

“Rivers”

The Rev Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages

Revelations 22:1-5

Matthew 21:23-32

“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.”

Rev. 22:1-2

Let us pray... O God,

Teach us to go with the flow of life and not to fight so hard
when faced with change.

Help us to see that we are not the same as Christians twenty years ago
or 600 years ago or 2,000 years ago,
but Christians responding to the joys & concerns of our time.

Amen

The image on our bulletin cover today is meant to illustrate
the history of the Christian “Church” with a capital “C”
leading up to the United Church of Christ.

It is meant to show the twists and turns of the Church’s history
with its origins and departures and even reunions.

This picture is used in our Come & Consider classes
to show the roots and branches of how the UCC came to be.

This is a very simple portrayal of that history showing just a few
of Christianity’s religious movements and the years of their inception.

One way to think of it is as an enormous tree with roots going back to
the very beginnings of life on earth, growing up to have a common trunk
that is split by the advent of Christ and efforts at reform later on.

Another way to use this image is to see Christianity as a great river
symbolizing the different forms our Church has taken
through the centuries.

And like a river, the Church has thirsted for unity –
Christians have yearned to be re-united in God’s love
like waters rushing down mountainsides,
pulled by gravity at last to the sea.

This model of a great river might also include the other great religions
as separate rivers making their way from a common spiritual Source
and experiencing their own revolts, reformations, and reunions.

Willard, p.2

In this vision of a common beginning and ending,
there is the hope that all the great religions will eventually meet,
each at its own entry point just as the Mississippi, the Nile,
the Yangtze, and the Danube rivers all find their way to the ocean.

Look at how the UCC was formed –
we are the reuniting of 4 Protestant traditions
and we continue to be a church that is united and uniting
'faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races'.
And this is in keeping with our denomination's motto –
"That they may be one",
a quote from Jesus' final prayer with his disciples.

Perhaps we need to ask this question,
"What is meant by this 'oneness'?"
Are we all to believe the same thing? Act the same way?
Dress the same way? Sing the same songs? Say the same thing?
Tyrants try to do that by promoting their culture as the ideal
through a 'process of elimination'
beginning with the most vulnerable in a society.
This is characteristic of any social structure of domination
as it insists on 'my way or the highway'.

But what was Jesus getting at? What did he mean by 'oneness'?
Look at the bulletin cover again and consider
what has been flowing in that 'river' of the Church.
Maybe what Jesus was getting at was a common Spirit
potentially at work in all people and their social gatherings.
Perhaps, it is simply people whose lives were touched by the Church
and carried along by the current of Christianity.

I visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC in the early 1990s and
remember the display dedicated to European Medieval Art.
as a small gallery on the second floor.

It was set up to be like a small chapel with various sculptures
as well as paintings and decorative objects
and wooden chairs for visitors to just sit and reflect.

In one corner, there was a large baptismal font carved out of marble—
big enough to dunk a baby like the Eastern Orthodox still do.
My friend Chris Farlekas was with me and when he saw this font,
he went over & touched the edge of it and said, in words to the effect
"It makes me think of all the people who were baptized in it."

Willard, p.3

He was talking about the connection we all have as members of the Church
as a gathering of the people of God who call themselves, 'Christians'.

For us, what is flowing in that great river,
is the Holy Spirit, the unchanging character of God who
we know through our scripture and traditions as the Christ –
who came among us in the disguise of a Jewish carpenter
named Jesus of Nazareth.

What has been flowing through that river has remained unchanged –
though there certainly have been some dangerous tributaries
along the way and even some pollution.

But the flow of the Spirit cuts deep and its current is resolute
and unrelenting through history, shaping the hearts of people,
irrigating their minds with unforeseen possibilities
and bringing forth a harvest of faith, hope, and love along the way.

So, let us go with the flow of life and not fight so hard
when faced with change.

Let us recognize we are not the same as Christians twenty years ago
let alone 600 years ago speaking Elizabethan English
or 2,000 years ago speaking Aramaic,
but Christians responding to the joys & concerns of our time
in our own language.

God is still speaking and so are we as we as tell the Good News of God's love.

Today, we celebrate the addition of new members to our church
including one by the affirmation of her faith through baptism.
And the river keeps rolling along and will continue to do so
with the generations yet to come yearning for that day
when we all may finally be one.

Amen

Today's lesson is from Revelation 22:1-5, a letter attributed to the Apostle John.

According to tradition, it was written while he was imprisoned on the Isle of Patmos in the Greek islands.

¹Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb

²through 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.

³Nothing accursed will be found there any more.

But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it,

and his servants will worship him;

⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

⁵And 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 for ever and ever.

Matthew 21:23-32

²³When he entered the temple,
the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him
as he was teaching, and said,
'By what authority are you doing these things,
and who gave you this authority?'

²⁴Jesus said to them,
'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer,
then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.

²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?
And they argued with one another,
'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us,
"Why then did you not believe him?"

²⁶But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd;
for all regard John as a prophet.'

²⁷So they answered Jesus,
'We do not know.'

And he said to them,
'Neither will I tell you by what authority
I am doing these things.

²⁸ 'What do you think?
A man had two sons; he went to the first and said,
"Son, go and work in the vineyard today."

²⁹He answered, "I will not";
but later he changed his mind and went.

³⁰The father went to the second and said the same;
and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go.

³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?'

They said,
'The first.'

Jesus said to them,
'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes
are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness
and you did not believe him,
but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him;
and even after you saw it,
you did not change your minds and believe him.'