

## **“Let Go and Flow”**

**Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor of Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 2/9/20**

*John 7:37-39*

Langston Hughes’ paints a picture like no other in his expression of the power and importance of Rivers. He says,

*I’ve known rivers:*

*I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

*I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.*

*I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.*

*I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.*

*I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.*

*I’ve known rivers:*

*Ancient, dusky rivers.*

Jesus begins by inviting others into the healing waters that will refresh and satisfy, that will cure thirst. I love the illustration of “living water.” Of course we have it here in John 7, but Jesus has already shared this amazing metaphor with the Samaritans in John 4. It is emerging as a theme. Here the writer of John even explicitly explains the river to signify God’s Spirit. The first sermon I preached here was on the importance of water, after having just returned from an emotional day at Charlottesville during the “Unite the Right” rally that ended in such violence. “Water,” I said, “Is our basic necessity. We must have it.” Dressed in my clergy robe and stole, I stood in the midst of violence and poured water to the pursed lips of the braves men and women I have ever known, many of them elderly clergy, vested in their robes as well, singing quietly “This Little Light of Mine” and other Negro Spirituals that broke my heart, and hearing their prayers of love, knowing that they would soon be bowled over by the rancorous hostile younger, white bodies that hurled insults and screamed profanity, much in the name of the same God. But these aged saints looked at me, and one whispered to me, “it’s okay” –seeing a tear stream down my face. “We’ve done it before; it’s okay” referring back to the Civil Rights marches of the past. I didn’t know what would happen next, but when I saw the young men yelling “you will not replace us!” and charged the line with wooden shields reminiscent of Viking raiders from legend, shouting as they toppled the old, frail bodies of these brave heroes. Our heroes. The ones who counted the costs and stood up to hate. In love. They stood as a resistance to intolerance and White Nationalism. They stood up.

Water is the symbol of the Spirit. No wonder when Jesus told the Samaritan woman that God wants us to connect with our Creator in spirit. For as the prophets of old declared, thus saith the Lord, “I desire Mercy, not sacrifice.” God wants our hearts, not our rituals. There is something so inclusive about water. Think about it, how the water bubbles up from the earth, like we read in Isaiah, and how it makes streams to flow into creeks, and creeks into rivers. Then the River flows downhill to the ocean. But what is amazing about the River is that is really a combination of water sources rather than a single source.

What makes the River large and its current strong isn't one stream, but the many. This metaphor is not lost in scripture when God's sacred River is flowing from God's throne. It is healing, satisfying water. But what is even more exciting than the healing properties of God is that really we are all streams of water flowing into it. We are part of God's current, God's flow. And I love Jesus' reference to an ancient teaching, that "from his heart rivers flow," meaning more than just one. God is flowing as a river, or a spirit, EVERYWHERE. God's rivers are everywhere. God isn't as exclusive as you might think. We are all God's children and God's creation is everywhere, so certainly God's Spirit is everywhere too.

Water is intimate and sacred, and necessary for life. Not only is it inclusive and a River's strength being in the tributaries that join it, but there is something healing about water in general, something therapeutic and intimate. It relaxes us, and allows us to be together in fun and play. Our ancestors enjoyed this refreshing aspect of water on a hot day, just as much as we do today. And Lynchburg knows this reality. But when our city was forced to desegregate its municipal pools in 1961, the city chose to simply close all the pools down, rather than blacks and whites swim together. The segregationists understood the intimacy and power of swimming together. It is hard to be enemies with people you relax and have fun with. It is hard to dehumanize another when you are uninhibitedly enjoying something like simply finding relief from unforgiving heat. The cool water in the heat of summer removes your inhibitions, you simply relax. It returns our most compassionate facets of our own humanity. It is indeed therapeutic. And we are thankful for the merciful reaction of those in this community of faith at the time, with Bev Cosby leading the way, courageously opened our pools to everyone... blacks and whites, and people came from far and wide to experience what would be for many the first time experiencing blacks and whites swimming together—in the same water. Inclusivity is not optional, it is the only way the River of God works. Jesus invited all to enjoy this River, together—much like the pools here just outside this door are still serving this often times fractured community, which has much more healing to do. May we continue to work through what it means to truly embrace one another, and practice what we preach. If we preach inclusivity and diversity then may we let go of all our inhibitions and simply flow into the water with all those flowing in its current. There is much more healing to do, but God will do it through you!

First, we must let go! Like my brave, aged heroes who stared hate in the face at Charlottesville, but did so with such love and dignity, we must let go of all our fear. Let go of all the cultural baggage that have tethered us to the River's bottom. Let go. All the inhibitions and personal reservations, let them all go. It's not your fight anymore. As Jesus said, "Give me your burdens, and instead take mine, for it is much lighter to carry." In essence, Jesus said, "Let go." We must let go in order to follow God's current. And you already know where the current will take you. You perhaps have just been too afraid to admit. The River is flowing to what end? It is flowing to EVERYONE around us, offering its healing properties of unity, peace, and love. It is offering intimacy of the highest level between Creation and Creator. In Sanskrit, an ancient language, it is called "upasana." It means "to sit close with or communion with God." I encourage as we flow in God's River of Living Water, let us swim with God and with one another, like those who have braved to enter the waters of our swimming pools over these many years now, together, intimately. Let us swim with God and each other, freely. But we must let go in order to flow, swimming spirit to spirit, side by side. *Upasana*.

Listen to this song that Sam Garrett composed, a tribute this intimate act with God... creation swimming with Creator, or as he puts it dancing together in the storm.