

Peter Bankson: Living Water

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour

Peter Bankson

Sermon: October 1, 2000

Living Water

[The altar table is set for Communion, with a small, clear vase of water added.]

Summary

Last time I shared the Word, I offered some images about the Bread of Life. This morning I want to do the same for Living Water. This "living water" is the love of God, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the mystery of community. Living water feeds us. Living water carries us into the future. Moreover, we are part of that "living water," keeping hope alive, and carrying a vision into the future of peace with justice – for creation, for each other, and for ourselves.

Scripture

John said to him (Jesus), "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." However, Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us." (Mark 9:38-39)

Therefore, the king went to the feast with Queen Esther. On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your question, Queen Esther? It shall

be granted you. And what is your request? Even tot he half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." The Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me – that is my petition – and the lives of my people – that is my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated." (Esther 7:1-6, 9-10)

Introduction

This morning, we gather around this table of remembrance to share the Bread of Life and the cup of Living Water. This is the last time we will gather with Manning and Sonya here before they leave for North Carolina, so our celebration is bright with a sense of loss and grief and thanksgiving. The Dyers are leaving Seekers, but all of us – Sonya and Manning, those us who are staying, and those of you who are here just for today – all of us are part of something larger, something deeper, something much more miraculous and mysterious than an ordinary farewell party. We are lifting up what it means to be part of the Body of Christ, and for that I give profound thanks.

[Last time I shared the Word](#), I offered some images about the Bread of Life. This morning I want to do the same for Living Water. This "living water" is the love of God, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the mystery of community that keeps hope alive and expresses who we really are.

Living water feeds us. Living water carries us into the future. In addition, we are part of that "living water," keeping hope alive, and carrying into the future a vision of peace with justice, for creation, for each other, and for ourselves.

Waves are more than the water they contain.

In the Hebrew Scripture for this week, Queen Esther made waves at the dinner table, and it saved the life of her people. She was daring, but she did not act alone. Her family and friends were supporting her in prayer, and all of them were guided and empowered by their sense of community – their "angel." Her courageous act is a wonderful model of how the Spirit brings a community to life.

In one of my favorite poems, "West-Running Brook," Robert Frost says:

*'Speaking of contraries, see how the brook
In that white wave runs counter to itself.
It is from that in water we were from
Long, long before we were from any creature. ...
It has this throwing backward on itself
So that the fall of most of it is always
Raising a little, sending up a little.
Our life runs down in sending up the clock.
The brook runs down in sending up our life.
The sun runs down in sending up the brook.
And there is something sending up the sun.
It is this backward motion toward the source,
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
The tribute of the current to the source.
It is from this in nature we are from.
It is most us.'*

This sense of flowing against the currents of culture, back toward the source in God, creating a standing wave in the stream of life, speaks to me of our call to be Church.

Living water is substance and Spirit; body and blood; congregation and angel.

We are "living water." Our bodies are 98% water. We know we should drink eight glasses of water every day to stay healthy. When we are cut, we bleed, and our blood is wet, and as salty as the sea. We can live for weeks without food, but only days without water. The human body is a "body of water," the term we use for a river, or a brook, or a pond, or the ocean.

However, we are more than water. Let me compare you to this vase half-full. Here is a clear, uniform, transparent liquid. You are much more complicated. When I look at you, I see your physical features, each one of you unique. Nevertheless, more than that, I see the pain in your eyes, the smile on your lips, the energy in your step, the weight on your shoulders. Yes, the 2% in you that is **not** water makes you seem solid and different from the water in this vase. Nevertheless, it is not that 2%, but your spirit that brings you to life! When we meet, I experience you as body and spirit, water and wave.

In "Unmasking the Powers," Walter Wink describes the "angel" of a church as "more than a mere personification of the church, but the actual spirituality of the congregation as a single entity. ... Angel and people are the inner and outer aspects of the same reality. The people incarnate or embody the angelic spirit; the angel distills the invisible essence of their totality as a group." The angel of a church "encompasses both what the church is and what it is called to be."

In the Gospel lesson for this week, Jesus gives his disciples a lesson in incarnating the angel of his small group: "No one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil against me. Whoever is not against us

is for us."

Over time, the angel of Seekers has shaped us as a small part of the Body of Christ. As we say in our call, we are a community "which comes together in weekly worship rooted in the Biblical faith, with shared leadership; and disperses with a common commitment to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives." We might say that this opening paragraph of the Call of Seekers is one of our efforts to describe the "angel" of this church.

So Seekers is "living water," too – a body of water incorporating its particular angel: all of us working and worshiping and grieving and celebrating together, drawn into the unknowable future, called forth by God from the experiences of our past.

The Seekers' wave has been standing in this place for a quarter century, taking its shape from our faith in God, our space, our life together, and our commitment. Working together, we incarnate the Angel of Seekers.

Now, we are busy shaping our new home on Carroll Street, reaching out to the community there, listening for emerging call. If Wink is right, we are being led by our Angel, which is developing as we move into the future. Each of us has the opportunity to help nurture our angel as we follow God's call. Each of us has different gifts to offer: time and energy, insight, financial investment, experience, prayer.

Sonya and Manning, who have been part of this living water since we were born as a community, have shaped us all. For the whole life of Seekers, they have been part of this body of living water, helping us make waves as a church!

There is a wonderful relationship between waves and water. The wave is made of water, but it is much more. To me, it is very much like the relationship between the congregation and the angel of a church.

In a river, or a brook like West-Running Brook, a wave retains its shape even though the water moves on. The water **incarnates** the wave; it expresses the wave; it may shape the wave, but in the end, the wave is something mysteriously "other," the angel of the brook, or the river, or the sea, or the church.

Kayakers get to know a river. Eddies and standing waves have enduring characteristics. Some of them even get names: the Haystack, the Coffee Grinder, the Crusher, Heaven's Gate Kayakers can give them names because they know where to find each particular wave, and they know what to expect when they get there. Two weeks ago, when we went to Great Falls, Marjory and I watched again as kayakers sat in their tiny craft, dwarfed by the foaming haystacks at the foot of the falls, held in place by the force of the water turning backwards against the current, toward the source.

However, just as the rocks shape the river, the river shapes the rock. Mather Gorge, that cliff-sided channel just below Great Falls where the water runs still and deep, was carved by the Potomac flowing through it. In the ancient past, the river filled the whole valley at Great Falls. As the continent rose, (the continental granite floating on the molten core of the Earth) the river washed stones and gravel down from the Blue Ridge, carving out the deep gorge below the falls. You can see signs of this along Billy Goat Trail, round basins scoured in the rock by sand and stones moved by the river eons ago. Today they are 50 feet above the water, but once those holes were on the bottom of the channel.

We can learn a lot from moving water. Just as the river is shaped in the moment by its channel, but shapes its channel over time, so, too, the congregation can nurture the angel of the church.

Walter Wink observes that "(c)hurches are just like people: they do not change in order that they might be accepted; they must be accepted in order that they might change. If we accept

and love the wounded angel, praying for a vision of its true potentiality (rather than imposing our own), and engaging with others in the struggle to discern the true nature of its calling, then the whole congregation may move toward it organically."

If we are conscious and caring, we can nurture the Angel of Seekers. I believe our angel grew when we opened our pulpit to any Seeker tall enough to look over it, trusting that there really are prophets among us. Moreover, I know that our angel has a dark side, too, and needs our prayers and our nurturing support in this time of change.

Letting go is not easy, but it is inevitable.

Nine years ago, I spent four days in silence sitting on the bank of the Dearborn River, deep in the Rocky Mountains, half a mile from the Continental Divide. For four days, I lived on water alone ... drinking from the river, wading in the river, sleeping with the sound of the river in my ears.

A four-day fast can bring one to the place of visions, and that is what it did for me. The Dearborn River ran swiftly through a valley filled with stones worn round and smooth by years of spring floods. Evidence of the floods was all around me – huge trees uprooted on the gravel bars; tough brush on the dry banks bent by the water.

Beside my bedroll there was a wave standing over a stump, stuck in the stream. The wave it made was a constant tribute of the current to its source. When I was there in late August the water was low, and clear and cold. The logs that had been carried there on the spring flood were high and dry.

Living with the river, watching that wave, and the stump that made it, and the logs beside me on the bank I learned this

basic lesson: "The river picks up what it can, carries it as far as it is able, and sets it down – without anger or regret."

In many ways, Seekers Church is like that river. We come, and the current of life that is here sweeps us up. Seekers carries us to new places. In flood times, we grind the rough edges on one another, revealing our inner stuff. We grow and change, and the Angel of Seekers changes with us.

At some point, whether we like it or not, we leave, and Seekers sets us down. Some of you have come a long way to be here this morning. Welcome back! (Ask them to stand.) I hope that your memories will tell us something about the Angel of Seekers, something of what it means to have been part of this stream, now that you have stepped aside.

Today, Seekers is setting Manning and Sonya down on the bank. After 40 years, they are leaving for their new home. They have been part of our river of life since we began. They have been carried by the wave of Seekers to new places. They have helped rub off some of our rough edges. We miss them already, and will always have a seat in the boat for them when they return. I pray that we can be like the Dearborn River, and set them down gently, without anger or regret.

Although they are leaving, they will still be with us in spirit, following the call of the Risen Christ in new ways. "No one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil against me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

We are nearing the end of our annual season of recommitment. This part of our tradition reminds us that even though we are only here for a little while, each of us is an essential part of Seekers. We recommit to Seekers annually to help us carry the knowledge that we are all vital parts of this intentional Christian community.

In his discussion of ministering to the angel of a church, Walter Wink observes: "We must do everything we can to foster change, and we can do nothing. God calls us to transform the church, and yet only God can bring that transformation about."

When we recommit, we are moving with the Angel of Seekers into the future. Just as Manning and Sonya have done since our wave began in the storm of the "New Lands" in 1976, we all help incarnate the angel of this church. Each of us will spend our time here, and leave. By the grace of God, the Angel of Seekers will reveal our inner life in a new place ... different water, but the same wave.

Keep praying!

Amen.