that invites us to drink of some life-giving waters that keep us flowing and going in the Spirit.

Jesus is present with us. He allowed those around him to work out what they believed about him, and he does the same for us too. While all these guys were questioning him, Lord knows that if Jesus had wanted to answer them, he would have!

But he lets them keep questioning. Keep discussing. Keep debating. And let us not forget that Jesus’ whole ministry was based on asking questions. That was how he taught, more so through questions than statements. May this be a lesson for all of us – that sometimes Questions are the Truest Part of our Faith for they lead us into deeper conversation and connection with others...keeping us at the Table long enough to realize that the

person across the Table from us (the person we are disagreeing with) might just be reflecting to us the image of God we need to see, AND sometimes our own questions invite us to realize that WE are the very image of God we need to see.

As I read this passage this week and thought of our current political debates and even religious debates that people in the church have about who Jesus is or isn't – it got me thinking. Sometimes I wonder if it's easier for us to debate Jesus than to truly be open to what he offers us and let it transform us.

We'd rather talk ourselves in circles, getting thirstier by the hour, than just sit back, listen, and take a deep drink of the love and life of Jesus who doesn't want our debate as much as he wants our discipleship.

We are transformed when allow ourselves to be transfixed by the One who came to show us a different way, another way, to be in the world. Perhaps all that we need to do is simply answer the question Jesus asks us, "Are you thirsty?" with an open and honest, "Yes."

And maybe just admitting our thirst and saying "Yes" is

enough for today, because when we say "Yes" – we the allow Jesus to pour something new into us that perhaps we have never felt or experienced before.

No matter the tension around the table or the struggle in our own self, may our thirst always lead us to drink of the life-giving waters Jesus offers us each and every day.

Amen.