

John 7:37-39 (NRSV)

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^k the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart^l 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,^m because Jesus was not yet glorified.¹

^k Or *come to me and drink*. ³⁸*The one who believes in me, as*

^l *Gk out of his belly*

^m Other ancient authorities read *for as yet the Spirit* (others, *Holy Spirit*) *had not been given*

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Drink Living Water

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: May 15, 2005

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: John 7:37-39

Today we are going to talk about money. We're also going to talk about our life together as North-Prospect Church. And we're going to talk about the living water we can drink, and the living water that can flow from within us. Today we are going to talk about how all of these things intertwine and form a strong braided rope that makes us whole.

I want to start with what seems the most pedestrian of these topics. Maybe it's also the one we are least comfortable to talk about. I want to start by talking about money. I want to talk about how we make decisions about money.

So, here's a great big dollar bill. Let's say this dollar represents all my money. How do I go about spending my dollar? Well, first, I need to take care of things I have to. Let's say I'm going to pay about 25% in various taxes. No choice there. So, three, 25% is gone.

According to the statistics, I'm going to spend almost about 35% of what I've got left on sheltering myself: on my housing, household expenses, and utilities. Okay, so that's 35% of the rest gone.

Let's see. Then there's a whopping 20% for my automobile and other transportation costs. Got to have that. Then, I've got to eat. That's another 15%. Whoa, there's another 35% I'll try to put about 10% in savings for retirement. Another 10% gone.

Let's see. Then there's about 5% for clothes, another 5% for entertainment, another 5% for healthcare. That's another 15% combined.

Wow! I've only got 5 cents of my after tax dollar left. And there's still a lot more to go. How about money for education? Also, how about emergencies? What about that special vacation I've been hoping for? Well, that last 5% isn't going to go very far, is it? Oh boy, and now it's time to think about my church pledge. Stewardship Sunday. This is bad. I don't think I've got anything left over for stewardship. In fact, I think I'm already into the credit cards. Ugh, the faster I go, the farther I get behind. Am I ever going to have enough?

It's so frustrating. I have many times more money than the average person in the world. Even though I do not consider myself wealthy, I am probably in the top 10%, maybe 5% in the world. That is, 90% or 95% of the world is worse off than I am. In one day I earn more than many families in the world earn in one full year. And even so, I cannot seem to get ends to meet. How frustrating, indeed. No matter how much I have, or how hard I try, I seem to have little left over for things that really matter to me.

Well, to be truthful, my problem isn't entirely that I don't have enough money, is it? It may not even be most of the problem. Maybe most of the problem is what really matters to me. A Lutheran Bishop I know says it bluntly. "Show me your checkbook, and I will show you what you believe in," he says. Show me your checkbook, and I will show you the things that you really value. Jesus said it another way, "Where your treasure is, there also is your heart." It's true, isn't it? Yet, how many of us would want that to accept that who we are at our core is

found in how our checkbook looks? I have to admit that the thought makes me shiver a bit.

Stewardship in the church isn't, then, so much a matter of upping your pledge to the church; although I know the finance committee will not be against that. And truthfully, in the end, you may want to up your pledge, maybe even significantly. But before we get to that point, Stewardship offers us a far more important opportunity. It offers us the opportunity to survey how we live our lives, how we live our values, and how we order our priorities. In the end, Stewardship offers us the opportunity consider where we find the water that refreshes and nourishes us, the water that makes us whole, where we find what Jesus calls living water.

Let me offer you another parable. Imagine that all the things you have to do today are a big pile of gravel. And imagine that your day is a big vase. Got it? All the things you need and want to do are a big pile of rocks and stones and sand. And today, the container you can put these things in, is a glass vase. So you start filling the vase (your day) with gravel (the things you have to and want to do). You just shovel the gravel in, shovel after shovel. The vase grows ever more full. You shovel ever more in. But, alas, you come to the point that the vase is chock full. The problem is, there is still a huge amount of gravel that doesn't fit in the vase. There's a whole lot left to do that you didn't get done today. Do your days ever end up like that? Mine sure do.

Well, let's take a different approach. You've got the same pile of gravel. You've got the same vase. But instead of shoveling the gravel willy-nilly into the vase, you do something a little different. You start with the biggest rocks in the gravel. You put the biggest rocks in the vase first. Next you put in the slightly smaller rocks, and they kind of rattle and filter down into the open spaces between the biggest rocks. Then you put in the next smaller rocks, and they do the same thing. And finally you put in the sand, and the sand slips and slides into all the cracks that are left. And lo and behold, you have gotten the whole pile of gravel into vase.

Isn't that great? If you set your priorities correctly, if you start with the big important things first, you get everything done; you get everything into the vase. Right? Not exactly. This fable is a bit misleading, isn't it? For the high-powered over-achievers among us, the moral of the story seems to be that if we prioritize everything perfectly and manage our time to within an inch of our life, we can get done everything we ever wanted to get done. We can have it all. Many of us give it a try. We balance work and family and recreation, trying to fill the jar as full as possible. We may even go to business school to learn how to do it better.

However, there are more than a few problems when we look at the parable this way. The beginning idea is brilliant. The parable tells us to put the big rocks in the jar first, before we start putting the less important things in. Otherwise the less important things in life will squeeze out the important things. So far, so good.

But what about the fact that we can't even fit in all the big rocks. It would be nice if we could fit all the important things into our jar of life. It is true that we can do a better job by being careful to put the big rocks in first. But time management sets us in search of the holy grail of a perfectly organized life in which we get everything done we want to. At the end of the day, though, no matter how carefully we organize our lives, we won't get even all the important things into the vase.

So, our project is a little more complicated than at first it seems. We are probably going to have to differentiate between the some of the big rocks. Which ones are the biggest? Make sure those go in the jar first. Now, we're cooking.

Oops, wait a minute though, we've still got a couple of problems left. First, I'm not sure that we're always that good at telling which rocks are the biggest. I'm not sure we always get it right about what's most important. This takes us back to our dollar bill. Today we spend an inordinate percentage of our dollar on our homes. We spend over a third of our dollar on housing. Even so, many of us may be living in a modest fashion. But many of us are not. In the suburbs today's garage is as big as a house was in the 1950s. Isn't that amazing? Today garages are as big as houses used to be. And the houses now are quite extraordinary. If you drive through the communities around Boston that have large building lots, the normal house being constructed today is what we used to call a mansion. They often look like small hotels.

Of course, to afford these houses, the people have to have high-powered, high-demand jobs. In fact, both spouses may be working 60 plus hour weeks. The big house, which requires the big job are big rocks. They take up a lot of the jar. But are these big rocks really as big as we think they are, or as big as we allow them to be? Have we let these rocks take on more importance than other ones that are really bigger? What about your children, our loved ones, our education, our dreams, our faith, a worthy cause, teaching or mentoring others, doing things that we love, time for ourselves, and our health? Are these really smaller rocks than the rocks with which we often fill our days?

A few of us may be getting the rocks in the right order. You are our mentors. Others of us have thought about these questions. We realize that there are a lot of important things that we aren't getting done. We say to ourselves that we will get around to the really important rocks after awhile. But first we have to get ourselves established. First we have to build our wealth. First we'll make sacrifices so we can have it better later on.

There are some real dangers when we think this way. First, none of us knows how big our jar actually is. None of us knows how much time we have. If you're life were to be taken from you today, would you be satisfied with how you have lived it? Would you say that you paid the attention to the big rocks that you would have wished to? Would you have accurately identified and attended to the things that really matter?

Of course, we can't entirely live as though we are going to die today. Our friends and family members will grow weary of our mournful good-byes. Neither our banker nor our spouse will be impressed that we spent all our money in case we didn't make it to tomorrow. But the point is not so simple-minded as that.

I tell my graduate students that I will not believe them if they tell me that they will change their ways after they graduate. If they tell me that in graduate school they are too busy, but that after they graduate they will pay more attention to their family, that after they graduate they won't work as many hours, that after they graduate they will eat better and exercise more, I tell them, "I simply do not believe you." The reason is simple. The choices they make in graduate school will endure. There will always be pressures. And their ways of dealing with them will become habits. Think of the guy with the huge house and high-powered job. How many of these guys do you know who suddenly change their stripes? I feel more reluctance about calling my parishioners liars than I may my students, but the point is the same. If we keep putting off the big rocks of our children, of our loved ones, of our dreams, of our faith, of our causes, of the things that we love, of time for ourselves and others, and of our health, if we keep putting these off, we won't just delay them, we will never get to them.

This is where the church community comes in. The messages in the culture bombard us

with a version of what the big rocks are. We know the story. The big house, the big car, the expensive clothes, winning at all costs. These are what count. But here in the church community we find a different set of values. Here we identify the big rocks in our life of faith together. Here we learn that the big rocks are love God and one another. Don't worry so much. Help the poor. Simplify. Be generous. Build your house on solid ground. Love yourself, because God loves you. Also, forgive yourself, because God forgives you. Don't confuse Caesar with God. Don't confuse mammon with God, either. Drink deeply from all of these things, for they are the living water, the water that refreshes, the water that does not leave you thirsty.

The church community helps us know what really matters. It becomes our ark and our anchor. And so the church community itself is one of those things that matters most to us. Even as most of us struggle to arrange the rocks correctly in the jar, and even as we stumble in doing it, the church community is there to prop us up and keep reminding us of what really counts. Over these last twenty-two years with you, I have seen in your eyes and in what you have said just how much it means to you.

Twenty years ago we formed North-Prospect Church. It was not an easy matter, especially for the members from Prospect Church, who left their building that had been their church home for many, many years. There was loss and grief and sadness. I shared many tears with you, and you shared even more among yourselves.

Even so, the vote to go forward was nearly unanimous. And we formally celebrated the union on Pentecost, just as we mark it today, on Pentecost. We chose Pentecost for the obvious reason that the first Pentecost marked the beginning of the Christian church. Like those first disciples still to some degree reeling in the wake of Jesus' death, through our tears we made the commitment together for a new beginning.

And why did we do that? I can't presume to know the whole of your minds. But from everything I could tell, it had much to do with just how important the church community was to you. The church community is a big rock, and it helps us recognize life's other big rocks. The church community is the source of our living water.

I began with how we divide up our dollar, a symbol of how we order our lives.

35% housing;
20% transportation;
15% food;
10% savings;
5% clothing;
5% healthcare;
5% entertainment;
5% everything else

Part of the picture is how much we spend on each category. But an even bigger part is where we start. For if we start spending our dollar on the things that really matter, the things that provide living water, two very important things will happen. First, we won't get to the end of the dollar and find that we have little or nothing left over for the things that are truly important. And second, we may find that by starting with what is important we will recognize that many of the things that we thought were important, many of the things on which we spend the most, are actually not nearly as important as we thought they were.

So, here's your dollar. It's up to you to decide how you will divide it up. My prayer is that how you do it will shower you with the blessings of living water. Amen.