



The Same River Twice

A Homily Offered by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz©

Sunday, September 11, 2022

Unity Unitarian Church, St. Paul, MN

Here we are! Together Again, in a familiar sanctuary and service, that is brand new for people who have been attending Unity for a year or less. So – I should say – Here We Are! Together Again, but for the First Time!! That’s how I feel! Like our newest members and friends, I’m a newbie at Unity Church and at your Merging of the Waters service. But I’ve been leading these ingathering services with water ceremonies my entire career as a minister. So there’s nothing new under the sun when it comes to planning this service, nothing new except that it’s today, not last year, or the year before. It’s today , at this moment, and everything about this moment we are in right now is brand new.

I’ve been anticipating this moment since the Board first offered me the position as your interim senior minister almost three months ago, and it is so good to be sharing worship with you at last! Many of you know the story of how I came to be here, but there are two interweaving spiritual lessons that have been reaffirmed for me as I reflect back on how my journey has led me to this moment.

Inevitably, on this Sunday, both of these lessons involve water imagery...I just can’t help myself... Parenthetically, I have to say it amazes me how many different sermons you can preach on themes suggested by water!!

And I’ll bet some of you have probably heard every one of those sermon variations. But today it’s a different river, so bear with me !

The first lesson that was reaffirmed for me is “Don’t Push the River.” This was the title of a book by Barry Stevens that was widely read among UU’s back in the 70’s and inspired many sermons. That’s where I first heard this advice, in a UU sermon, and it’s been a metaphor for me, not just for “going with the flow” - that’s too easy --

but also a metaphor for discerning the ways in which I am or we are fighting the currents; when I’m pushing up stream for no good purpose other than sheer stubbornness.

The second spiritual lesson that was reaffirmed for me turns out to have also been the theme for last year’s Canvass Campaign here at Unity: “Trust the River.”

This is metaphor and a spiritual lesson that a lot of congregations and ministers have trouble remembering when it comes to searching for a good match.

While you were going through your search this past spring, I was going through mine, both of us trying to Trust the River that is the UU recommended search protocol.

So, I had four interviews with congregations wanting interim ministers during the month of May, and by the end of the month I had one job offer. OK I hoped for more choices – but - it's good to have an offer.

Yet, despite the offer coming from a perfectly good church with perfectly wonderful people, something kept saying “no. The inner voice that I listen to that I call Spirit said “Stay Put.”

So, awkwardly, I told this perfectly good congregation that I couldn't accept their perfectly good offer. After I said no to that congregation, I had nothing on the horizon.

Meanwhile, during May you were navigating your own currents in the river of your own search process, and needed another year or two of interim ministry.

When Rev. Kathy Hurt was not available to continue as your interim minister and the word went out that you may be looking for an interim, I felt and heard a clear call right away – no doubt whatsoever - to step into this river with you – at this time and this place in your journey towards settled ministry.

So here we are ! It's another year of interim ministry, the same as last year, and completely different. For one thing, you've ended up with not One, but Two interim ministers on your staff this year. Rev. Karen Gustafson, an experienced interim minister, has accepted the role of Interim Minister of Pastoral Care.

Together we are providing you a second chance to wade into the deep waters of interim ministry, which the unique circumstances of last year did not offer you and Rev. Kathy to do.

Whoever the ministers are that might serve you in this interim time, they have all had similar training in the theory and the process of the time in between; the time when everything seems like a rocking boat, unmoored from the familiar. It needs be the time to when we don't try to push the river and we all figure out together how to trust the river.

For those of us who have been doing interim ministry as a chosen career path, there is danger for us if we forget the philosophical and spiritual advice that gave me my

title for this sermon today: “You can’t step into the same river twice” . Every interim ministry, no matter what the size or history of the congregation are similar. The issues that arise during an interim time don’t vary much from one congregation to another. Every interim ministry is, paradoxically, all the same and utterly unique. And thus - There is no cookie cutter approach to creating an interim ministry. An interim’s job is to help discern the movements, currents, blockages of this particular river – together – and to do that, I looked back at good old Heraclitus of Ephesus.

He’s been part of my posse of inspirational teachers ever since I stumbled wide-eyed into my freshman college class on Pre-Socratic Philosophers. That’s where I first I came across Heraclitus’s statement that “we cannot step into the same river twice”, and my eighteen-year-old sense of having a self-moving through time was confounded. What? What does that mean? What are the implications? Is there **more to it** than understanding you can’t step into the same river twice because as we know the river is constantly changing and you are constantly changing. As the poet Lynn Ungar recently wrote:

“Everyone knows you can’t step in the same river twice.

But really, the moment you submit to the cold and your toes hit the slippery rocks, the river you entered is already gone.

The boulders have been there for eons.

The minnows dart about the shallows but roughly speaking, remain.

The river itself is nothing but movement, flowing like time in the only direction it can go. It moves without volition, without resistance, blessed by gravity to know where it must go. Your choice is more complicated, but not much. Don’t imagine that you are immune to gravity or time. Take your pick. Your options are to stay safe and dry on shore, or slip into the current and be carried away. “

There’s another body of water we’ve evoked this morning in this service, in the story that KP told this morning from a commentary on the book of Exodus in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Red Sea -- not really a river, not really an ocean – a wide marshy wetland, actually a kind of in-between body of water, just like the one we’re crossing now. We’re not sure how deep it is or how wide across and we’re at the edge and there’s an impending army of threats not far behind us -- budgets and inflationary pressures, virtual versus in-person church, will people come back or stay away? white supremacy culture challenges. How do we enter that territory that’s in front of us? How do we cross?

Well, I gotta say what most of you probably already know - every minister has some kind of Moses complex. We interim ministers can think that, because we arrive in a new congregational culture with tools and tasks and things to suggest from our training, that we've got lots, if not all, the answers. Early on in my interim career I thought if I just brought the big staff and told the waters to part – they would! And that's when I return to the story of Nahshon that KP told us this morning for a reality check about what religious leadership is really all about.

Moses, the Hebrew people and Nahshon all stood at the edge of the Red Sea - and All of Moses' magic tricks up there on the high rock overlooking the water hadn't worked! Most of us have that dramatic moment in Cecil B Demille's Ten Commandments when Moses stretches out his rod and says "Behold the Power of the Lord!" and wow! Hollywood magic happens. But life is not like that. We stand on the edge of uncertain waters, and if we venture in, we don't know what will happen. Maybe we'll drown or maybe we'll be carried along by the current. The least likely scenario is that the waters will part and we can walk through on dry land.

What on earth compelled Nahshon to step into that water? Nahshon was just an ordinary guy, but somehow he believed that this covenant that the Jewish people had developed with God through their enslavement, and through their liberation from Egypt, would be tested but never broken. And with that confidence, maybe he just looked around and said "well, nobody else gonna do it, might as well be me." So he went first – not Moses – not Joshua – Nahshon went first. He kept wading in – up to his knees, up to his nose, right? And then, just when he thought he might be going under – the miracle happened. The water parted. The text doesn't even say it that "then Yahweh parted the waters". It just happened because Nahshon took that first step and waded in.

And, the most important part for me of this midrash is that it wasn't the leader who made the magic happen. It was Nahshon, from the congregation, who did.

Maybe at this moment you resonate with Nahshon, who mustered up the courage to wade in that foreboding body of water; not knowing if the covenant would sustain him; or maybe you you are feeling more like Lynn Ungar today, who reminds us that we are not immune to gravity or time, but that we have a choice, to stay safe on the shore, or to jump in with our whole selves. We need both kinds in this church – the waders and the jumpers. Each approach has their own special courage..

Interim ministry makes room for both; Sometimes we wade in cautiously and carefully; testing the temperature of the water. And sometimes, because of time pressures and the needs of the congregation, we will just jump in, knowing that the river – this river – carries us forward into a never-ending, ever flowing stream.

Every congregational year we begin the same way. We gather together by bringing the waters. You have made a tradition of welcoming back our friend Peter Mayer. We bring our water from many places on the planet – oceans, lakes, rivers, and even our own backyard. These familiar rituals are like the giant boulders planted firmly in the river we are on.

Sometimes we need to cling to them when our tiny rubber rafts threaten to overturn. Sometimes we just enjoy and admire them as they pass by, knowing that the river we are on is never the same. We are changed and changing and this year will be like no other.

I'm wading in with you because I believe in this congregation; in its vision, its mission and its heart. Will you wade in with me? Can I count on you to not only step in this river but to be swimming alongside with me – with us – with your leaders and your staff? Come on Unity – let's wade in together, because I believe with my heart, mind and soul – that this water – YOUR water - is gonna be FINE.