**Letting the Spirit Flow**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

Bedford, MA

How many of you know what an icon is? Not the kind on your computer desktop, but rather the kind sometimes used in church. An icon is a special image, usually depicting a scene from the Bible or an image from Christian tradition, often painted on a square or rectangular piece of wood, and stamped with gold. Icons themselves aren’t objects of worship. Rather, when we gaze at them, they are meant to act like a window – helping us, in some mystical way, to look through them and catch a glimpse of God. Icons take something visible and recognizable, and use it to reveal part of the invisible mysteries of God.

On Wednesday afternoon this week, I came across an unexpected icon. I was at the gym, watching the news on my little TV screen as I ran. A water main had broken in East Boston, sending a geyser of gushing water streaming six stories high into the sky. It was a sight to see, all the power and force of that water flowing up from beneath the streets. A force of energy so strong, so near us every moment, and yet often so invisible to us as we go about our daily lives. How often do we think about the incredible flow of energy that runs through the water pipes just beneath our feet? Almost never, until it explodes from beneath the pavement with a great and violent force and radiates upward in a fantastic display of beauty and power.

As I was gazing at this image of a torrent of water released like a geyser on the news, it started to become like an icon for me. The more I watched the water rushing forth from beneath the ground, the more I felt like I was seeing a living metaphor for the Holy Spirit. I think we often underestimate the importance and the power of the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives. Like the pipes that provide our water, the most basic substance that we need for our lives to flourish, often the Holy Spirit remains invisible to us, even as it works to provide life’s most essential gifts. We come to rely so deeply, so instinctively on the gift of water to sustain our lives that we easily forget about the forces at work that provides this gift to us -- because those forces, though quite powerful, often remain out of view. And the same is true of the gifts the Holy Spirit offers us too – because we can’t see it, we sometimes forget about its role in bringing gifts and blessings into our lives.

Just as a young child would say water comes “from the sink” so too, we often fall into the trap of believing that the gifts and blessings of our lives come just from our own effort. But of course, the sink is only the most visible source of our water. And our own efforts are only the most visible source of the Spirit’s abundant blessings found in our lives. In both cases, there are less visible and more powerful forces at work that are the true source of the life-sustaining gifts we receive.

In the Gospel today, Jesus tells a parable to warn us from believing entirely in our own self-sufficiency to manage our lives. Unlike some of the more complicated parables, this one is pretty easy to decode. Jesus contrasts the prayer life of a religious and community leader with that of a tax-collector, a position of low reputation in the 1st century. The Pharisee’s prayer focuses on his own goodness, his own ability to carry out the requirements of supposedly holy living. The tax collector’s prayer focuses on his own insufficiency, his own personal weakness, his own need for God’s presence in his life. At the end of the short parable, Jesus gives us the lesson: the tax man’s prayer is far more good and holy than the supposedly good Pharisee’s prayer. It’s nice when the parables are straightforward from time to time.

What makes the tax-collector’s prayer so holy, is that the tax collector’s prayer invites God more and more into his life. The tax-collector is trying to make the presence of God, in particular the mercy of God, more visible in his life. He knows it is always there, but he can’t sense it and so his life feels broken, incomplete. The tax-collector recognizes that he alone cannot make his life complete, and that the path towards his own wholeness, his own personal wellness, involves becoming more aware of God’s merciful presence in his life.

Conversely what makes the Pharisee’s prayer so insufficient is that his prayer asks nothing of God, and frankly, doesn’t suggest that God has any role in his life whatsoever. Did you count the number of times that I is the subject of the verbs in the Pharisee’s prayer? 4 for 4. He is the subject of every sentence he speaks, whose purpose is to extoll his own goodness, his own self-sufficiency. He has little awareness of the fact that the blessings in his life come from a source beyond himself. He creates no space in his prayer life for God to act, and is almost fully ignorant of the fact that God is acting in his life at all. Or maybe he just prefers not to acknowledge it, to take all the credit for things actually done in partnership with God’s Spirit and grace.

When the water and sewer employees in Boston discovered the geyser on Wednesday afternoon, a frantic search ensued to find the right gate to lower that would cut off the flow of water. I’m sure eventually they found the right one, most likely a very large, very heavy gate of solid steel that would have required tremendous effort to lower into place. It’s not easy to stem the powerful flow of all that water.

The Pharisee seems to have lowered a similar gate in his own heart – either unaware or unwilling to accept that God is working with him, in him, and through him. He thinks of himself as working “for” God rather than “with” God, and so, just like a worker who gets nervous when the boss comes around, for the Pharisee, the real presence of God feels more like a threat than a constant blessing. As a result, his heart is closed to new blessings, new awareness, new gifts. Nothing can flow in, and nothing can flow out.

As you all know, we’re coming to the end of our annual Stewardship season. We’ve heard several reflections this month about the gratitude many of us feel for St. Paul’s and the way it brings new blessings into our lives. I put myself squarely in this category, and consider my participation in your parish community to be one of my life’s greatest blessings.

When I think about my own stewardship of this community and why I pledge to support this parish, it really has to do with my awareness that the blessings of our community, that I value so much, come from sources far beyond myself. I don’t make this church a blessing. Our community is such a blessing because of each one of you. In some way, large or small, each one of you offers the special and unique gifts that only you can to make our parish the community of love, compassion, support and strength that it is. Our community is also such a blessing to us because of those who founded this parish, and who have sustained it over its nearly six decades of life -- people many of us have never met, whose names we don’t even know, but whose generosity provides us today with our physical legacy of the beautiful church building, and our spiritual legacy as a community of care and support. And, of course, our community is a blessing because of the ever-flowing presence of God’s Holy Spirit among us – renewing our hearts, touching our lives, and calling us to love and care for this special parish.

We don’t just choose St. Paul’s. In some way, St. Paul’s chose each of us…that is to say, God chose St. Paul’s for each of us, as a gift to change our lives for the better. St. Paul’s: our parish family, our ministries, our traditions, our missions, and our worship all of it is a holy gift. Created by all of us, our forbearers, and God, to make us all more whole, more well, more reconciled to God and to each other. We give our gifts of time, talent and treasure in thanksgiving for that gift; in thanksgiving for those who made the gifts in ages past and today; and of course in thanksgiving for the ever-flowing Spirit of Christ. Amen.