

September 28, 2014 River (Sunday School Theme) John 4:5-15

If you enjoy canoeing and kayaking you may have tried the West River at the south end of Canandaigua Lake. Although calling it a river is wishful thinking, as it would be better described as a vast stagnant swamp. It can be a neat place to explore though because of the abundance of wildlife around the stagnant water. If you have ever been there you know the river has a lot of duckweed, lily pads, and algae. And in a dry summer the duckweed will choke the entire place into a stinking stagnant mess with no open water at all.

On such summer several years ago Nissa and I decided to take our canoe out anyway. We took our former dog with us. I don't remember why we wanted to take her because she didn't like boating at all. The duckweed was so thick that the water surface looked like a vast green carpet. We placed our canoe in the water. Nissa got in. And then I put the dog in. I was in the process of getting in when our dog did a very logical thing. Not wanting to go on the adventure she confidently exited the boat by stepping over the edge and onto the duckweed. Of course there was no stepping "onto" the duckweed. She immediately went

completely under and a moment later her head reemerged covered in the smelly green stuff. If a dog could have a look of complete indignation she did at that moment. It was betrayal! What was so clearly solid land was not! We yanked her back out; now completely dripping, green and smelly.

Perhaps we should have had pity on the miserable creature and taken her home to wash off, but we didn't. We had an old towel with us so we wiped her off, put her in the middle of the boat again and went on our way. No teenager ever gave his or her parents looks as scathing as she gave us!

Swamps can be fine to explore wildlife, but you'd never want to swim in them. I can't imagine ever being thirsty enough to be willing to drink from the West River. No, clean, clear running, fresh water is what appeals to us. We'll drink it, swim in it, and play in it. The Finger Lakes boasts over 40 large waterfalls, and who hasn't enjoyed the refreshing mist coming off them on a hot summer day.

It is this dynamism that we turn to today as we look at rivers. Not only is the water itself flowing, but they are also

teaming with all sorts of life. We know that our God's engagement with creation is not like a stagnant smelly swamp, but like a flowing river. God creates and sustains life each and every day in each and every living thing. And God also created the dynamics of the non-living, for we know that continents drift, mountain ranges grow and erode, weather systems change with the seasons and on and on it goes. We live in a world where everything is in motion.

If you were here last week you'll remember that we focused on wildernesses. Those were the times and places where God seems absent in our hardships. Perhaps we become so frustrated with God at those times because we know of God's dynamism happening all around us, but not for us.

Perhaps the Samaritan woman that we encounter in our gospel reading is living in such a wilderness time. Something is certainly not going well in her life that she has to go out in the middle of the day to draw water. Who knows what? Many have speculated: everything from she ran out of water to she is shunned by the other women and get water on her own. The Bible really gives us no clue. All we know is that women usually went

to the wells to collect water at the beginning of the day when the temperatures were cool. And in those days of fairly strict gender roles, women carried water. Not men. Carrying water is hard work. Doing it in the heat of midday is no one's idea of a good time.

For whatever reason, she goes to the well in the heat of the day to draw water. She's expecting a long slog back with a heavy container of water. To her surprise a Jewish man is hanging around the well. You'll remember that Jews hated Samaritans. But Samaritans hated Jews too, so I suppose it all evened out.

This Jewish man does a very weird thing, and that is where we begin to sense God's playful way of interacting with the world at work. The man asks her for a drink. Sometimes I think our Bible translations are a bit harsh when they quote Jesus as saying, "Give me a drink," as if he were a male chauvinist like Archie Bunker ordering Edith around. But no, in Greek you realize this is a simple, pleasant request... "Will you get me a drink?"

Not used to such treatment from a man, and a Jew at that, the woman is startled and curious. The conversation between Jesus and the woman is delightful. I won't get into all the technical depths of what their conversation, but I'll summarize it by saying they touch on the core divisive issues between Jews and Samaritans, and they do it in a very disarming way. Would that middle east peace conferences could go so well today!

Jesus makes the woman an offer she can't refuse - to provide her with a spring of living water gushing up. Not only would she not have to come to keep drawing water, but it would be better water. Even though this is well water, and it was undoubtedly safe to drink, it was still somewhat stagnant. A shallow hand-dug well on a hot summer's day really isn't all that great a thing. A cool flowing mountain spring is another thing entirely, and much to be preferred!

Jesus says, "Everyone who drinks of [the 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." You can imagine the entranced gleam in her eyes as she says, "Sir, give me this water..."

We'll leave them to their conversation as we remember God's promises of dynamic life for us. While we know that life has its ups and downs, its wildernesses and its times of joy, we are all carried onward by the current of God's plans for this creation. God is giving us a spring of living water that is gushing up to eternal life. God is in the process of making us alive, fully alive in him.

The reason why we are using the explanations of the Apostles' Creed from the *Small Catechism* in today's service is because they remind us of how fully God's grace comes to us. God created us and gave us life. God sustains us with all the air, water, food and everything our lives need from creation.

Through Jesus God claims us away from death and destruction. It is a promise; an historical fact that cannot be undone. There is no getting away from it, ever. You have a God who has walked into the realm of death for you, and death cannot ever fully have you.

The Holy Spirit moves us onward into God's eternity and makes us holy.

God is a river of life gushing up in and around us all the time. We can laugh, giggle, delight in God's goodness; shed tears of joy that we are so loved and cared for. Ultimately God's grace is unshakeable. It is absolute. It is real.

Martin Luther ends each section of his explanations with the words, "This is most certainly true." That is not a tentative, hopefulness, that maybe, just maybe if we believe hard enough it just might, maybe, somehow, someway, against all odds have a chance of correctness. No! This is most certainly true! - A reality that cannot be shaken; boldly, confidently, securely something we can live in and never worry about falling out of. That is God's grace - a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. This is most certainly true. Amen