

Opening Worship - Synod Assembly 2019

Sermon: Pr. Khader El-Yateem, Assistant to the Bishop/Director for Evangelical Mission (South)

Gospel text: John 7:37-39

This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. As some of you know, I was born and raised in Bethlehem--not Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, the real Bethlehem. So hopefully you'll enjoy the accent as I preach today. The gospel that I have proclaimed to you is a beautiful gospel, but there is a context to it. And I would like to bring that context to your attention. Here, Jesus just got into Jerusalem, and there is a huge festival of the Booths. All the Jews are celebrating to remember God's mighty acts with them when they were wandering in the desert. They got hungry, and they were thirsty, and they went to Moses and they were complaining. And God told Moses, "just take this stick of yours and hit this rock, and the water will come gushing out of that rock." And it did. So, in that festival, they were remembering what God has done for them--remembering that water that God gave them to quench their thirst in the desert. Have you ever been in the desert? Boy, I tell you, when you get thirsty--you get thirsty. And when that sand gets into unnecessary places, it's very painful. That celebration in Jerusalem was to recall what God has done for them. And they would go to the Lake of Solomon to draw water, and they would pour it on the altar to remember what God has done for them. During this Assembly, my colleague Rob Carlson and I are speaking to you about Vitality. Jesus in today's gospel, when he's inviting people to come and drink, he's inviting them into a life of vitality. Not only to drink, but to become overflowing with the living water that is poured in them. Today the gospel is calling us to remember how we are connected to God, how we are connected to each other as the church, and how we are connected to our communities. Today God is calling us into a living relationship with the world. The world is changing, and the world is broken. And we cannot live our Christianity behind closed doors, because the world is looking for Jesus, and we need to offer Jesus to them.

I will tell you this story. When I was in seminary in Egypt, our custodian was very involved in our lives as students. Every night he would clean the seminary and he would take the garbage out. And he saw something strange. He saw this man comes every night to look through the garbage. He felt bad for him, so he got some food and some drink. The next day when he came, he went to offer him the food and drink. And the man said, "no thank you, I'm okay." But day after day, that man--every time the custodian took the garbage out--would come to look in the garbage. The custodian came to us and said, "guys, there's this guy who comes every night to look in the garbage. Can you do something to help him?" So myself and some of my colleagues in seminary we bought some food and some water and some clothing for him, and when the custodian went to take the garbage out, he came to look in the garbage, and said, "are you okay, can we offer you this gift?" and he said, "no, thank you, I am okay." So we said, "please tell us--what are you looking for in the garbage?" And this is what he said. He said, "I am hoping that one day you will throw a copy of the Bible in the garbage, and I will be able to find it and read and discover who this Jesus is." He was looking for Jesus in the garbage. We were so consumed and so busy trying to find him food and drink and clothing, and we failed as seminarians to offer him the most important thing he was looking for--Jesus.

Brothers and Sisters, Jesus is calling us today through this gospel reading to care about the world and those who still suffer in the darkness away from Christ, to come and to enjoy this relationship with this living Lord. Jesus said, "out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." And that's why when we speak about Vitality, we speak about how we are connected to God. I had a friend of mine in California ask me to be his mentor as a pastor. And his church is growing, and he said, "you know what, my pews are full, but the people are empty." They wanna come to enjoy the music, to enjoy the sermon, and they go home unchanged, untouched. They don't want to live their relationship with Christ. When we come to that relationship with Christ, our lives are transformed. We don't know about God, we know God. We're not fans of Jesus, we are disciples of Jesus. We know how to do church, but I believe Jesus is calling us through this reading to BE the church in the world today. There's a big difference. To be the church to a broken world. Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water. We need to be grounded in prayer, and the whole vitality process speaks

about prayer...inviting the whole church to commit to a life of prayer so we can grow in our relationship with God so we can be empowered in our ministry. We can act in love, and we can live in love and we can change people's lives, because Jesus has changed our lives.

You know, I grew up in the Middle East, in Palestine, in the Holy Land, so you know something is coming about that, right? So the river Jordan comes, and then it divides. Some of it goes to the Dead Sea, and some of it goes to the Sea of Galilee. So if you like fishing, and you go to fish in the Dead Sea, good luck. But if you like fishing and you go to the Sea of Galilee, the fish, the scenery, the life is incredible. It's the same water. One is dead and one is alive. Do you know why? Because the water comes from the River Jordan into the Dead Sea and it stays there...it never goes anywhere. The water from the Jordan River comes into the Sea of Galilee and it flows out into the ocean so it's always renewing so there is always life.

Brothers and Sisters, the Holy Land metaphor can teach us something about our own life. If God's spirit is poured in us, and does not flow out of us, it's gonna die in us. If we drink from this living water and that water does not flow out of our bellies into the world, then it's going to die in us. Jesus is calling us today as his disciples, who have drank and have had our thirst quenched, to become rivers flowing in our communities to satisfy the thirst of everyone we meet. Our congregations are called to be living signs of hope in their communities. We are, in this assembly, called to be made new and to become alive in Christ. To realize the potential of our discipleship, and to realize what Christ has called us to do. So today I am calling on all of us, as we engage in this conversation about vitality, as we engage in the conversation about being connected to God and to each other and to our communities, I am calling us to be rooted in our prayerful life so we can become these rivers that flow through our communities and people finding Jesus in us.

Now, I know some of you are going to be asking me--"did you ever give that guy a copy of the Bible?" Yes, we did. We gave him a copy of the Gospel. We connected him to a local congregation. Shortly after that he was baptized, came to seminary, and now is one of the most known proclaimers of the Gospel in Egypt.

Saving lives, as God has saved his life. Sometimes we get so comfortable in our context here in this country. But the world can teach us something about discipleship and how we are living our discipleship in our daily lives in relationship to our neighbor. So my question to you: Got Water? Or are you still thirsty? Are you a flowing river of life that is satisfying the thirst of others? Christ has called us to this relationship, Christ has blessed us with his spirit, to become those believers, that from their heart flow living waters. To him be glory and honor, now and forever. Amen