

**Go with the Flow**  
**Pentecost - May 31, 2020**  
**The Reverend Dr. Sandy Selby**  
**Acts 2:1-21, John 7:37-39**

The Girl Scout troop had arrived early for the event that was to take place in the basement of the cathedral, and were hanging around, killing time. One of those Girl Scouts, who was twelve years old, decided to walk up the back stairs to the cathedral and say a prayer. She knelt at the altar in that giant space that was in deep darkness but for one sanctuary lamp to the right of the altar. Suddenly a flash of light grew until the cathedral was bathed in light. She looked around, and there was nobody in the church. Then little by little, the light diminished, and the cathedral again was in darkness. She walked down the stairs knowing that the light was in her, and she would bring it with her wherever she went.

More than seventy years later, the Benedictine nun and author Joan Chittister tells how that experience in the cathedral has stayed with her, all these years. She says, “After that moment, to this moment today, I have had a sensation of the presence of God, and I never, ever lost it. In the darkest times, in the brightest times, there is somehow around and in me, a sense of security...I have felt that somehow or other I was being watched, or held, or led. Even when I feel cold physically, I feel wrapped in warmth.”<sup>1</sup>

What Sister Joan experienced in that cathedral is the power of the Holy Spirit that we celebrate today on Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit came among the early followers of Jesus with rushing wind and tongues of fire. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that before he ascended to heaven, Jesus promised his disciples that he would send them the Holy Spirit to empower them to be his witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Ten days later, he did just that.

The first mention of the Holy Spirit in the Bible is in Matthew’s gospel, when Mary is “found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Mt 1:18). But we hear of the Spirit of God beginning with the second verse of the Book of Genesis, where the Spirit of God is the very instrument of Creation, as “the spirit of God [which can also be translated wind, or breath of God] swept over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:2). That same Spirit “breathed into [Adam’s] nostrils the breath of life,” and he came alive (Gen 2:7). The Spirit of God was with God’s people from the beginning of Creation, guiding them through the wilderness and, later, through the return from exile in Babylon.

God’s Spirit was manifest when Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. As John the Baptist proclaimed, Jesus would baptize those who came to him “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Luke 3:16). In today’s reading from John’s gospel, Jesus speaks of how that Spirit of God will flow from him to those who follow him, and from them, to the world. He says, *Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, <sup>38</sup>and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.* ”

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me.” Oh, how the people thirsted! Jesus was one of many Jews who flocked to Jerusalem to celebrate the harvest Festival of Tabernacles. The city and the Temple were embroiled in conflict because Jesus’ message was so threatening to the

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Chittister, “Presence and Perpetual Goodness,” Podcast with Tami Simon, [soundstrue.com](http://soundstrue.com), 5/5/20.

Romans and to the Temple authorities. He was in danger, with threats of arrest, even death. Yet he did not back away from proclaiming his message of hope to those who lived under the oppression of the Romans and of the religious authorities who were complicit. On the day Jesus spoke the words we read today from John's gospel, there was a Temple ceremony in which water was poured out as a libation, recalling how God provided water from a rock to the ancient Hebrews wandering in the wilderness. Standing outside the Temple, Jesus said, "I am that living water, and that water flows from me. Drink of it." Earlier, when he had met the woman from Samaria at the well, he said, "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty." (John 4:14). In response, the woman at the well told Jesus, "Give me that water! I'm thirsty!"

So are we! We thirst for what we don't have, whether that be water, possessions, security, companionship, a job, justice, or an end to COVID-19. At times we feel parched, trapped in a desert wilderness. Jesus says, to each of us, "If you're thirsty, come to me. From you will flow rivers of living water, by the power of the Holy Spirit."

During these past several weeks when our public activities have been limited, I have hiked or biked nearly every day on the Towpath Trail in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. It has been a godsend. I have noticed that strangers speak with each other more than we used to, taking time to share our excitement at seeing a river otter, a green heron, or baby wood ducks. I have learned that children love to see turtles! Together we have experienced the blossoming of spring, the renewal of life, even as the media remind us that we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

All of this takes place alongside the Cuyahoga River, whose streams and adjacent canal intersect and adjoin the Towpath. As I rode my bike north from Peninsula on Wednesday, I thought about the Cuyahoga in relation to the rivers of living water that flow from our hearts through the Holy Spirit. What does the Cuyahoga River tell us about life that is nourished and sustained by the waters of the Holy Spirit? And what gets in the way of that flow?

One thing the river tells us is that living waters can become toxic. That happened in Cleveland fifty years ago, when oil-soaked debris in the river caught fire. And like the tongues of fire that got the attention of the people in Jerusalem on Pentecost, the tongues of fire that spread along the Cuyahoga River got our attention! The Clean Water Act passed three years later, and the river and its habitat have slowly, but surely, come to life.

Rivers can be toxic, and so can we. When we become toxic through prejudice, self-seeking behavior, rage, or simmering conflict, the rivers of the Holy Spirit cease to be life-giving to ourselves, or to others.

We can also impede the flow of a river by the barriers we place in its way. In the Cuyahoga River those barriers are in the form of dams that restrict wildlife movement and build up toxic sludge. Fortunately, they are being removed. The removal of a dam in Cuyahoga Falls a few years ago gave rise to Class IV rapids that are a delight to highly-skilled kayakers. Work to remove the Brecksville Dam began this past week. The Gorge Dam will be removed within the next five years. Ultimately, the living waters of the Cuyahoga, and its wildlife inhabitants, will flow freely.

What barriers, what dams, do we place in the way of the living waters of the Spirit? We may erect barriers of hard-heartedness as self-protection against grief, loss, or disappointment. What barriers do we place in the way of nourishing and transforming the world around us with the living waters that flow through us from the heart of God? As I read the newspaper, words

like, “self-interest,” “prejudice,” and “structural and institutional racism” come to mind. We simply cannot deny the reality of the sin of structural and institutional racism in our society, with the death this week of George Floyd in Minneapolis—and of others before him—and with the disproportionate incidence of infant mortality and of COVID-19 deaths among African-Americans here in Akron and elsewhere. Structural and institutional racism and the economic, social and health inequities that spring from it are a sin against the Holy Spirit. As we celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit among us today on Pentecost, may we commit to open our hearts and minds to the ways in which the Spirit is calling us to be a witness and advocate for God’s desire for love and justice for all God’s people.

The river teaches us that toxicity and barriers get in the way of its flow. But there are other, more life-giving lessons the river can teach us. This week, I saw on the river south of Boston Mill a half dozen people in kayaks. As they approached the rapids, one of them took the lead to guide the group through the rocks submerged beneath the water. I could see the subtle course adjustments the kayakers made with their paddles along the way. The life of faith is like that. The power of the Spirit keeps us moving, and we make course corrections in response to life’s currents and rapids.

Farther along the river were two big blow-up rafts, each with a person sprawled out upon it, floating peacefully along with the current. I could hear their laughter. By the power of the Holy Spirit we, like the people on river, get through the rapids, navigating around the rocks and challenges life puts in our way. We find joy, and the river of living waters that flow through us from the Holy Spirit extend that joy to the world around us.

The Holy Spirit is ever with us, flowing from God’s heart through ours, like a river, bringing God’s power and God’s love to others. Like the Cuyahoga River, the quality and flow of our river of living waters can be depleted when we become toxic, or erect barriers in its way. But the Holy Spirit never gives up. It keeps nudging us, sometimes gently, sometimes forcefully!

The Holy Spirit is not some wimpy, ethereal presence that drifts about in the heavens. It is Christ present with us, grounded in the earth and manifested with power, symbolized in Scripture as violent wind, tongues of fire, and rivers of living water.

This week I rode alongside the river on the Towpath Trail north of Peninsula as it narrows and forms rapids. Those rapids reminded me of another river whose rapids were not the relatively mild ones of the Cuyahoga, but the swift and powerful rapids of the New River in West Virginia, where I went with a group of friends some forty years ago. Before we got into the two rubber rafts that would take us down the river, our guides gave us wetsuits and life jackets, and taught us techniques for paddling around and through the rocks and rapids we would encounter. They told us what to do if we got launched out of the raft into the river, which can happen during some of the steep drops in the Class IV and V rapids of the New River. “If you go overboard, do not try to swim to the raft! The current is too strong. What you need to do is lay flat on your back, put your feet out in front of you, and let the power of the river take you through the rapids. Just go with the flow.”

Midway through one of the big rapids on our way down the river I noticed that there was an empty seat on the raft in front of us. Someone had gone overboard! Eventually we caught up with our friend, Dawn, in relatively calm water, and got her back in the raft for the rest of the ride down the river. That night as we sat around the campfire, someone asked Dawn what it was like to get catapulted into the rapids: “Weren’t you scared to death?” Dawn replied, “No, I wasn’t scared at all. You see, I don’t know how to swim, so I didn’t try to fight against the

current. I knew that I was totally powerless. So I laid back, put my feet out in front of me to let the power of the river take me through the rapids, and said to myself, ‘Dawn, just go with the flow.’”

People of God, let us open ourselves to “go with the flow” of the living-giving waters of the Holy Spirit. And let us resolve to work together with people of goodwill to dismantle the barriers—the prejudice, policies, and structures—that block the flow of those living-giving waters, placing so many people of color in our city, and our nation, at risk. With God’s help, through this work of justice, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the life-giving waters of justice, love, and peace, will flow to all of God’s children.

Amen.