

Faith Mennonite Church
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Phil Stoltzfus

Does our river live?

Genesis 2:4b-6, 10; Isaiah 41:17-20; John 7:37-38, 40a, 44

Does our river live? Does *your* river live?

The life-giving and life-sustaining power of the river comes to us as a major image in the biblical storyline already in the creation narrative in Genesis. After God separates and orders the primordial salt water of chaos, an image of the Garden of Eden is painted for us as a sort of sacred high place that serves as the source for mighty rivers. Kind-of like...Minnesota! Fresh water springs originating in Eden flow out in the four directions to water the earth. And in the garden itself it is these fountains of water that are the crucial sustaining force for plants and trees, as well as for the animals and humans that have initially been given life by the breath of God. Water is that which allows the dust of the ground to become arable land, soil that can be tilled by these first farmers, and to which the patriarchs and matriarchs are continually called back into relationship with throughout Genesis when they have become alienated from the dust of the ground, flooded, and separated from the face of God. It's those rivers, of Mesopotamia, of Egypt, of Canaan, that allow this relationship with God to go on. Does *our* river live?

During the period of the prophets and the exile in the Bible we're continually reminded of the theme of water in the wilderness. Just as God of old created a people through the Red Sea and provided for them drinking water out of the rocks of the desert, so too, now, God is doing a new thing. God will open up the springs and cause the life-giving rivers to flow, allowing trees to take root again (Jeremiah), and the people of God to return from exile and re-establish their fruitful life together again (Isaiah), in a place where justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing river (Amos), and many healing trees will line its banks (Ezekiel). This is the prophetic vision of the river of life in Amos, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah. Does *our* river live?

In our gospel reading for today the scene takes place in the courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus announces, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me." Immediately this becomes controversial and an argument ensues about arresting him. But why? Why would reference to a beautiful ancient image of "rivers of living water" flowing out from the people of God be so challenging and upsetting to some of those in the audience?

Well, the passage immediately before this indicates that the time this exchange is taking place is during the annual fall harvest festival—the festival of booths, recalling the forty years of living out of booths, or tents, in the wilderness. In Jesus' day the ritual had developed that during each of the first seven days of this festival a golden pitcher of water would be carried up to the temple from the pool of Siloam, a nearby reservoir of water fed by the Gihon spring (one of the four "rivers" mentioned in Genesis 2). The water in this pitcher was to remind the people of God's provision of water in the desert, and also for a hope of future salvation or national deliverance in the form of the coming Messiah, all tied together into the ideology of the temple cult of the time.

So when Jesus says these words about coming to *him* to drink, this represents a shift in the official story line. When he talks of streams of water flowing from those who have become part

of the Jesus movement (“who *are* they, anyway... a bunch of *Galileans* from the north?”) this is upsetting to the natural arrangement of things in this *Judean* center of religious, social, and political power. Individual believers, followers of Jesus, are now to be considered a conduit for the salvific acts of God, for the sustaining power of God as represented in flowing, vivifying, living water? What about the priesthood, the temple, the Romans? What about the way things have always been done when it comes to approved rituals of cleansing and corporate purity—of who is in and who is out? Jesus is saying, the source of the life-giving love and compassion of this new community we are building is not found in a particular building, or courtyard, or city, or special social arrangement. The source is Jesus, and Jesus’ new community, the body of Christ. The quickening power of the Spirit flows through each, unique person who has been made alive again in this new circle of friends, and is now flowing in this new stream, this new river, this new Way. Does *your* river live? Does *our* river live?

Well around these parts we might say a river is healthy if there are trees growing along its banks. Last week we read about the image of the tree of life in chapter 22 of the book of Revelation. These trees grow on either side of the river of the water of life, shining bright as crystal and flowing from the throne of God. The trees, we are told, are quite special. They produce twelve kinds of fruit for each month of the year, an internal sustenance for the community, and their leaves represent hope and healing for the nations—an outward healing for all people.

So we might say that we could measure the life of our river by looking at the leaves and fruit that our congregation produces. We could make a big, long list of evidence of the work we do as a congregation as we care for each other and perform acts of service for our neighbors, our city, and our world. We have put a lot of effort into renewing our church building. Many of us have selflessly given of our time on this wonderful project, or on preparing for our 50th anniversary next week, or on the upcoming MCC sale, or on numerous projects right here in Seward neighborhood or in our own neighborhoods. Yesterday I volunteered to help Glenn do a little painting in the entranceway stairwell. It felt really good to do that—to volunteer to be a part of the church’s work in some small way. I highly recommend it!

Yet, as anyone who has recently seen my zucchini plants can attest, you can cover the plants up from the frost and still have wonderful, green, healthy leaves, you can still have luscious blooms and fruits that want to still grow and mature, but if you look closely at the vines, they’re reaching the end of their life—they are no longer, or only tenuously, connected up to their root systems anymore. It’s not enough to have nice-looking leaves and fruit. If they’ve become separated from their roots, they can’t absorb water from the soil. They can’t drink from the river. They’re effectively not alive, and within two or three weeks there won’t be much left of these plants anymore. Are *you* still connected up with your root system? Are *you* still able to drink? Or are you perhaps feeling a little bit like a zucchini plant today?

Well let’s talk about root systems. Some of you might think of roots as something fixed, something never changing, perhaps some family dynamic that holds you back, keeps you from moving, keeps us oppressed and keeps us stuck in the unhealthy ways of the past. But roots are really about movement, the movement of water from the soil up into the plant. It is this movement of nourishment that is absolutely essential for life. And the roots, of course, have to keep growing and moving to where the source of the water is located at any one time. In the biblical passages about rivers and trees you *might* think that the symbol for God is the roots. God never changes, right? God is like a root. But in actuality, it’s the *water* that’s the key. The

symbol for God is the river and the water of the river, as it moves up from the soil through the roots and into the plant—the believer—the church—and then flows outward. That's the way the metaphor works in these passages. In the New Testament, in particular, it is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus that we experience as living, as alive in us, in the sense of it being a flowing, a movement in time, a growing from one moment to the next.

So I'd challenge you today. What are your central images of God? What are the primary symbols that you think of when you think about God? Shepherd? Rock? Mother? Father? Love? Justice? Judgment? Compassion? A starry sky? A partner in prayer? The universe? A flaming fire? Whatever images or stories or concepts or feelings are evoked in you when you think of God, I'd challenge you to reflect upon a sense of a God who is truly alive.

Sometimes we let God die. Sometimes we let our sense of God be taken over by stock symbols from the past that we don't really agree with or believe in. So effectively our water of life is cut off. And then we wonder why we're not going anywhere! We wonder why we've lost our way! Well it's because we need to tap into that sense of creativity and dynamism that allows us to rediscover a God who is flowing again, in many ways flowing freely and unpredictably, and who is constantly making new things appear that we might not expect, or anticipate, or predict.

Two weeks ago Candace and I went up to the North Shore and looked out over Lake Superior from Carlton Peak. It was a clear day, and you could look at the forests stretching out to the north, but the water of the lake itself was completely shrouded in mist, as if a very low-lying cloud was embracing the water right up to the shoreline, and then it stopped. A gorgeous sight. You never know what the water is going to look like from day to day up there.

And that is what God is like. Like flowing water. Like a living river. *That is what a God who is alive is like.*

Your river can live today. *Our* river can live today. It can live when, like Jesus, we affirm that the source of our energy, our work, our spirit, is drawn from that Living Source, the one, true, everlasting Spirit, the only One who can quench every thirst, heal every wound, reconcile with every enemy, and sustain us and the whole earth for the long haul—even for fifty years on the banks of this mighty river, even for another fifty years, and beyond. May God continue to invite us to the water of life, may we continue to accept the invitation to drink, and may we continue to invite others into this wondrous, ever-flowing stream. Amen.