

John 7 - Wanting What Jesus Wants¹

Before the lesson – Prepare the handout of John 7 (NRSVUE). Have colored pencils used to mark words in the handout, for the Information segment. Prepare the handout, “Thomas Merton’s Prayer of Abandonment” for the Transformational Exercise.

Fellowship Question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

Answer this statement: “If I want something, I _____.”

What is your favorite kind of water? (tap, chilled, flavored, a brand name, etc.)

Information

We come to another long argument in John’s Gospel. In chapter 6, the miracle of feeding over 5,000 persons led to an extended monologue by Jesus that was capped by his declaring, “I am the bread of life.” In today’s chapter, we have a thread based on the image of water.

When we don’t have water, we desire water. We want the longing quenched. Physically, water is more than a desire. It is necessary for life. Jesus deepens this image in the spiritual life. We long for something to quench our lack of wholeness. We may try many things to quench that thirst - pleasures, knowledge, constant activity, even religion. None of these are evil, yet none of these will fulfill the longing we have to become the one God created us to become.

The irony is that even those closest to the one who could fill their deepest longings did not see, at first, that Jesus had come to satisfy those longings and to offer “a more abundant life.” (John 10:10) This included the younger brothers of Jesus and the elder religious leaders.

Before we read John 7, it is helpful to consider the context.

“From 7:1 until 10:21 the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles...is the background of John’s story. This was the most popular and joyful of the three feasts that brought pilgrims to Jerusalem. It was associated with harvest and also with the exodus from Egypt.”²

“The autumnal feast received the name of Sukkot (‘huts,’ but also translated booths, tents, tabernacles”) because the people celebrated it outside in the vineyards where they made huts of tree branches. By theological adaptation this was associated with the dwelling of the Israelites in tents during their wanderings in the desert during the Exodus.”³

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² David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 163.

³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John*. The Anchor Bible, Volume 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 306.

“While the Passover incident in the previous chapter put us in the spring of the year, the feast of Sukkoth (Booths, Tabernacles, Huts, etc.) was in the fall. It marked the festivities attending the grape and olive harvests (September-October), and was soon followed by the rainy season (October-March) when travel was impossible....The festival included a prayer for winter rains (water) and for the renewal of sunlight (light).”⁴

“It included a water-pouring ceremony with singing and trumpet blasts and prayer for abundant rain, and by the time of Jesus the water was associated with the gift of Torah, the law and way of living given through Moses.”⁵

Orthodox Jews continue to celebrate Sukkoth, as seen in this short video:
<https://www.facebook.com/reel/1297716004266078>

As we did last week, our lesson this week will include reading an entire chapter in silence and marking certain words or phrases. Take a handout and two pencils of different colors.

[Distribute the handout of John 7 and colored pencils.]

In one color, mark words that have to do with desire (want, try, resolve, seek, search, cry out, etc.). In another color, mark words that have to do with water (water, thirst, drink, etc.).

[Plan for several minutes of silence for this exercise. When it looks as if most are finished, ask the following two questions. Then, use the following selections from some Bible scholars to address some issues that may arise.]

What did you notice as you did this exercise?

What made you curious?

*“At the heart of the drama is the question of the identity of Jesus and the life he gives, provoking diverse responses and especially challenging those he encounters about what they really want. The language of desire - wishing, wanting, looking for, trying to, seeking, resolving, and searching - reaches its climax in this chapter. One of John’s favorite words, *zetein*, which was first used in the first words of Jesus in 1:38, occurs in verses 1,4,11,18 (twice), 19, 20 25, 30, 34, and 36. In addition, *thelein* is in verse 1 (‘wish’), 17 (‘resolve’), and 44 (‘want’), and *eraunan* is in verse 52, meaning search, inquire, try to find out.’ Above all, there is the cry of Jesus, using the Johannine image of desire: ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink’ (vv. 37-38).”⁶*

Brothers of Jesus: “They are described negatively, as not believing in him, and as being on the side of the world...There is a wider implication for John’s readers: it may be necessary to resist

⁴ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 140.

⁵ Ford, 164.

⁶ Ford, 162. (author’s italics)

the pressures exerted by your family if you are to follow Jesus...The problem with his brothers seems to be that they are tempting him to be successful through miraculous signs, without the basic, essential element of recognizing and believing who Jesus is.”⁷

“The fact that they wish to see Jesus’ reputation grow suggests their own self-interest: if Jesus gains honor, so will every member of his family.”⁸

“Seemingly the brothers became believers after the resurrection, for they are mentioned in Acts 1:14 along with the Twelve. James and Jude became important figures in the Church.”⁹

V. 13, fear of the Jews - “This is a clear indication that ‘the Jews’ are the Jerusalem authorities, for the crowds themselves were certainly Jewish and still they fear the Jews.”¹⁰

“[C]onsiderable time has elapsed since the miracle reported in 5:1-15 (about fifteen months, if that feast was Pentecost); yet that miracle seems to be very much the topic of conversation in 7:21....The Synoptic Gospels show us that the charge of violating the Sabbath which was hurled against Jesus was not based on a single Sabbath healing but on a consistent practice. By using one miracle as the specific instance on which the argument was based, John is summing up a much larger ministry.”¹¹

V. 22. “even on a Sabbath” - “Circumcision took place on the eighth day after birth; if the birth took place on a Sabbath, so did circumcision.”¹²

“The double cry...Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple. His core statement identifying himself points to his origin in God. *The answer to the question about where he is from is who he is from: The one who sent me is true....I am from him.*’ [O]n the last day of the festival, Jesus again cried out: ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.’ But this invitation is given a new dimension by the evangelist’s postresurrection perspective. He looks ahead to the giving of the Spirit.”¹³

“On each of the seven mornings [of this feast] a procession went down to the fountain of Gihon on the southeast side of the temple hill, the fountain which supplied the waters to the pool of Siloam. There a priest filled a golden pitcher with water as the choir repeated Isaiah 12:3: ‘With joy you will draw up water from the wells of salvation.’ Then the procession went up to the Temple through the Water Gate.... Then the priest went up to the ramp to the altar to pour the water into a silver funnel whence it flowed to the ground...It was at this solemn moment in the ceremonies of the seventh day that the teacher from Galilee stood up in the temple court to proclaim solemnly that he was the source of living water.”¹⁴

⁷ Ford, 165.

⁸ Malina, 141.

⁹ Brown, 306.

¹⁰ Brown, 307.

¹¹ Brown, 315.

¹² Brown, 312.

¹³ Ford, 167. (author’s italics)

¹⁴ Brown, 327.

“The two cries of Jesus carry us further into answering the two questions in John 1: ‘Who are you?’ and ‘What are you looking for?’ They correspond in classical theology to the double concern with the ‘person’ and the ‘work’ of Jesus Christ. John opens up one dimension after another of who Jesus is, and one dimension after another of his work in shaping and fulfilling people’s deepest desires, his coming so that ‘they may have life, and have it abundantly.’ (10:10).”¹⁵

37-39 “Coming on the last day of the Feast of Sukkoth and in the temple, this declaration of Jesus suggests that he is the life-nurturing water for which the pilgrims prayed.”¹⁶

Raymond E. Brown points to several images in the Old Testament and in the writings of John that can enhance our reflections: 1) water flowing - reminding us of water from the rock in the Exodus (1 Corinthians 10:4); 2) water reminding us of prophets Zechariah 14:8 and Ezekiel; 3) these OT images tie to Revelation 22:1, 17. The image of Jesus AS the Temple in John 2:21.¹⁷

“Psalm 105:40-41 says, ‘He gave them their fill of bread from heaven; he cleft the rock and water flowed forth.’ This sequence of bread from heaven and water from the rock is exactly the sequence we have in chapters 6 and 7 of John.”¹⁸

V. 39 the Spirit - “The symbolism whereby water stands for spirit seems strange to the Western mind, but it is well attested in Hebrew... Verbs applicable to water are used to describe the gift of the spirit, e.g., poured forth (Isaiah 44:3). The soul, *nefes* (which can be translated as ‘spirit’), was looked on as the seat of thirst, since *nefes* seems originally to have meant ‘throat.’...Psalm 42:1-2 ‘As a hart longs for streams of water... my *nefes* thirsts for you, O God.’”¹⁹

45-46 The police “have failed to arrest Jesus. What is worse, they come back impressed by what they have heard. Fine speech would be an unlikely basis for withholding an arrest in our modern society, but in antiquity great speaking implied something positive and powerful about the character of a person.”²⁰

Transformational Exercise

Much of John’s Gospel centers on the challenge to us to be honest about our desires. Do we “thirst” after God and God’s plan for the world’s reconciliation?

[Distribute the handout, “Thomas Merton’s Prayer of Abandonment.”]

Let’s read together this prayer by the monk, Thomas Merton (1915-1968). It includes an honest and humble prayer about our spiritual desire.

¹⁵ Ford, 169.

¹⁶ Malina 154.

¹⁷ Brown, 320-328.

¹⁸ Brown, 322.

¹⁹ Brown, 324.

²⁰ Malina, 155.

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The Unbelief of Jesus's Brothers

7 After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him. **2** Now the Jewish Festival of Booths was near. **3** So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing, **4** for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." **5** (For not even his brothers believed in him.) **6** Jesus said to them, "My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. **7** The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil. **8** Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come." **9** After saying this, he remained in Galilee.

Jesus at the Festival of Booths

10 But after his brothers had gone to the festival, then he also went, not publicly but, as it were, in secret. **11** The Jews were looking for him at the festival and saying, "Where is he?" **12** And there was considerable complaining about him among the crowds. While some were saying, "He is a good man," others were saying, "No, he is deceiving the crowd." **13** Yet no one would speak openly about him for fear of the Jews.

14 About the middle of the festival Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach. **15** The Jews were astonished at it, saying, "How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?" **16** Then Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. **17** Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own. **18** Those who speak on their own seek their own glory, but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and there is nothing unjust in him.

19 "Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?" **20** The crowd answered, "You have a demon! Who is trying to kill you?" **21** Jesus answered them, "I performed one work, and all of you are astonished. **22** Because of this Moses gave you circumcision (it is, of course, not from Moses but from the patriarchs), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. **23** If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath in order that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I healed a man's whole body on the Sabbath? **24** Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."

Is This the Christ?

25 Now some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, "Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill? **26** And here he is, speaking openly, but they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah? **27** Yet we know where this man is from, but when the Messiah comes no one

will know where he is from.” **28** Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, “You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him. **29** I know him because I am from him, and he sent me.” **30** Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him because his hour had not yet come. **31** Yet many in the crowd believed in him and were saying, “When the Messiah comes, will he do more signs than this man has done?”

Officers Are Sent to Arrest Jesus

32 The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering such things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent temple police to arrest him. **33** Jesus then said, “I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. **34** You will search for me, but you will not find me, and where I am, you cannot come.” **35** The Jews said to one another, “Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? **36** What does he mean by saying, ‘You will search for me, but you will not find me’ and ‘Where I am, you cannot come?’”

Rivers of Living Water

37 On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, **38** 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.’ ” **39** Now he 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.

Division among the People

40 When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, “This is really the prophet.” **41** Others said, “This is the Messiah.” But some asked, “Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? **42** Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?” **43** So there was a division in the crowd because of him. **44** Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

The Unbelief of Those in Authority

45 Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, “Why did you not arrest him?” **46** The police answered, “Never has anyone spoken like this!” **47** Then the Pharisees replied, “Surely you have not been deceived, too, have you? **48** Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? **49** But this crowd, which does not know the law, they are accursed.” **50** Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before and who was one of them, asked, **51** “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” **52** They replied, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.”

Thomas Merton's Prayer of Abandonment

Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (1956)

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain
where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself,
and that I think I am following your will
does not mean I am actually doing so.

But I believe
the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire
in all I am doing.

I hope
I will never do anything
apart from that desire.
And I know if I do this
you will lead me by the right road
though I may know nothing about it.

I will trust you always
though I may seem to be lost
and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear,
for you will never leave me
to face my perils alone.