

Rivers of Living Water

May 31, 2020

THE PIGEON RIVER

Can we take Jesus' words seriously—that he will give to us hearts flowing with living water? Why not? For our church picnic sermon this Sunday, I'm going to bring you some poetry about rivers of living water from various places in and around us—rivers nearby that can remind us how we're all connected through the Spirit.

Leonardo Da Vinci—the famous artist and genius, put it like this: “In rivers, the water that you touch is the last of what has passed and the first of that which comes; so with present time.”

In other words, when we live in the moment, we can recognize that we ARE water, just like a river, 2/3rds of our bodies are water, anyway. And we can recognize, when we live in the moment, that this water is “the last of what has passed and the first of that which comes.”

Every river connects, all waters flow together, even those within us. Through the Living Spirit, we are, like any river, distinct, unique, irreplaceable, and at the same time truly one, united, flowing together.

Norman Maclean, the University of Chicago professor of English and author of the memoir (also a movie) called “A River Runs Through It,” put it like this:

“Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters.”

People everywhere have been haunted by waters, throughout time. There are sacred rivers, like the liquid *shakti*, or female energy, of the Ganges. Or there is the faithful wife Oya, otherwise known as the River Niger. There is the New Zealand's Whanganui River, which is a living, breathing ancestor to the local Māori. In 2017 it became the first river in the world to be granted the same legal rights as a human being. There is the Urubamba, in today's Peru, running past Machu Picchu, which the Incas thought was a direct reflection of the Milky Way, a celestial river known as "Mayu," whose waters watered the sky. There is the Nile, the Amazon, and this river, the Pigeon. This water is sacred.

THE EMBARRASS RIVER

In Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe, and the Middle East, are found stories of waters that preceded humans, preceded life, and from which life came. The Bible practically drips. Water or “waters” appear 694 times in 620 verses, as seas, rivers, and streams, in wells, cisterns, jars, bodies and more.

Creation begins in waters in the Bible, in both versions of the story, in a truth that transcends time. In the first creation story, in the Book of Genesis, we hear about the “boundless deep,” the wild *tehom*, upon which the Spirit of God moved. In the second creation story, there are four rivers that run together around the garden of delight, which is what Eden means: the rivers Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates.

Every river is different, but they all represent our biological origin and a sensual delight—a collective and personal Eden.

I am here at Hayman Falls, on the Embarrass River. The Embarrass is a tributary of the Wolf River. Its name was given to it by the French, for whom the word embarrass does not mean “I’m ashamed.” It’s a noun meaning obstacle. The river was, and is, often clogged with fallen logs or big boulders.

The power of this water is as impressive as it is beautiful. It flows at over 1,000 cubic feet per second, according to American Whitewater.

And that power of water in movement is why the Prophet Amos used it as a metaphor for the way of Torah, the way of justice, which trumps (sorry) any pious and solemn assemblies we might imagine in this era of so-called “sacrifice.” So, hear these words of Amos: “I hate, I despise your festivals,” says the Lord, “and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” This water is sacred.

THE WOLF RIVER

The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born in Ottery St. Mary, Devon, in the Southwest of England, in 1772. The village is named for the River which runs through it, called The Otter River. In his sonnet, “To the River Otter,” Coleridge remembers the river from his childhood, which for me would be this river, the Wolf:

Dear native Brook! wild Streamlet of the West!
How many various-fated years have past,
What happy and what mournful hours, since last
I skimm’d the smooth thin stone along thy breast,
Numbering its light leaps! yet so deep imprest
Sink the sweet scenes of childhood, that mine eyes
I never shut amid the sunny ray,
But straight with all their tints thy waters rise,
Thy crossing plank, thy marge with willows grey,
And bedded sand that vein’d with various dyes
Gleam’d through thy bright transparence! On my way,
Visions of Childhood! oft have ye beguil’d
Lone manhood’s cares, yet waking fondest sighs:
Ah! that once more I were a careless Child.

Under the weight of COVID-19, and stay-at-home orders, it’s good to remember what it was like to be a “careless child,” and being near a river where you might try skipping stones would be a good way to rediscover that spirit, no?

After all, every river is replete with stones and rocks, which are themselves used as a metaphor by Paul for our life in Christ, through the Spirit. We are “living stones,” Paul says, which is no doubt a metaphor that the Menominee, the first people to care for and live from this river, would appreciate.

This little spot is on my way to church on Route 156, just a few miles outside of Clintonville. But if you go upstream to the Menominee Nation, and Big Smokey Falls, there’s some great whitewater awaiting you. Over the course of a six-mile run (3-4 hours), you go through Otter Slide, Thompson’s Rapids, the Wolf River Dells, and Big Smokey Falls, which in high water is about a fifteen-foot drop. Exhilarating—better than any ride at Six Flags, in my opinion, because this water is sacred.

THE FOX RIVER

This River, the Fox, was not named for the animal, but for the peoples who first navigated its waters—the Fox tribe of Native Americans, whom the French encountered in the 17th century. At one point, anthropologists estimate, as many as 12,500 Fox, Menominee, and Ho-Chunk Indians, along with others, lived along its banks. The Fox were forcibly relocated to Oklahoma in the 1870s; the Menominee and Ho-Chunk are still here.

In the Menominee language the river is known as *Meskwahk̄w-Sīpiah*, which means “Red Earth River.” In the Ho-Chunk or Winnebago language, the Fox is known as the *Nionigera*—a word whose translation I wasn’t able to discover (Winnebago, as you probably know, means “dirty or stinking waters.”)

Today, due to a massive clean-up effort that has taken over a decade, the river is the cleanest it has been in fifty years. I like to imagine what it was like when the first members of Union Church encountered it, in 1836. You can be sure it was lined with trails—some of our river-side roads no doubt follow their paths, and trees. And imagine—you could drink the water directly from a cup. Not quite there, yet....

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who lived during the time when those first Union members were settling here in Green Bay, wrote an ode to the Charles River, in Boston, that he lived near for four years. His poem evokes some of what many of us might feel about these waters. It reads, in part:

River! that in silence windest
Through the meadows, bright and free,
Till at length thy rest thou findest
In the bosom of the sea!
Four long years of mingled feeling,
Half in rest, and half in strife,
I have seen thy waters stealing
Onward, like the stream of life.
Thou hast taught me, Silent River!
Many a lesson, deep and long;
Thou hast been a generous giver;
I can give thee but a song.
Oft in sadness and in illness,
I have watched thy current glide,
Till the beauty of its stillness
Overflowed me, like a tide.
And in better hours and brighter,
When I saw thy waters gleam,
I have felt my heart beat lighter,
And leap onward with thy stream.
Not for this alone I love thee,
Nor because thy waves of blue
From celestial seas above thee
Take their own celestial hue.
Where yon shadowy woodlands hide thee,
And thy waters disappear,
Friends I love have dwelt beside thee,
And have made thy margin dear. ...

Friends my soul with joy remembers!
How like quivering flames they start,
When I fan the living embers
On the hearth-stone of my heart!
'Tis for this, thou Silent River!
That my spirit leans to thee;
Thou hast been a generous giver,
Take this idle song from me.

It is also because rivers are such “generous givers,” that the writer of the Book of Revelation imagined heaven with a river in its midst, just like our city:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and God’s servants[c] will worship there; 4 they will see God’s face, and God’s name will be on their foreheads. 5 And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

This water is sacred.

BAPTISMAL FONT

And it all comes back here for us, doesn’t it? THIS water is sacred.

We baptize not to magically wash away sin—although there are Christians who think that way.

We baptize as a reminder that God’s grace is like water—it flows over and around and through us, uniting us, strengthening us, giving us life. God’s grace is like water; God’s grace IS in water.

We drink water, wash with water, clean with water, bathe in water, swim in water, sweat water, and are born in water. Water takes endless shapes and forms. As my mentor Martin Marty put it, in a little book on baptism: “There is mist, dew, droplet, rain, torrent; rivulet, brook, creek, river, whirlpool; there is lake and most of all the boundless depths of the sea. . . . Water produces power, cleanliness, life; it can be evaporated, frozen, changed.” Water teems with energy.

We baptize children because they are beloved: they represent new life. Children point us to the flow that comes after us. Or, as Congregationalist ministry Henry Ward Beecher put it nearly 150 years ago: “Love is the river of life in the world.”

Through Jesus, and the gift of the Spirit, God’s creative and loving power brings us into community, and washes us daily, each moment, for a new beginning. Forgiveness is as real as the water with which we wash every day, as we forgive others and wash away their sins with our own acts of love and mercy.

To those who believe, through the Spirit, God is a river of living water, flowing through our hearts, carrying us all through whatever worries we have, wiping away our petty attachments, flowing with power toward justice.

These rivers of living waters, we might imagine, are the everlasting arms of a loving God, so:

What have I to dread, what have I to fear,
Leaning on the everlasting arms
I have blessed peace, with my Lord so near,
Leaning on the everlasting arms...

And all God's people say? Amen.

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