

A River Runs Through Us

Psalm 46:1-7

Romans 3:21-25a

John 7:37-38

November 1, 2011 Reformation Festival Vespers Beeson Divinity Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

I

We are all on a journey, trying to find our way home, home to the Everlasting Arms, home to the Mighty Fortress who is our God, that never failing bulwark, that helper amid the flood – even Christ Jesus our Lord. And as we make this lifelong journey we move along the River of God’s free grace, a river that runs right through us, by grace through faith.

The Reformation of the 16th Century, led by Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, John Knox and others, was an effort to return to that central mighty channel of this River and experience its flowing power. It was an attempt to open up the plugged arteries and blocked tributaries that kept people away from the central channel of the River of this living God, tied up as they were in an elaborate medieval system of merit, and instead restore direct vibrant relational contact with the living God. *Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura*, Grace Alone, Faith Alone, Scripture Alone mark this reformation and renewal, within the context of the covenant community – the ecclesia, the church which is Christ’s body – reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God.

The Reformation was both recovery of roots and renewal of shoots, new branches springing up with fresh green buds of life in the Spirit as people opened the Word of God and heard the Good News of the Gospel – that we are made right before God by God’s free gift of his grace in Jesus Christ through his atoning death on the cross - and responded, claiming this gift by faith. The Apostle Paul in Romans summarized this liberating news, saying, “I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith.”¹

II

One of the most poignant and personal movies I have ever seen is “A River Runs Through It.” Perhaps it spoke to me so personally because it is about a Presbyterian minister out in Montana and his two sons. I qualify on two of the three points- Presbyterian minister with two sons. A precious daughter too! And also I have a nephew who lives in Montana. The movie is based on a short story by Norman Maclean about his own growing up along the Big Blackfoot River in Montana. Norman’s father is a Presbyterian minister. Norman has a brother named Paul. Central to the story is fly-fishing and the river. Norman Maclean writes,

“In our family there was no clear line between religion and fly-fishing. We lived at the junction of two great trout rivers in western Montana, and our father was a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman who tied his own flies and taught others. He told us about Christ’s disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first-class

fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman.”

Norman Maclean describes their religious training in western Montana, and how Sunday mornings and evenings were spent in Sunday School and Church Services, and how they spent Sunday afternoons walking with their father, listening to him share parts of the sermon he would preach that evening. But, Norman writes,

“Even so, in a typical week of our childhood, Paul and I probably received as many hours of instruction in fly fishing as we did in all other spiritual matters. They learned early and learned well that casting a fly rod is, in the words of their father, ‘an art that is performed on a four-count rhythm between ten and two o’clock.”ⁱⁱ

As the boys grew, developed their own identities, struggled, moved away from home, made mistakes, in Paul’s case, deadly mistakes, they still came home and returned to the River and fly fishing. The River was that point of origin and orientation for them. It was part of their essential identity.

III

Many times through its pages, and over thousands of years the Bible lifts up this central symbol of the River as the source of life. In Genesis, “A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers.”ⁱⁱⁱ In Ezekiel, “Wherever the River goes, every living creature that swarms will live.”^{iv} In Psalm 46, which inspired Martin Luther’s great hymn, “There is a River whose streams make glad the city of God.” In the last chapter of The Revelation, “Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb... on either side of the river, the tree of life,”^v In each Gospel, Jesus begins his public ministry at the River, receiving the water of life in baptism. It’s the way we all begin our faith journey, going under the waters of baptism, recognizing that we are claimed by God in Jesus Christ, buried with him by baptism unto death that we may be raised to live with him in newness of life.

How is it that Bach’s Cantata graphically puts it?

“Whoever, with the bloody banner of Christ is sworn into the fealty of baptism, Conquers in the spirit again and again.”^{vi}

As Jesus nears those final passion events, that central purpose for which he came, the Cross and the Resurrection, he makes a bold personal application of the waters from the River of Life. It is the last day of the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles, the Great Day, celebrated in the autumn, still, recalling God’s leading Israel through the wilderness. For seven days water was carried from the Pool of Siloam to the Temple and poured over the altar as reminder of the water that God brought forth from the rock in the desert. Jesus stands before the Temple of Herod, rebuilt over the remains of the Temple of Solomon. As Jesus stands there in that holy place, recalling in his mind’s eye those events from his heritage, God’s deliverance, God’s provision, he suddenly cries out,

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”^{vii}

Jesus declares that the life-giving water, with which the Jews commemorated the Exodus events, and from which they looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, has reached flood-stage, ripeness, completion, fullness of time, in him. He says, if you want refreshment from life’s dry deserts, if you want to tie into the Source, the head waters, the original intention of the Holy One, then come to me. Come to me and take a drink. Come to me and drink of the Water of Life. Come to me and never be thirsty again. He had said to that Samaritan Woman at the well,

“Everyone who drinks of this (well) water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”^{viii}

That promise of Jesus on the Great Festival Day, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water,”^{ix} assures us that real life emerges for us from deep within when we are living out of the grace given us by God that we receive by trusting faith.

John Calvin put it like this,

“For our assurance, our glory, and the sole anchor of our salvation are that Christ the Son of God is ours, and we in turn are in him sons (and daughters) of God and heirs of the Kingdom of heaven, called to the hope of eternal blessedness by God’s grace, not by our worth.”^x

IV

There is a river, you see, a river of God’s grace and peace and power and presence, a river where God dwells with us and is in us. Amazingly – this river runs right through us. Amazingly, we can build upon and improve upon the faith foundation we received, from parents and grandparents and church, even as did Jesus that day in the Temple. We can be grateful for our Protestant forbears, but we do not stop with them, because God is still at work reforming and renewing his Church today. God is sending fresh water full of fish throughout our world today. It is our hope and prayer as parents that our children will live better and more faithfully than we have, and that we can pass on to them a living tradition that will lead them to a vibrant and vital living relationship with the Living Lord.

Like every child, Norman Maclean learned something from his Presbyterian preacher and fly-fishing father. As he became an adult he took that knowledge and built upon it, modifying it and making it his own. He wrote of fly-fishing with his father,

“Rhythm was important... and complicated. It was one rhythm superimposed upon another, our father’s four-count rhythm of the line and wrist being still the base rhythm. But superimposed upon it was the piston two count of his arm and the long overriding four count of the completed figure eight of his reversed loop.”^{xi}

Jesus did the same thing that day at the Temple, as there upon that solid foundation of the Temple and its noble tradition, he said, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.” He took the basic covenant truths of Israel, the Laws, the Festivals, the Deliverance, and he improved upon them in his own person.

You know what? I think God is working in you and me this very day in such a way, if we are open, that we can receive his living water, connect and reconnect with this Great River of his love and grace which is life indeed, and it will become better as it flows forth from us into the lives of others. Are you tired? Are you thirsty? Come to the River. The Mighty River “whose streams make glad the city of God.”^{xii} Do you want water that really satisfies soul deep and is not simply the thin soup of pop culture and evening news? Then come to the River. Come connect and reconnect with the Source that is life, abundant life indeed. Come to the River, feel the security of God our mighty fortress. We had an outreach BBQ and Bluegrass concert late Sunday afternoon. A street artist at 5 points who paints in spray paints named, 3 Foot, came up to thank me and gave me this. (*show painting*)

“See the streams of living waters, springing from eternal Love.
Well supply thy sons and daughters, and all fear of want remove.
Who can faint while such a river Ever flows their thirst to assuage?
Grace which, like the Lord the Giver, never fails from age to age.”

Amen.

ⁱ Romans 1:16-17a

ⁱⁱ Norman Maclean, [A River Runs Through It](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 2:10

^{iv} Ezekiel 47:9

^v Revelation 22:1,2

^{vi} J.S. Bach “Ein Feste Burg Ist Unser Gott” from stanza 2

^{vii} John 7:37-38

^{viii} John 4:13-14

^{ix} John 7:38

^x John Calvin, [Institutes of the Christian Religion](#), 3, 17, 1, page. 803

^{xi} Norman Maclean, [A River Runs Through It](#)

^{xii} Psalm 46:4