



Texts in Context

Living as Gods on Our Skin

The Vigil of Pentecost and Pentecost Sunday (John 7:37-39)

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Writing about the Gospel of John is like explaining a joke. This is a real problem. I'll try to deal with it as I write the following pages. I suspect that when you preach from John's Gospel you run a similar risk: turning what you know is a knee-slapper into a dud. Don't misunderstand. I am not saying that John is merely funny, though indeed there are some humorous bits. What I mean to say is this: John is profound and poetic and I am neither. My writing just isn't going to convey all of what I know is there in the texts. Even more, when I take on the role of "explainer of texts," I have to realize that these texts are not plain, and they resent being made plain by my act of writing.

Yet there is some reason for optimism. Since I am not now preaching, I have the luxury to dawdle along the way and play with John's words. This will be my way of acknowledging the text's beauty and mollifying its resentment about my turning it simple. As for you preachers, you can do some of this dawdling when you preach (certainly when you prepare). But you have an additional responsibility, which, if you take it too seriously, will make you offend the text and send it running away. Your responsibility is this: when you preach you will have to carry your desire for

What will it mean to "thirst" for Jesus? The "thirst" spoken of in John 7 is much more passionate than we have been trained to imagine. Thirst brings about fantasy. Fantasy takes me out of my everyday existence and opens me to the possibility that things are not as they appear to be.

these texts to your hearers without spilling a drop. To say it another way, you will tell the joke and, if all goes well, the good Christian souls paying your salary will laugh.

Just now I smuggled a word onto the page. Perhaps it took your mind in a direction you thought odd, given the fact that you are reading an article about the Bible. It was the word “desire.” I implied that your best bet against flat-footed preaching of John is that you bring to your hearers your desire for the text. Now it’s no longer an implication. I’ll be explicit: you must inspire in them desire for these words. Let’s defer thinking about whether you actually do desire John’s Gospel (take that one up on your own time), and concentrate instead on the question whether or not desire is even the right term for that which stands between you and the text, and whether it really is desire that you want your hearers to catch from you. What does it mean to desire? What does it mean to desire written words? And what would it mean to desire written words about Jesus, our Lord and our God? To be honest, the answers to these questions are not at all clear to me right now, but I am proceeding on the theory that the text we are gazing at will enjoy being asked precisely these questions. Every text enjoys being asked, I hope.

One thing, I think, is clear. Desire, with all its eating, drinking, and erotic connotations, is an appropriate theological category. We are not violating the Super Law Applying to All Preachers of the Gospel by allowing desire to appear publicly. In fact, desire is the only concept capable of holding together the great building blocks of Johannine theology, which are Spirit, faith, and the glorified (that is, crucified) Jesus. Jesus says so, in so many words, in John 7:37-39, the text you may choose to preach from on the Vigil of Pentecost or on Pentecost Sunday:

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, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Right off the bat, I feel the need to complain. I object to the translation of ἔσθις τις διψῶν (“anyone who is thirsty”) offered here by the NRSV. It should read “Anyone who thirsts.” What’s the difference?

The New Revised Standard Version of thirst is a state of being. It is sitting on the couch thinking a soda might taste pretty good. It is a vague sense of a lack in oneself, and it proceeds to satisfaction by trial and error. That is, it tries to find fulfillment in lesser things until it discovers what it knew it needed all along but couldn’t name—a tall glass of water. It then goes on to demean the lesser means to satisfaction after the right one has been found and possessed. NRSV thirst is Augustine’s way of converting Christianity into Platonism: “[Y]ou have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in You.”¹ Unfortu-

¹Augustine, *The Confessions* 1.1, trans. Rex Warner, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: New American Library, 1963) 17.

nately, it takes the heat out of desire and puts desire into a system that ranks God the best satisfier. Lovers, food, the feeling of wool twining around knitting needles, and other bodily pleasures are contemptible in comparison. If you are a preacher with Augustinian habits, you might say to your hearers: “I know you are unsatisfied with your lives. Your material possessions, your achievements, your hobbies are not giving you real happiness, are they? What you need is God.” This will be the way John 7:37-39 gets preached from most pulpits. Please, don’t let it happen in yours.

The thirst our text speaks of is much more passionate than we have been trained to imagine. It is the thirst of a greenhorn fisherman standing in a Montana river (no help from the river—*Giardia lamblia* protozoa, you know) on a sunny day with the water bottle forgotten on the kitchen counter. No vague sense of emptiness that leads the mind eventually to thoughts of God. No wondering what might taste pretty good. No, this desire is a matter of rushing off to the nearest gas station fifteen miles away, waders forgotten and drooping down around my ankles, and a half-gallon of lemonade ripped from the cooler and guzzled down and only then paid for. I think Augustine would roll his eyes at this man’s desire. The teenage clerk certainly did. Too wild to be redeemed.

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If something like this temporary madness is the thirst that Jesus speaks of, then the text is an embarrassment, for two reasons. First, because it sounds as if Jesus is offering himself to people who are out of control with desire. Second, he wants these parched folks to keep on coming to him and to keep on guzzling *him* down. This really is embarrassing. Coming to our rescue, the Platonists among us will say, “Oh, for heaven’s sake, it is only a symbol. To drink of Jesus is to listen to his teaching and come to a greater knowledge of God so that you can properly order your desires and have God as your greatest good.” The Platonists have toned down our desire and redirected it away from Jesus’ flesh and bone and blood to ideas, concepts, and disembodied divinity, absent from material reality but well represented by words. They have done this to us before. In chapter six of John, when Jesus offers his body to be eaten and his blood to be drunk down, Platonist interpreters throughout the centuries have insisted that Jesus speaks in symbols. Ever try to eat a symbol? Not very satisfying. No thirst-quenching potential either. Dignity and calm are preserved, yes, but such fare is boring.

So, we have figured out what desire is, maybe. It is passion to possess something and guzzle it down. I have assured you that it is theologically okay to think these thoughts. It is more than okay. Jesus says that your desire, your thirst, is the beginning of your... divinity. Where do I see humans being made divine in the text?

It was only for an instant. I thought I glimpsed divinization darting between the words. Maybe, if I retrace my steps, we can spy it out together.

I haven't yet told the whole truth about thirst. There is a paradox in desire that must be appreciated before we can say we understand it, to the extent that anyone can say they understand it.² There is an element of pleasure in thirst. Let's go back to my fishing trip. As the sun baked me there in that river in Montana I fantasized about cool water running over my lips, over my tongue, and coating and cooling my throat. The fact that I was standing knee-deep in cool, running water, unfortunately carrying nasty microorganisms, only contributed to the pleasure of my thirst by teasing my imagination with how good it was going to feel to have a drink. Thirst brings about fantasy. Fantasy takes me out of my everyday existence and opens me to the possibility that things are not as they appear to be.

I began to think about myself in relation to my body in a new way. I'll admit, I was not as lucid then as I am now, but something big happened in that river that seduces me to reconstruct the experience. (Isn't that the way with all conversion stories?) It dawns on me now that the surface of my body was not there just to keep my innards in. I don't think I am alone in thinking that skin is our edge to the world and that I live on *this* side of the edge. But on that hot afternoon, my surface—the skin on my lips, my tongue, and the lining of my throat—these became touching points to the outside, from which my salvation was to come. As I dried out, my surface became more and more me, and the “me” felt more alive and more electrified than before when I was tucked safely away inside my skin. I was not having an out-of-body experience. I was having an *on* the body experience. My insides were hollowing out. They were becoming empty, and if I was going to continue to be me it would have to be on my surface. Like people going to the second floor, then the attic, and then finally the roof to escape flood waters, I was out there living on my skin. Only it was an inner flood of emptiness that drove me out there. So here is the paradox in desire: at the same time I was in a panic, my lips cracking and my tongue thick and dry, I was intensely aware of myself, primed for pleasure.

Have we seen our divinization yet? Not yet. Almost. Patience. We have learned something about thirst, though. From the outside, it looks like a foolish man losing all decorum on his way to the lemonade. From the inside, it is the discovery of the soul homesteading on the lips. I stand on the surface of my skin and peer into the world for the pleasure that is to come. Would you say that a skin-dwelling soul is divine in its happiness? Or is it miserable? Or is it both?

There is another paradox that we must reckon with in this Pentecost passage. The NRSV does not let readers see it, however. The NRSV Jesus quotes Scripture: “Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.” The shroud hiding the paradox is the word “heart.” When you pull out your Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament you would naturally expect to find καρδία. Instead, what you discover

²For this insight and others in and behind this essay, I am indebted to Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

is that the rivers of living water are flowing out of the believer's κοιλία (“cavity of the body,” “belly,” “intestines,” “womb”).³ This word has to do with empty space, hollowed-out areas. The paradox consists of rivers flowing out of emptiness.

The NRSV does more than make an innocent mistake. It perpetuates the emanationist or expressivist theory of personhood that has dominated the Western intellectual tradition. Dominated you and me too, I am afraid to say. What do hearts do in our modern way of speaking? They bubble over with love. They seek to make themselves known to other hearts by expressing themselves, pouring themselves out, or by revealing themselves. Mention “heart” in everyday discourse and people will think you are speaking about someone’s fullness, which can afford to let some, and maybe quite a bit of, love, care, or philanthropy flow out and be registered as this particular person’s mark on the world. We speak this way about God, too. God is the person God is precisely because the divine heart overflows. God expresses himself and reveals himself in the material world. (And it is always a *himself* that is expressed and revealed.) Completely self-sufficient within himself, God freely allows himself to overflow and voilà... creation, redemption, and sanctification.

“I just saw divinity!” No, wait, it’s divinity alright, only it’s the wrong brand.

I will explain this misleading God-sighting. Let’s just suppose that NRSV is correct to write down “heart” as the source of the rivers of living water. Then we could understand the narrator’s direct speech to us readers as a claim about our divinization: “Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive.” We believers, when we receive the Spirit, become like God. That is, we too become rivers overflowing and self-expressive. Our hearts are the natural place for this to happen, because, as we all know, the heart is the seat of our identity. Each of us is a self living inside his or her skin, representing to the outside world through our spoken and written word the character of our heart. Now that the Spirit has come to us, each of us is a Self living inside his or her skin, representing to the outside world through our spoken and written word the character of our Heart. The Spirit makes us more of what we already are. Grace capitalizes nature.

I don’t believe a word of this. I stood in that Montana river with my soul perched on my dry lips, so I know I am most alive and most me when I am thirsty, painful as that experience might be. And I know Greek: κοιλία means hollow space—not a bubbling over, self-expressive heart. I know that if we are going to spot our divinity in Jesus’ words, then we are going to have to work with the materials that the good Lord, through the poetic abilities of the Evangelist, has given us: thirst, inner emptiness, and Spirit (the Spirit that doesn’t exist until Jesus is glorified [crucified]).

First, there was pleasure in thirst. Then there were rivers flowing out of the empty parts of our innards. Now for the final paradox, the one that will turn the lights up a bit on this passage so that we can see our divinity—our real divinity, that

³Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978) 966-967.

is, not the fake one of overflowing self-perfection, which is not the Spirit's divinity either. The final paradox is in the last half of verse 39, which, predictably, has been eliminated from the lectionary reading (Go ahead, include it at Pentecost; the lectionary police can't be everywhere): "for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified." You are right to stumble over this verse. We think that Spirit is divine. We are correct on this. We think that that it is impossible for the divine not to be. Maybe we have something to learn here about what divinity is, so that we will believe it when we become divine.

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when he drew the whole world to himself to cover him and to be
joined to him as water is joined to parched lips to satisfy desire"*

"Spirit" is the word the ancients (particularly the ones who wrote love poetry) had for the mobility of the soul. They were on to something. Go back to the river in Montana one last time. It was a spiritual experience I had when I desired water. My soul migrated from my insides and dwelt on my lips. Spirit is the soul's flight outward. It is the soul living ecstatically and passionately, opening itself to be covered by and joined to the outer world. Something like this is happening when the author of John repeatedly calls Jesus' crucifixion his glorification. To be glorified is to have one's identity recognized and praised. For John, Jesus' identity is recognized and praised in his death for the world, when he drew the whole world to himself to cover him and to be joined to him as water is joined to parched lips to satisfy desire. Jesus is most himself, full of the electricity of being alive, when he draws the world to embrace him as he lives out there on his skin, waiting to be refreshed by your body joined to his. Of course there was no Spirit until Jesus drew you to his crucified body. Remember what he said before he died: "I thirst." And soon after, we read, "he bent his head down and handed over the Spirit" (John 19:28-30).

You are Gods. Scripture does not lie (but it does tease). ⊕

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