

2019 01 13 – The River

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I want you to think about your favourite place in nature. A place where you feel most connected with yourself and with the universe. Take yourself to that place. Be there for a moment and remember what it feels like. Where are you? Where did you go? How many of you found yourself on or in or near water? We seem to have an attraction, a connection with water, a need to be near water. At this week's bible study someone said, "Of course that's true because our bodies are made up of water." I looked it up and we are around 60% water, men may have an even higher percentage and women a little lower. But our bodies are mostly water. Our physical bodies need and crave water. We drink water to stay alive and we use water to wash our bodies, our clothes, our homes and even our cars. No wonder we want to be around it.

We need water for sustenance and for daily chores, but as we've already noted water is also a place for rest, relaxation and recreation. What kinds of things do you do when you are near water in nature? When you are at the ocean, or the lake, or the river, or even the pool? (*again, wait for responses*) What I love is that, in Canada, we have found ways to enjoy even frozen water. Hockey and curling are two of our favourite sports. We seem to have a physical need to be near water but it's more than that, isn't it? Our need for water goes beyond the physical into the emotional and the spiritual realms of our being.

Water has been a part of spiritual practices for thousands of years. I'm sure we could find it being used in every religion in the world. The ancient Hebrew people immersed themselves in water in order to achieve ritual purity. They believed that living water from a spring could cleanse them of more than just dust or sweat. For the Hindu people, the Ganges River is seen as sacred and many Hindus go on pilgrimage to bathe at various places along the river.

<https://www.ancient.eu/Ganges/>

In today's scripture reading we find Jesus' cousin, John, in his usual location by the Jordan River. Earlier in this chapter the author tell us that "John went through the entire region of the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin" (Luke 3:3). He told the people that they needed to let go of their greedy, bullying ways and turn to the healing power of God. It was through the act of baptism that they demonstrated their willingness to follow a new way of being. As they came up out of the water of the Jordan River it was as if they were reborn into a new life – a life of love and compassion for God, for their neighbour and for themselves.

The people saw that John was filled with the Spirit of God and they wondered if he could be the Messiah, the one they were waiting for, the one that would save them from their oppression. But John told them, "I am baptizing you in water, but someone is coming who is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not fit to untie! This One will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire." John was talking about his cousin, Jesus. John wanted them to know that Jesus had a connection with God that was like no other man alive. That his ministry would be more powerful than any they had ever witnessed.

The most astonishing thing for John, and for many of us, is that Jesus also came to be baptized. Jesus also came to the River. Many would argue that Jesus really didn't need to be cleansed. That he had no need to repent. But I don't care how holy you may be, or how connected to the Spirit you may feel, there is one thing that we all need. We all need to know that we are loved and that we belong. We need to know this especially when we are about to embark on a new and a scary adventure. And Jesus was just about to start his new life as an itinerant preacher and healer. More than anything else, he needed to know that he was not alone.

The scripture tells us that after he was baptized, Jesus prayed, and "while Jesus was praying, the skies opened and the Holy Spirit descended on the Anointed One in visible form, like a dove. A voice from heaven said, "You are my Own, my Beloved. On you my favor rests." When Jesus came to the living waters of the Jordan River, Jesus was reminded that he was not alone. Jesus was reminded that he was God's beloved child. Jesus was reminded that God loved him unconditionally.

Each time a baptism is celebrated here in this church we are reminded of God's amazing grace. We are reminded that each one of us is a blessed child of God. We are reminded that God loves us unconditionally. We are reminded that we all belong in God's world. We are reminded that we have a place of sanctuary and a place of belonging here in this family of God that we call First United Church.

Water has an important place in Christianity just as it has in so many other religions in our world. For us, water is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. It is a reminder of God's grace flowing around each one of us every day of our lives. It is a reminder of God's love and mercy within each one of us.

So today, I invite you to come to the river of life, come to the font of blessing, come to the water. Yes, I am inviting you to come to the font here at the front of the church. I am inviting you to leave your pew and form a line down the centre aisle that will bring you to the life-giving water that resides in the font.

Yes, you may end up standing in line for a period of time. Use that time to meditate, to pray, to reflect. You may want to think about these words from Martin Sheen, the actor and devout Catholic, who when talking about standing in line in worship said: "How can we understand these great mysteries of the church? I don't have a clue. I just stand in line and say, Here I am, I'm with them, the community of [faith]...Sometimes I'm overwhelmed just watching people in line... It is the most profound thing. I never, ever can get over it. It's just something you have to surrender to." <https://onbeing.org/programs/martin-sheen-spirituality-of-imagination-jun2017/>

I invite you to surrender yourself to this experience. When you come, bring whatever is troubling you in this moment and offer it to God. Come to the font and dip a finger or two in the water and bring a drop to your forehead or your lips. Come and pray as Jesus prayed. Come and be reminded of the love of the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being. Come to the River of Life. Come to the Water.