

The Gathering Church
Dan's message 5/31/26
Chasing Smoke, Finding Water - Week 7

Vanity is Smoke
Freely Love Unreciprocated
Display God's Love
Filling of Joy

Living Thirsty

A sermon inspired by themes from Kent Denlinger's book "Living Thirsty"

We started this series talking about Chasing Smoke in the book of Ecclesiastes where the writer refers to all the things of the earth that you try and satisfy yourself with and in the end he says it is all vanity. He had tried it all and it all felt meaningless, worthless. Eugene Peterson in his message translates the word "Vanity" as Smoke. No matter how much you might try to get ahold of it you can't capture smoke. And life is that way sometimes.

On Friday I played a round of golf. We were playing best ball, and we were tied going into the final hole. I stepped up to my last drive of the day and stripped it right down the center of the fairway; longer than I had hit it all day. It was a great feeling. But as we walked off the last green in a tie, the feeling faded. That's life, isn't it.

And if we are not careful we will try and fill our lives up with the pleasures of the world asking them to do something for us that only God can. Even church as great as it can be only partially fill us. Why is this? The only explanation is that **we were not made for this world.**

(Kent) "**A paradox: two thirsts.** One is identified by the psalmists *"As the Deer pants for the water so my soul thirst for the living God"*, and this thirst is alive within each of us, but never to be fully satisfied this side of heaven. **We live outside of Eden but are headed home.** We thirst for perfectly restored relationship with our Creator God and for a home filled once again with God and the harmony and beauty that comes from Him. We are called to live thirsty. (Joe - *Willingly Remaining Thirsty*)

But there is another thirst within our souls, one from which comes moments of deep satisfaction. When we join Jesus in giving our lives away for the sake of God and others, we discover a deep resonance that surprisingly fits who we are and that for which we were created."

Today I want to talk about the second thirst, which Kent says is a paradox to the thirst we have been referring to for the last 7 weeks.

I was eating lunch with a friend of mine this week and he shared a thirst that I too have longed to have satiated on this side of eternity.

He mentioned how he longed to be on a team in a church setting where it was similar to a good athletic team. This would be where each person knew the part that they had to contribute and the combined gifting and talents came together to bring people to Christ, to help them grow in Christ, to build a church, and see the church really make a difference in the city it was in.

He also pondered that maybe the reason He couldn't experience that was because he was outside the inner circles of professional ministry; something maybe people that devoted their life to full-time ministry had the joy of experiencing, but maybe he would never because he has always been more of a volunteer.

[Kent referred in his book (page 92) to playing on a couple athletic teams where there was a chemistry that resulted in effortless movement; where each player knew their role and were familiar with the other players and they really enjoyed the game and won a lot.]

My friend had also been on sports teams that were so good he wondered why the church couldn't strive to operate like an athletic team.

As he was talking I resonated with his thirst. And I think I kind burst his bubble when I shared I have been in 20+ years of full-time ministry and I too have always wanted to be on a team that was fully surrendered to what God wanted; where we were able to love, accept and appreciate each other's gifting and move together in harmony and chemistry and God did exceeding and abundantly more than we could have imagined.

I think this thirst my friend and I were pondering is similar but more in a ministry context.

I don't think he liked hearing that I had never quite experienced what he was describing. He assumed that because I had worked in full time ministry, I had felt that sense of teamwork and I told him there were times where I felt that, but by and large those were short-lived seasons of ministry.

But more often than not, there was a lot of ministry time given to what I would refer to as solid ministries. We stayed in our lanes and did what we were good at without too much interaction between everyone else in ministry.

When I told him that as much as he thought just being in full time ministry would satiate that thirst, the reality is there are many in ministry who are obediently and sacrificially serving without ever quenching the thirst of the kind of ministry chemistry he was thirsty for.

My point in bringing up this story is we both expressed the same thirst we had, from two different viewpoints: neither fully satiated. We noticed it and that is a good thing. Many of us don't even notice this thirst; which is a human, God-given thirst to live and function in teams where relationally everything is good and not just good but running the way it should run.

We could spend the rest of our lives going from church to church, from ministry to ministry trying to find the right team. Maybe instead we should slow down, notice the thirst and present that thirst to God and leave it to Him and his plans for our life whether he will fulfill that in and through us on this side of eternity.

Sometimes, God makes it happen and it's a beautiful thing when it happens. And to be honest, I would love to see God do that here at the Gathering. But if I make it my mission to chase those feelings or create them myself, I've missed the point. When we demand that life provide our fulfillment, satisfaction, or sense of completeness, we're setting ourselves up for disappointment and living potentially miserable lives; trapped by our own unfulfilled thirsts.

But there is a thirst that is deeper than that thirst to be on a well-functioning Team. This thirst is what Jesus found in his life. The disciples were a pretty dysfunctional Team. They argued about status, they misunderstood Jesus, they lacked faith, failed to pray when he asked them to, and scattered when pressure came. One betrayed Him. Another denied Him. Did he give up on them. Did he discard and throw away and look for some better ones. No, he didn't. His Thirst was deeper than finding the right people, the right team, the right church, the right ministry, the right calling, the right job.

When you are aware your deepest thirst is for God, you are freed from this world or other people and right circumstances satisfying your soul. Whether you are on a winning team or losing team, a healthy team or a dysfunctional team, a new team or an old team; you can still love those around you and bring God glory by the way that you relate to them. And when you can see beyond the circumstances and find what God is doing, you have an opportunity to find joy and satisfaction that comes from being in the will of God.

This is the Paradox of the two thirsts: "One thirst longs to be filled by God; and will only be completely filled when we see him face to face; but the other thirst, which I am sharing about today, can be filled as we give ourselves to God's will for our lives; when we love others like He has loved us."

We catch a glimpse of this thirst that can be satisfied when we go back to the story of the woman at the well.

Recall: Jesus stopped and sat at Jacob's well at noon while his disciples went into town to get food. He asks the Samaritan woman for drink of water. She is confused because he shouldn't be talking to her and he has nothing with which to draw water from the well. After a conversation that is full of God's love being released on an unsuspecting woman, she is the first person to whom He reveals Himself as the Messiah. She believes He is the Messiah and the disciples return with food.

When they get back with food they proceed to give some food to Jesus, but he rejects their offer.

They say to Jesus (*John 4:31-34*) ... "Rabbi, eat." ³² But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." ³³ So the disciples were saying to one another, "No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?" ³⁴ Jesus *said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work."

He is saying, "My hunger and thirst is satisfied when I put the Glory of God on display in such a way that others come to know the Father."

A Harvest is beginning to happen in the Samaritan City as the woman is telling everyone about the Messiah. They are getting ready to come and Jesus is saying "this" is what truly fulfills me; it is what brings me Joy; it is what truly satisfies.

Which brings us to the thirst that can be fulfilled this side of eternity. We like Jesus have been made in the image of God and our sin has blurred the image of God. What is most true about me, once I AM REDEEMED, the deepest reality of my heart isn't that I am hungry for the things of this world and sin but I am hungry to love Him and to love others. And when I do this well in my life, when I put his love on display it brings me joy; it brings me fulfillment; it brings me satisfaction. Yes like all the other joys in life it doesn't last but it is a "foretaste of Glory Divine."

Blessed Assurance Jesus is Mine **O what a foretaste of Glory Divine.**

Today is my 51st Birthday. It's hard to believe I have lived over half a century. On my 11th or 12th birthday I was interested in the piano and wanted my own electronic keyboard, and my grandparents took me on a road trip to buy my first keyboard. It was pretty awesome; not only to go with my grandparents alone by myself to Walmart in Merritt Island to get it, but this wasn't just any keyboard. It was the Casio PT-82. Its cost was somewhere between \$100-150 in 1986. In today's money, that would be somewhere between \$300-\$400.

It had cool song cartridges and a "melody guide" feature that helped me learn songs by following LEDs above the keys. And it would keep track of how many times you messed up during the song and rate your excellence at the end of the song. AMAZING!

I do remember annoying my brothers and sisters who heard the same songs over and over again on our trip up to Georgia in our Blue Conversion Van. But I digress.

What's the point? My grandparents, out of their love of their grandkid(s) and joy to buy me a piano, invested in me. I imagine it gave them great joy to give me that gift as they saw how much I loved it. We can't go back in time, but I imagine something in them was filled with joy and little did they know they were stoking the flame that led to me being a musician who still uses those keyboard skills I honed on the Casio PT-82 to lead others in worship.

After Caleb's accident I remember being in quite a numb state, coming back from experiencing all that we walked through in those days. For months I would come into worship and couldn't open my mouth to sing. It was not until a friend of mine, who had heard I did not have a guitar, bought me the guitar that is on the stage that we use every week. That guitar and that gift led to me spending time in my quiet place just trying to find worship again before the Lord. I started singing God's praise, and some sparks of who God had created me to be, started to flow again. My Friend was moved by God, to buy me a gift that he had no idea at the time would get me back to who God had created me to be as a worshipper. He loved and gave extravagantly, and I don't think he could have known what that gift of love did for me.

Every day we have an opportunity to release love to others with the love we have been given, whether it's the gift of time, the gift of listening, the gift of things, the gift of teaching, the gift of investing. It can bring us great joy to release love to others especially when that love can't and probably won't be reciprocated. Both of these examples, for which I didn't reciprocate, were things given to me with no strings attached, because they loved me.

This last year, I had an unexpected joy to go back to working bi-vocationally as we have been planting this church. The Christian classroom has been a unique place where God has used me to help teach and love on students through the love God has placed in me. One of my students presented a challenge for me. From day one, I saw something underneath the hard exterior that I was drawn to, and it became a goal, beyond the teaching of Geometry, to get this student to smile at me. I was unsuccessful for most of the semester until the very last day when to my surprise the student asked me to sign her yearbook. It gave me great joy, that I am sure she will never really know, to see that we had turned a corner and now Mr. Ferguson wasn't such a bad guy.

That was satisfying. It filled my cup that day.

I could keep going on but we have opportunities every day in every season of our soul. Whether we are going through a great time or a dry and weary land we journey through, to love others with the love that God has shown us when we didn't deserve it.

Scripture tells us. *"While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* (Romans 5:8) While we raised our fists in defiance and resistance, He lavished His love upon us when he willingly put Himself into complete surrender to the Father and allowed for Himself to be the sacrificial lamb that would set you and me free.

And the scripture says, “He did this while he was struggling and moping around and complaining about how unloyal and uncaring and unloving his followers were at His time of need.” No he didn’t do any of that. Scripture actually points to quite the opposite: he didn’t care a thing about himself and how he was being treated by others.

In Hebrews 12:2-3 Scripture actually implores us to consider what Christ did for us when he went to the cross; it says. ² *who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.* ³ *For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”*

Quite a paradox isn’t it: Jesus found joy as He endured the hardest thing he would have to endure as a man, giving up his life for you and me.

His food was doing the will of the Father and making His father known to those whom he came to save.

Are you finding joy in your journey? Part of the filling that God wants to give you, the “living water” is going to be found not always when you receive something, but when you give something (love and joy to others) with no regard for what you will receive in return.

Last Story: My same friend who I talked about at the beginning of my message, wanted to be on a team in ministry, and took some time with me one afternoon this week visiting widows and widowers in our community. He thanked me at the end of the day for taking him along. He said, “It was really good for me to get the focus off myself and on to others for a change.” He gave his time and his prayers to people, but he was filled with something in return.

Such is the way of the two thirsts: the first and deepest thirst will never be satiated this side of eternity, but the other thirst can be satisfied as we reflect the glory of God to others, not expecting anything in return. We are walking like Jesus when we do that, and there is a hunger which is satisfied because we are fulfilling the greatest commandments: *“To Love God and love our neighbors as ourselves.” (found nine times in scripture – Matthew 22:36-40)*

So, be patient with the first thirst and trust that in eternity, your deepest hunger to know and be filled by the fullness of God’s love is coming. Don’t be foolish and try to live a life filling that thirst; and be quick to recognize when you are using the things of the world to fill something only God can fill.

But also be eager to put God’s love on display by sacrificially giving your time, talents and treasures to others not expecting anything in return.

(Luke 6:38) **Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.”**

That “measure” that will be returned to you will be something that satisfies you and fills you, brings you joy and meaning in life. It’s not referring to money as a measure coming back to you... **it’s joy; it’s the filling of the second thirst.**