

Sermon- "Water and Spirit" Rev. Heidi Champagne January 10, 2021

The Sufi poet and mystic, Rumi said: "Love is the water of life. Drink it down with heart and soul." When was the last time your thirst was truly quenched?

When was the last time you sat by the water? Maybe just this morning, you drank your coffee in the beach parking lot, letting the rhythm of the waves comfort you. Maybe like me, you walked in the woods, searching out the energy of running water in brooks and streams. Maybe you took a cold dip into an ocean or pond on New Year's day. Maybe you lingered in a warm tub or shower. Maybe you watched the rain. In this week during which more than 7,000 people a day in MA are diagnosed with covid--in this week in which so many of us simply cannot wrap our heads and hearts around the chaos and violence and malice that broke into our nation's capital on Wednesday--in this world in which feelings have been trampled on, sensitivity has been mocked, and compassion is considered weakness by so many in power--perhaps we experience water through our tears. Whenever and however you last experienced water, did you think about your baptism?

We often think of baptism as something that is "one and done", an act of love that we engage in as infants, or as older children or even sometimes as adults. In our tradition we think of our beautiful baptismal bowl. I remember the weight of an infant in my arms, and the smell of innocence as I sprinkle water on their head and as we welcome them into the family of God. I think about your faces as you reach out to touch the tiny foot or little hand of our newest member as I walk them through the aisles and as Diana welcomes them with a special song. I think about our children, gathered around the baptismal bowl, helping to bless the waters of baptism, touching and splashing in the water. I think about those who are tall enough to peer into the bowl and see truth reflecting back at them.

In both of today's texts, we hear about baptism. In the reading from the gospel of Mark, we hear the writer of Mark's account of John the Baptist baptizing all who came to him in the river Jordan. John's baptism was a call to people to wash themselves clean, to help them to leave behind the sins of their past unbelief, to prepare them for the coming of Jesus. As a grown man, who was believed to be about 30 years old, Jesus came to the Jordan to be baptized by his cousin, John. And, while John professed that surely Jesus should be doing the baptizing, Jesus wades into the water, and is given the same baptism that John's followers had experienced. And, as he comes up out of the water, Mark's account tells us that the heavens open, and the Spirit descends like a dove, and the voice of God calls Jesus beloved. By all biblical accounts it is this baptism that marks the beginning of Jesus' three year ministry.

In comparison, the text that John read to us from the book of Acts, (believed to have been written by the author of the gospel of Luke), speaks to us about the early disciples of Jesus baptizing believers in Jesus' name, years after the death of Jesus. This baptism, Paul told believers, was different from John's baptism. This wasn't a simple cleansing or a preparing the way. This baptism was an acceptance of and an openness to the Holy Spirit.

This is the type of baptism that we celebrate as one of the two sacraments we observe as members of the United Church of Christ. We believe that when we baptize a person into the family of God, we are invoking the Holy Spirit. We believe what Rumi said--that love is the water of life, and that the water

sprinkled on the head of the baptized child symbolizes a quenching of our thirst to be close to God, to be acknowledged as a beloved child of God.

Yet, just like when we dry off after a swim or a bath, we can sometimes quickly forget what it is to be in the flow of that kind of love. As we grow into adulthood, we no longer feel it is proper to splash in the baptismal bowl or to stand on our toes and try to make out our reflection in the water. And, if we did, would we see the reflection of a child of God, or would we worry that we were somehow less than deserving of being God's reflection?

Disney's *The Lion King* is one of my favorite movies. Do you remember the story? Little Simba, a lion cub born to Mufasa, the king of the pride, longs for the day when he can become king. He aches for the independence to do what he wants, when he wants. His youthful exuberance gets him into trouble more than once, and engages the interest of his sinister uncle, Scar, who is jealous of Simba and Mufasa and wants to be king enough to kill Mufasa. In a cruel twist, Scar convinces young Simba to explore an area his father warned him to stay away from. With Simba in danger, Scar manages to kill Mufasa as Mufasa anxiously tries to rescue Simba. Scar then convinces Simba that he was responsible for his father's death. Simba, seeing no other way, leaves the pride and wanders off, leaving the ruling of the pride to Scar.

But my favorite part of the whole movie, (and the link back to our discussion about baptism), is the moment when Simba, who has befriended a warthog and a meerkat and has been living a life of "no worries" finally realizes who and whose he is. Simba had convinced himself that he was unworthy of leading his pride. He carried the guilt of having killed his father--an untruth and a weight that was not his to carry. And, while he was living a reasonably happy life with his friends, he could not hold back his growth and maturation. Meanwhile, his childhood friend Nala has come to find him, to tell him that Scar has caused famine and disaster and he is needed. He falls in love with Nala, and one day, when he goes to drink at the watering hole, he looks into the water and sees a reflection that he thinks is his father. He ultimately realizes that the face staring back at him is his own reflection, yet he has a moment of connection with his father's spirit, and understands his call to care for his pride.

So when was the last time that you splashed in water? Do you remember your own baptism as an affirmation and a point of connection with who and whose you truly are? In our faith, baptism is a moment, but also an ongoing source of connection to our true selves. When we take time to remember our own baptism, we invite the Holy Spirit in. We invite God to dispel the stories we might tell about our own unworthiness. We remember that we are God's beloved children and that we are connected as a family of faith. We remember that love is the water of life, and that only when we are well hydrated can we share that love fully with the world. So...drink up and know you are loved--and when your cup is full, share it with someone else. This is a dry and thirsty world. Amen.