What would you say is the greatest river in the world?

Perhaps the Nile, the longest river of the world – more than 4,000 miles long? Or perhaps the Amazon, which discharges the most volume – about 20 percent of the freshwater discharged into the world’s oceans comes from the Amazon. Perhaps the Yangtze, one of the world’s most powerful river that requires many dams to contain it and even then overflows its banks. Or perhaps it is the Atrato (ATROTTOE) in Columbia which is one of the fastest flowing rivers in the world. Or finally, perhaps, it is the Niagara River, as it roars over Niagara Falls at the rate of about 150,000 gallons a second -- one of the natural wonders of the world.

These are all great rivers, created by God. They are awesome to watch and they provide great power and sustain life. But the greatest river in the world is Living Water. It’s what Jesus is and it’s the river of life that Jesus sent to live inside the hearts of believers. It’s the Holy Spirit of God. The living water of the Holy Spirit flows very powerfully out of our hearts to sustain and give life to the world.

The festival mentioned in the Gospel of John is the Festival of Booths. In one way, it was a harvest festival, occurring when farm operations finished one rotation and began again. As part of the celebration, people lived in booths or tents for seven days as a way of reminding themselves of their days in the desert. It reminds them of the days after fleeing slavery in Egypt when they had found living freely in tents in the desert preferable to living the lives of slaves in the lavish residences of the Egyptians. Every morning for seven days, water was drawn in a golden vessel from the pool of Siloam and carried in procession to the Temple. A verse such as Isaiah 12:3, was recited --- Isaiah 12:3 says with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. Loud jubilation and shouts of Hallelujah accompanied the water’s arrival at the Temple. At the temple the water, along with a jug of wine, was poured into silver bowls at the altar and then poured into the ground. From this ritual derived a common Jewish saying “He who has not seen the rejoicing at the pouring out of water from the pool of Siloam has never seen rejoicing in his life.”

The meaning of this rite to the Jews was threefold. The first was that this represents a memorial of the water God provided for their forefathers in that desert. For all their years in the desert, the Israelites never thirsted or became dehydrated.

The second is a symbol of the forthcoming “latter rain.” Then the third is a representation of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the coming of the Messiah. When Jesus says “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,’” he is referring to this third meaning. He is saying that He the Messiah has come and that soon the Holy Spirit will flow out of the hearts of the believers. This is the Holy Spirit that was given at Pentecost, when all those attending began to speak in different languages and to interpret different languages. It is the Holy Spirit that was given as prophesied by Joel. It’s the same Holy Spirit that has been given to us to enable us to show Jesus to the world, to channel His love and His power, to be lifegiving to others -- the same Holy Spirit that gives each of us unique gifts to use in this lifegiving ministry – the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, discernment, prophecy, and many others.

As you recall from last week, Jesus gave his disciples – the church – a very challenging commission – to demonstrate his love to everyone in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and throughout the entire world. With the living water that wells up inside each of us, Jesus equips us, just as he equipped the Early Church, for that daunting task.

James Sidlow Baxter, an Australian pastor and theologian of the 20th century, once said the following:

What God chooses, He cleanses.

What God cleanses, He molds.

What God molds, He fills.

What God fills, He uses.

Jesus chooses, cleanses, molds us and fills us with the Holy Spirit – with water that gushes forth from us to help quench the thirst of the world.

Dr. Michael Green, a Biblical scholar and author, tells this story of two Texas tourists who visited Niagara Falls. As they took the beautiful drive from Lake Erie to the falls they were filled with admiration and awe at the size and power of the Niagara River. Much like I was, when I stood with our search committee when I interviewed here, these two men were particularly impressed with the rapids just above the falls and stopped there to look. From there they could see the massive mist cloud that always hangs over the precipice.

One of the Texans, having been there one before, said “Come and I’ll show you the greatest unused power in the world.” Taking him to the foot of Niagara Falls, he said, “There is the greatest unused power in the world.”

“Ah, no, my friend, not so!” was the reply of the other. “The greatest unused power in the world is the Holy Spirit of the living God.

You, a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, sanctified by the water of Holy Baptism, have received that power. You possess that greatest river of water in the world. Let us go and use that power of the Holy Spirit of the Living God to its fullest

Amen