



**THE FIRST DAY OF PENTECOST
THE FLOW
MAY 31, 2020**

JOHN 7: 37-39

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

SERMON

A new client came to me, the question almost always arose in the first session: “how long will this take?” Often the question took the form of, “how long will it take to get rid of my depression, my anxiety, my pain, this life that is killing me?”

I would point out that we would not be getting rid of anything. After all, in therapy we are addressing a person’s experience of suffering. Where was the person’s suffering going to go? It wasn’t going to disappear, so we were going to work it through and attempt to make meaning out of the suffering and see how the suffering was meant to transform the person’s life. But, always I offered hope. Christ in the world means there is hope in every life situation, however painful and despairing.



I would usually suggest a minimum of a year, if not longer. Often a person's suffering began in childhood or, as an adult, the person's life had been unhealthy and dysfunctional for many years.

We were not going to affect healing in six weeks or three months. But I was willing to be with the person no matter where the course of therapy went. And this can be lifesaving. It can be enough.

Of course, the person would be shocked, as if therapy was some kind of quick fix. In fact, if the person was looking for a quick fix, I let them know I was not the therapist he or she was looking for.

My first supervisor and my lifelong therapist both made it clear that, in therapy, the client and I both needed to surrender to spirit and soul, both of whom work in their own autonomous way.

One cannot push the river with one's ego. One cannot force healing. One cannot demand a quick fix. Nothing is going to disappear one day as a miracle

Instead, we all have to surrender to the flow....

In my college days, a group of us would go tubing. Sitting inside large innertubes, we would float down the river. It meant giving up control and allowing the river to carry us along its flow. Where the river wanted to go is where we went. It would have been absurd to get out of the inntube and try to push the river in another direction.



Later in life, I flowed down life's river that was splitting in two directions. I could not decide whether to stay in my well-paying pastoral position and continue to climb the pastoral ladder or risk returning to school to train as a pastoral psychotherapist. It would entail starting over at age forty.

Then I had a dream. I was crawling through a tunnel that ran along the shore of a large body of water. When I came up out of the tunnel, I was standing in a circular forest clearing that reminded me of the Lutheran summer camp I attended as a child.

Two adults were there discussing adult education which was one of my responsibilities in my congregation.

I thought I could help them, so I pulled my card from my pocket.

But instead of "pastor for growth and nurture" listed under my name—my church title at the time, it read "soul doctor."

The dream revealed the rightful flow of my life which led me to leave the church, re-train as a pastoral psychotherapist, and spend twenty-five years working with people in therapy....



The early church, gathered around John's gospel, shared a belief that knowledge, through the experience of inner truth, had a saving power. In order to acquire this inner knowledge, early Christians sought insight from dreams and visions. They interpreted the scriptures symbolically. They believed that knowledge of the word of God came through the soul and taught the precept "know thyself" as the way to knowledge of God.

And from the beginning, water is key to spiritual life. The Bible begins, "in the beginning when God created heaven and earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."

The Hebrew word for wind is also the word for spirit.

We have the parting of the Red Sea. We have the water that sprang from the rock in the desert when Moses struck it with his staff. There is the crossing of the Jordan. John baptizing in the river Jordan. Water flowing from the side of Christ and the living water that Jesus calls himself.

We first have life within the watery fluid within our mother's womb. We come to spiritual rebirth through the waters of baptism.

Ancient cultures drew a distinction between the upper waters and the lower waters.



The upper waters correspond to the potential, the possibilities, what still might be in life. The lower waters correspond to the actual and the created.

In the same way, psychology later symbolized the unconscious as the great body of water upon which sits the tiny island of the ego.

Within spiritual and soulful reality revealed to us, this living water represents this deep flowing life within us, surrounding us, supporting us, refreshing, and re-energizing us.

This led the early church psychologists-theologians to identify this depth of living water as Christ, whom they termed “the fountain of life.”

One teacher, clement of Alexandria, asserts that this water is none other than “Christ, the maker of all,” who came down as the rain and was known as a spring, who pours himself out as a river.

This is the healing river of living water that comes up from within, heals the weary ego, and replenishes the soul.

This is the living water of our very souls. Drink deeply.



Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher, taught that “you cannot step twice into the same river; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you.”

But there are many others kinds of water than fresh, living water. Stagnant water, dead water, salt water, stormy water, running water, deep water, polluted water, poisoned water.

In my lifetime, I cannot think of another time in our lives when we are so sorely in need of being in supported and refreshed by the living water that flows from the spirit of Christ and is the very Christ....

“people keep talking of returning to normal,” said Natalie Dean, a disease biostatistician at the university of Florida, “but a future with an enduring coronavirus means that normal no longer exists. As we find different ways to adapt and discover what works, that’s how we’re going to start reclaiming parts of our society and life.”

The worst action we can take at this time is push the river. Ego run rampant, as they say in twelve step programs. The exhausting and meaningless effort to try and force the river to go where we want it to go. To define, from our small ego’s perspective, what living water ought to look like.

Just like tubing down the river, we are being asked to let go and get with the flow. For letting go is one of the foundational spiritual principles.



Letting go of our expectations. Letting go of what we think life should be. Letting go of our illusion of being in control. Letting go of how things used to be. Letting go of our wants, needs, demands, desires, and wishes. Letting go of our fears.

We make plans. God laughs.

Yet as Rumi says, “when you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy....”

Deb and I bought our house in Pittsburgh long before we moved here. For a few years, we slowly worked to renovate the house, hiring a talented tradesman to work on weekends. We would come up and work on the house when we could afford to get away from our jobs in Illinois. Being in Pittsburgh for the first time in my life, I loved to shop at the deli at Kuhn’s grocery in Ingmar. They sold beet eggs which I had not eaten since I was kid and my mom made them. I discovered the joy of Italy’s chipped ham. So I decided that when we moved, I would retire and work part-time as a deli clerk at Kuhn’s. Just do something completely different. Trade the stress of pastoral and psychological work for “was that a half pound or pound of potato salad?”

So, long story short, after serving clc as interim pastor, I accepted a call to become the pastor.

Did I mention that we make plans and God laughs?



Before the pandemic hit, our food ministry, if you want to call it that, consisted of a neighborhood dinner once a month.

And then living water bubbled up, the river carried us into uncharted waters and we found ourselves providing grocery gifts cards to the people of Millvale: \$20,000 worth. And then we began providing canned food. And then boxes of produce.

And then we began working to create pam's pantry, building our own food bank. And now we are on the verge of initiating a summer lunch program for children. And becoming a drop site for 412 food rescue. And down the line we hope to provide cooking classes for seniors and for families. And, along with the Triboro Eco district, we will build a playground next to the church where we can combine food events and play time for children and families. When things begin to open up, we want to support afghan refugee women in their catering business by their using our kitchen, which we are upgrading to a commercial kitchen.

Why go back to what was normal?

The pandemic has exposed the depth of poverty, hunger, and need around us that normal times were able to hide. And Christ, the living water, the fountain of life has flowed into clc and led us to give and care and work on behalf of our brothers and sisters in Millvale.



So, when we think of re-opening clc, let's think in terms of raising up a strong band of volunteers—members and people throughout Pittsburgh--who will make all of these food ministries possible.

Clc has not been closed by any stretch of the imagination. We are pouring ourselves out in service to others. And we need you to join us.

Living water has also bubbled up around this worship service.

It's funny. But each week I send out an outline of what we are doing to do and, from the start, I have titled it "The Flow." There is a method to my madness around the theme and sermon and songs each week.

Over the last two years, Christ, the fountain of life, led us to make decision after decision—sometimes in the face of strong opposition—that prepared us for ongoing ministry when the pandemic hit. Living water wore down the obstacles that resisted change. To work with the image of Heraclitus: some wanted to just stand in the same place in the river, resisting the flow.

So now, each week, we have sometimes as many as 2000 of you watching our service.



Waves of living water are bringing people to the shores of clc through the country. And what we are initiating opening conversations about an online virtual community becoming part of clc.

Each one of us is a small tributary flowing on and in the living water of Christ. When we join together as people in the flow, we become a mighty river, supporting and carrying people who come to us for life.

Feel the flow. Know the flow. Christ bubbles up within us.

Join with us. Become the mighty waters of clc.

SERMON SONG:

THE RIVER BY BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN