



Sermon by: Rev. Robert W. Ater
Text: John 7:37-39 + Romans 15:7-13

October 6, 2025

Rivers of Living Water

"Be embraced. This kiss is for all the world." These words are from the final lines of Beethoven's 9th Symphony, the Ode to Joy, performed in a stirring and hope-filled concert this weekend by the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra. In his introductory remarks at Friday night's concert, Music Director Ken-David Masur connected the performance to unification day in Germany being marked this weekend and his *own* memory as a German of the unifying experience everyone felt when the wall that divided Germany for many years finally came down in 1990 and friends and family from East and West were reunited again. "Everyone wanted to hear and play Beethoven's ninth," he said, "as a celebration of the joy felt during this hope-filled and life-changing experience in our lives." Even more meaning was added to the weekend program, Masur added, by the inclusion of two other more contemporary pieces played with "Violins of Hope," through the Milwaukee Youth Symphony Orchestra's program that is including violins that survived the holocaust as a part of arts offerings throughout the city this year. One of those pieces this weekend was the world premiere of J.E. Hernandez's "33,000 stolen sunsets," inspired by the redemption he found after his difficult and life-changing experience in an ICE detention center twelve years ago in Texas. He was in the hall Friday night and you could feel the hope and gratitude in the room as the audience leapt to its feet in applause when he walked out on stage!

Across the world, also on this first weekend in October, Pope Leo is hosting an international conference outside Rome called "Raising Hope Together." Recognizing that environmental disasters like floods, storms, heat waves, and droughts are causing more suffering, the conference brings together scientists, academics, church leaders, humanitarians, and others to discuss the problems at hand, with the hope of identifying and moving forward some real and tangible solutions.¹

The gathering marks the tenth anniversary of a papal encyclical published by Pope Francis entitled "Laudato Si" – Praise Be to You [O God]: On Care for Our Common Home. A call for humans to care for the earth and the world around us, the letter, written not just to the bishops and the Church, but to all people on the earth, frames environmental issues as a moral and spiritual concern and speaks to the problems of ecological destruction, climate change and the urgent need for global action. The event website for this weekend's conference proclaims: "This is our moment, to raise hope together, to unite as a global family of good will, to reflect on the impact of Laudato Si' and chart a path to the future."²

Today's text from the Gospel of John, speaks to the hope of this call, as well, to all members of the global human family, and how this hope comes alive in the life of each person -- using

the metaphor of water, living water. The text opens with Jesus and his followers attending the final days of the Jewish festival of booths (or tabernacles). In ancient Judaism, this was a festival of thanksgiving offering gratitude to God for the annual harvest and for God's protection of Israel in the wilderness. The festival included a ritual in which water was drawn from a pool and offered to God in thanksgiving.³ In today's text, Jesus engages this ancient ritual by offering a new insight and new meaning, as Jesus cries out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." This is what I might call, through a modern Presbyterian lens, Jesus "re-forming" the theological significance of this water ritual. Rather than simply offering this ritual, he takes it one step further by inviting believers to seek him out, to seek God out, for what he calls "living water." However, most significantly for John's audience and for us, is that he doesn't stop there, he says that after drinking the living water, the believer then joins him in becoming the source of "living water." And indeed, not just a little bit of living water, but rivers of living water. This idea, for me, is the crux of the text, as these words move from encouragement and reassurance to become a call to us, indeed a charge to us, to Christ's believers, to be that source, to be and become more and more each day, hearts that flow with Christ's living water. What a charge, what a call to us, to the church, to be together, hearts that flow with *rivers* of living water.

This metaphor came to life several years ago at Immanuel Church when we made a mission commitment to serve with Presbyterian partner, Living Waters for the World. Supported by a long tradition of international mission and service at Immanuel, in places like the village of Mwandi, Zambia and the Kendara Parish outside Nairobi, Kenya, the mission committee was looking for an opportunity to deepen Immanuel's impact by finding a partner on this side of the world where perhaps the reduced travel costs and distance could help us make an even bigger difference for our international partners in mission and ministry. And so in 2015, around the same time as the pope's encyclical of hope for the world, an Immanuel team made its first trip to Cuba to begin a partnership with Living Waters for the World and its Cuba network, eventually helping to install three water treatment systems over a period of about five years, systems that make the water clean and safe for drinking. First, at a Christian Community Center in Cardenas and its farm outside of town and then at the Arrechavalata Baptist Church in Matanzas, a congregation that truly serves its neighbors. Although we've continued to provide support from afar, the pandemic and conditions in Cuba and the circumstances of our own congregational transitions, have kept us from returning until now.

And so, on this first weekend in October, on this World Communion Sunday, as we've been fed at the table with Christians around the world, Immanuel Church is marking our dedication to Christian unity, mission, and service by re-affirming our commitment to help provide clean, living water for our neighbors in Cuba. In three weeks, a team of seven of us from Immanuel will be traveling for six days to Cuba. We'll stay at the Protestant Seminary in Matanzas, worship with our friends again at the Arrechavalata Baptist Church there and talk with them about how their water system is working, the number of people being

served, and how their efforts to educate neighbors about how to safely use clean water is going. We'll also have similar visits with our partners at our other two sites in the Cardenas area. Before we return, we have appointments to meet with two potential partners for a possible fourth Immanuel site in the coming year. Our team will be commissioned here in the Sanctuary during morning worship in two weeks! In the meantime, plan to join us following worship today for a special coffee hour in the Upper Room and a presentation on Living Waters for the World and the trip ahead! Please join us today and continue to keep this team of Immanuel members and friends in your prayers.

Inspired by a 14th century Welsh proverb, one of my clergy colleagues from the Living Waters for the World network wrote the poem that is included on the cover of today's bulletin. "What we need," the poem declares, "in order for sacred justice to fully unfurl, is people who are willing to be a bridge." As I've been considering this charge and the call to bring rivers of living water to people who desperately need it, the beautiful song by Paul Simon, "Bridge over Troubled Water," came to my mind. And while its message is still compelling about how people can be there for one another in tough times - like a bridge over troubled water, I've also been challenged to consider during these times in all of our lives, whether God's call to us might also be *to be a bridge, not over troubled waters, but to them*. And, not just to the very real troubled waters in Cuba, the water that can make people sick without being cleaned, but to the metaphorical troubled waters in our own lives, in our community, and in the world around us. Consider with me, as we re-commit *to being bridges* to living water in Cuba, where in your life, in your world, might you also *be a bridge*. And as we do this work together, as we listen for God's call, let us continue to know and believe that through it all, God is with us as Paul encouraged the early church at Rome, let us also hear and believe that: "the God of hope will fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." And with a final nod to Beethoven, be embraced by God's love and share the kiss of love and joy with all the world. Amen.

¹ <https://raisinghope.earth/conference/>

² Ibid.

³ New Interpreter's Bible, John, p. 542.

The world has more than a bate of bridge burners,
and even quite a few bridge builders,
but what we need,
in order for sacred justice to fully unfurl,
is people who are willing to be a bridge;
people whose identity is so grounded in hope
that they will span the gap with their very selves,
in order for love to blossom
and grace to bear fruit.

Rev. Todd Jenkins, Living Waters for the World