
Back to the Water

**A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Pentecost – Year B**

There is a yellow canoe that sits under my parent's porch. Like a true southern family, this canoe has a story, and is prominent in many of our family stories.

Shortly after my parents married, they liquidated stock in order to acquire this canoe. As fate would have it, the stock went on to split and double, and had they exercised some fiscal restraint, today my parents would have a lake house with a nice boat; but instead, they have yellow canoe under their porch.

Be that as it may, the yellow canoe has blessed us with a wealth of lessons and memories. That canoe became my parent's marriage therapist. It taught them relationships require balance, especially amidst swift currents. It instructed them on the dangers of not communicating and failing to chart a course. Without balance, communication, and a sense of direction, the canoe would capsize and my parents would lose all their beer!

I thought about that yellow canoe as I began packing my office. In my office is a Bible given to me on Pentecost 1994, the day of my confirmation. The service took place on a Sunday evening, so like any 15-year-old boy, I begged my parents to skip church that morning. Who needed church twice in one day?

When it became clear staying home to play Nintendo wasn't an option, I phoned a friend and we opted for a theological argument. We told our parents that at Confirmation we were confirming our baptismal vows and becoming disciples. So, it seemed fitting to spend our morning like the disciples, fishing in our yellow canoe.

It worked. We fished in the morning and were confirmed in the evening. It was a glorious day.

Pentecost 1994 taught me something very important. I learned that the Holy Spirit has a way of drawing us back to the water, back to the water of baptism.

At major moments in life, whether it be confirmation, graduation, marriage, having children, or final sermons, the Spirit has a way of drawing us back to the water of baptism.

During life's struggles, whether it be the loss of a job, illness, divorce, or even death itself; even in those moments, the Spirit has a way of drawing us back to the water of baptism.

Today, on this Pentecost Sunday, we bring these children to the water.

Archbishop Rowan Williams says the muddy waters of the Jordan River defined Jesus' ministry, as the Spirit sent him to proclaim the good news to the sinful, sick, the unclean, and those who were on the fringes of society.

The muddy waters of the Jordan River became a powerful current that flowed throughout Jesus' life and ministry. In baptism, we enter the muddy waters with Jesus!

We know the waters of life are muddy, turbulent, and all too often uncertain.

Life is difficult. Relationships are complicated. And for some reason, our children (and these children being baptized) were not born with instruction manuals. Navigating the waters of life is daily challenge.

Yet, the Spirit calls us back to the water of baptism.

The Holy Spirit calls us to see Jesus in the muddy waters of our lives, and the Holy Spirit wants us to know the water of baptism continues to through our lives!

This font...this water...remind us that the Christian life is best lived, not fighting, but leaning into the current.

Leaning into the current was one of the greatest lessons I learned in that yellow canoe.

During my teenage years I would canoe the Hiawassee River. Every year, I would go back to the river and have clean run until I got to one of the last rapids; it was called "the Funnel." For those of you who don't know the Hiawassee, imagine a large river coming to a funnel with a series of rocks and waves.

The first time I went down the Funnel, I panicked, took my paddle out of the water, grabbed onto the side of the boat, and ended up hitting a rock, taking in water and swimming the rapid.

The next few years I would try different routes to avoid the swift current. At least two years, I went river left, but each of those years the boat would catch a rock and I was back in the water.

The worst year was when I went river right and got sucked into cross current that ended up pinning me against a downed tree. I was holding onto a branch for dear life. As I tried pulling myself up, the current pulled my swimsuit down...all the way down to my ankles.

As youth groups and families came through the rapid, the sun was shining river left and I was giving them a full moon river right!

I spent most of my teenage years trying to get that yellow canoe through that stupid rapid.

Finally, one year I did the unthinkable. I didn't go river left or right, instead, I leaned into the current and went straight down the middle.

Yes, the waves were big and the water was fast, and there were definitely moments when the canoe came close to flipping, but I did what all paddlers are taught to do (and what all Christians should do), I leaned into the current!

Today, the Spirit brings us back to the water of baptism.

No matter who you are or where you, this holy water continues to flow through your life. Perhaps the greatest thing you and I can do this morning, is trust in that holy (and often muddy) water and lean into it the current. Lean into the water of baptism.

Lastly, I can think of no better way to end my ministry at this parish than standing at this water.

Standing at this water are colleagues that have been companions in faith and exemplars of grace.

Standing at this water are each of you, parishioners who have invited me into your lives for the best of times and worst of time. You have become friends, family, and incarnate examples of Christ love.

As I stand at this water today, I will think of those who are not here, parishioners who now rest upon another shore and in a greater light. They taught me how to live a life of faith and showed me that even at the grave we can sing a glorious Alleluia.

As difficult as today is for me, I feel blessed to have been called to serve this parish. And, if I have learned anything at the Cathedral of St. Philip, it is that God does amazing things when we lean into the water of baptism.

Ironically, you have also taught me the water of baptism is an appropriate time to make an exit.

Let me conclude with the following verses:

As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the Ethiopian said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the Ethiopian, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the Ethiopian saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8: 36-39)

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