



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – November 11, 2007 Pond or Stream? The Virtuous Circle Part II
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Genesis 12:1-2

12 Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

John 13: 12-17

12 After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you?' ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

John 21: 21:15-17

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' ¹⁶A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' ¹⁷He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.

1 John 3:16-18

¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? ¹⁸Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

If you walk all the way down the hill and across the lower pasture of our Maryland farm, you'll come to a beautiful stream that runs across our property and down to the headwaters of the Patuxent River. Cross

the stream and climb the hill on the other side and you'll come to a lovely little farm pond.

Streams and ponds have a lot in common. After all, they're both just configurations of water: from rain, from springs, from other streams. But we all know instantly whether we're looking at a stream or a pond. The difference is flow. Take water from rain or springs or streams and dam it up so it can't flow, and you have a pond. Open a breach in the dam so the water can flow out, and you won't have a pond anymore, you'll have a stream. The difference is flow.

Our pond has the charms of most ponds, but it also has the problems of all ponds; and all the problems arise from the lack of flow. With nowhere to go, the stagnant water silts up, heats up, dries up, and suffocates under a thick mat of algae only a biologist could love. I had to spend hundreds of hours maintaining the pond banks so the water didn't flow out, dumping in chemicals to knock back the algae, and pumping water from the stream up into the pond to keep up with summer evaporation.

The stream, on the other hand, is a miracle of God's nature. It runs strong and clean twelve months a year: cold, clear water rushing under the bridge, sliding over the shoals, and bubbling over the rocks. I never spent 5 minutes maintaining the stream; it just did its thing naturally all year long. The difference is flow.

Little wonder, then, that the Bible so often likens God to a flowing stream or spring, but never to a pond or pool or even a lake. The Psalmist sings, "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. [Psalm 42:1.] "You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water [Psalm 65:9]; Little wonder that God's most cherished promises are to pour that stream into our lives. Isaiah hears God promise, "For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring." [Isaiah 44:3.]. John hears Jesus

promise, "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." [John 4:14.] The essence of God is flow. That's my first point this morning. Flow is what God is. Flow is what God does. Flow is what God gives.

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, put it like this: *"What God gives is God. If we say that what God gives is life or being or goodness, then effectively what we are saying is that God gives God. . . . [T]he life that God gives is . . . an energy of sharing, an energy of movement, of diffusion, of spreading out To receive is not to have a possession, it's to be caught up in the stream of God's action."*¹

Now, that's a sophisticated bit of theology. God isn't a being so much as God is a doing. God is an active verb. God is living, loving, giving. And what this God gives us is God's living, God's loving, God's giving. It's sophisticated, but it boils down to a simple thought: God is more stream than pond.

And, truth be told, we all knew that before we surveyed either Scripture or theology. We all knew that just from looking out the window or shifting in our pews or looking up at the cross before the service began. If God were like a pond, there would be nothing out those windows, for God would never have flowed into creation as generative love. There would be no you or me, for God would never have flowed into Adam and Eve as Spirit of Life. There would be no Christ, no Cross, no Church, for God would never have flowed through Jesus as God's only begotten son, so that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life. [John 3:16.]

That's my first point. God is more like a stream than a pond; God's essence is flow.

My second point is that because God created us in God's image, we too are created to be streams not ponds. God promises Abram, that God will bless Abram so that Abram might be a blessing to all humanity. [Genesis 12:2]. Paul writes that we are to be imitators of God [Ephesians 5:1-2], we are to give as God gives: freely, lovingly, openly – more like a stream than like a pond.²

We are never truer to our intended nature and purpose than when we are, as Archbishop Williams writes, "caught up in the stream of God's action." We

are never more fully alive than when we are what Martin Luther called channels of God's love and grace flowing into creation.³ Our essence is flow. We, too, are what we do: living, loving, giving.

We were created to be more like streams than like ponds. But again, truth be told, we knew that before we surveyed scripture and theology as well. We knew that from the data of our own lives.

Reflect for a second on a time when you have felt most fully alive. Was it a time when you were self-consciously defending, protecting, or husbanding your resources behind a sturdy pond bank? Or was it a time when some blessing or bit of grace overcame your self-concern, and you felt yourself opening to God's love, and energy, and creativity flowing through you. Reflect for a second on which of your friends most glow with a customary demeanor of joy and gratitude. Aren't these the same friends who just happen to be the most generous with their time, their care and their resources?

We are meant to be more like streams than ponds, but there is a worldly siren song that preys upon our priorities and understanding of life. The siren song says the more we give to others the less we have for ourselves. The siren song says God's promises of provision are illusory, a chump's bargain. The siren song says our lives and capacities are fragile, always just one banana peel of illness, or business reversal, or twist of fate away from incapacity, penury and shame.

The siren song is a lie, but it sows fear, anxiety, and a grasping acquisitiveness that transforms us from streams to ponds, swelling our assets but shriveling our souls. As Miroslav Volf noted, the logic of the pond leads to an insatiable cycle of anxious grasping: *"It is possible to have a fortune and as many talents as any Renaissance man and still be poor. The bottomless pit of our hollow core will never be satiated. No matter how much we have, we remain "not-enough" people"*⁴.

My law firm represented Howard Hughes, then the richest man in the world. A partner once told me of his first meeting with the billionaire. The partner was given instructions to fly to Las Vegas, check into the Desert Inn Hotel, and wait for instructions. Two nights later, he received telephoned orders. Drive out into the desert for two hours to a designated rendezvous. He arrived at the rendezvous and waited some thirty minutes in the

dark until a car pulled up, Hughes's Mormon retainers politely opening a door for him to get in. They drove another hour to a second rendezvous point, waiting for a car that eventually pulled in behind them. The partner was ushered to the second car, stepping in to meet the shrunken, paranoid billionaire. An enormous pond of wealth, almost entirely devoid of life.

You might view John's Gospel as God's love note to your heart seeking to break the spell of the siren song. Jesus comes among us warning of the dangers of the grasping life and inspiring and then modeling the life of God's flow. Washing his disciples feet like a servant, Jesus teaches, ¹⁴*So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.* ¹⁵*For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.* [John 13:14-15.] Feeding his disciples a breakfast of fresh grilled fish, Jesus teaches Peter to go forth and do likewise, manifesting his love for Jesus by feeding his sheep. [John 21:15-17.] Jesus came to teach us the law of flow. He came to convert us from ponds back to streams so that we might fully live.

To paraphrase Frederick Buechner, "The siren song says, the more you take, the more you have. Christ says, the more you give, the more you are." It's the law of flow. You saw the law of flow lived on the YG mission trip. Giving up their family vacations, 95 kids worked their hearts out, slept on the floor, and nursed each other through the flu. After 10 days, they were more alive than they had ever been before.

In his book, Run With The Horses, Eugene Peterson tells of watching a mother swallow teaching her young to fly. The three fledglings were clinging desperately to a dead branch stretching out over a lake. The mother swallow got alongside the chicks and started shoving them toward the end of the branch. Pushing, pushing, pushing, she pecked and pecked at their little talons until it was more painful for the chicks to hang on than to risk the insecurities of flight. One by one they released their grips, one by one they began pumping their wings, one by one they soared, wheeling freely in the air. The mother swallow knew what the chicks did not – that they would fly – that there was no danger in making them do what they had been designed to do.

"Birds can walk and birds can cling," Peterson writes, "but flying is their characteristic action, and not until they fly are they living at their best, gracefully and beautifully."

Giving, Peterson continues, is what we do best. It is the action that was designed into us before our birth. But some people try desperately to hold on to themselves, to live for self. They are afraid to risk themselves on the untried wings of giving. If they would let go and let God, they would experience the thrill of flight. We were made to be givers. We were made to be streams more than ponds.⁵

My third point is really a question. What about you? Are you more like a stream or more like a pond? I'm not asking what you would like to say about yourself but, rather, what you really do. As John wrote in this morning's lesson, *"18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."*

Perhaps you've heard the old story about a farmer talking to the Lord, "If I had a million dollars, I'd give it all to you, Lord. And, if I had ten-thousand acres, I'd turn them all over to you." "Well" the Lord asked, "how about a pig?" "Take it easy there, Lord", the farmer replied, "I've actually got a pig."

Or then there were the three ministers bragging about their personal stewardship. The first minister said, "When God tells me to, I just empty my wallet into the collection plate." The second minister said, well, I draw a three foot circle around me, throw all my money in the air, and I donate everything that lands within the circle." "Oh, that's nothing," said the third minister, "I play catch with God. I throw all my money up to God and tell him to just throw back anything he doesn't want."

No, flow is about deeds not words. If you really want to find out if you're more stream than pond, I propose a subjective test and an objective test. Here's the subjective test: how do you feel in your heart? Do you feel caught up in the stream of God's action? Do you feel like an open channel, God's blessings flowing freely through you and on into creation. Do you feel free, trusting with Paul that no matter how generously you give, "God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good

work.” [2 Corinthians 9:8] Well, if you do, then you’re more like a stream.

Or do you feel stagnant: dammed up, silted up, and dried up - committed to hundreds of hours maintaining and protecting your assets, dumping chemicals into your system to knock back the algae of life, and constantly straining to pump more value into your holdings. Well, then you’re more like a pond. That’s the subjective test.

Here’s the objective test. Just take out your checkbook and your calendar. Billy Graham used to say that if you gave him just five minutes with a person’s checkbook he could exactly rank their priorities. Does your checkbook show more money going to your country club bond and dues, your dinner and entertainment bills, your second home and your vacations than to your church, the hungry, and the poor. Well, that’s kind of pondish isn’t it?

My friends, Stewardship Sunday is a gift from God to you: the gift of an opportunity to reflect on whether your life is more like a stream or a pond, an opportunity to discern whether your life is caught up in the stream of God’s action, an opportunity to carve out the breach in the dam that will free God’s living and loving and giving to flow through you and into creation.

The dynamo of God’s flow has always been gratitude. Grateful for what we receive, we generously channel our blessings to our world. So, let me close by asking you to reflect on the torrent of blessings pouring into your life every time you step into our beloved church.

We’re only here today because heroes of the faith sacrificed their lives for the Puritan cause of liberty and reformation in England. In October 1555, as reformer Hugh Latimer was led to his death at the stake for refusing to recant, he turned to his fellow prisoner and said, “Be of good cheer, Ridley. Play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God’s grace in England as I trust shall never be put out.” That candle lights our worship this morning.

We’re only here today because Governor John Winthrop and his Puritan band braved the North Atlantic and this howling wilderness to establish the new promised land, the New Canaan in the new

world. Half of them died in route or during their first bitter winter. Their spirit lives on in our congregation, our town, and our country.

We’re only here today because 275 years ago hardy subsistence farmers pressed out into the wilderness of Canaan Parish, paying a 4 ½% property tax to fund the construction of our meeting house. We’re worshipping in a house built with their hands now.

We’re only here today because generations of our puritan forebears tithed to establish our programs, labored to construct our buildings, and volunteered to teach the faith to their young. Their young passed it all down to us.

My friends, now is our time. The 275 year heritage of faith and generosity now passes into our hands. Now is our time to maintain our historic inheritance, expand to meet the needs of our generation, and prepare our legacy to future generations. It would be wrong to do less than our forebears, none of whom were as prosperous as we. It would be wrong to fail our progeny, children and grandchildren counting on us. What, after all, do we want them to say of us in 275 years.

We have been blessed so that we might be a blessing. Let us be caught up in the stream of God’s action. Let us be streams not ponds, God’s grace flowing through us and on into the next 275 years. **Amen.**

1 From Rowan Williams, “Think Niagra!” 1996 <http://natstew.diochi.org.uk/content/10-teaching-worship/05-sermons/05williams.htm> In the same sermon Williams writes, “In a way, to say we ‘receive’ the grace of God is as academic and abstract a way of putting it as to say that some little crevice halfway down Niagara Falls receives some water from the waterfall. Receiving isn’t quite adequate to the notion of being absolutely saturated and soaked by something that descends and passes on and draws you in.”

2 Williams continues, “What is given us — the world, each other and whatever it is that we have accumulated — if we really see it as from God, it has a restlessness about it, it won’t sit still. People sometimes talk about money burning a hole in your pocket — it’s the same sort of thing. The gifts

of God, if they really are seen as God's gifts, are restless, they burn holes, they don't sit still. To see a person as God's gift is to see them as restless, as growing, as moving — moving into our lives, demanding our involvement with them. To see the environment as God's gift is to see it as a restless sea of life which has its own energy and integrity, not something we can clamp down upon. And our own possessions, our own gifts and resources — material, spiritual, whatever — we can see them as restless, itching to be given. My gifts, my skills sit there restlessly. They wait to be put to work in the giving life of God.”

3 From the Large Catechism, section 9, <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/catechism/web/cat-09.html>: “Thus we have the Ten Commandments, a compend of divine doctrine, as to what we are to do in order that our whole life may be pleasing to God, and the true fountain and channel from and in which everything must arise and flow that is to be a good work, so that outside of the Ten Commandments no work or thing can be good or pleasing to God, however great or precious it be in the eyes of the world.”

4 Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge* (Zondervan, 2005).

5 Eugene H. Peterson, *Run With the Horses* (Intervarsity Press, 1983)