

“Welcoming All of Who We Are”

Homily delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
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Reading

“Living Waters” by Stephen Shick

Homily

Growing up in Chicago, I didn't spend a lot of time in natural bodies of water - in creeks, rivers, or ponds. We would go to Lake Michigan every so often, but not enough for me to grow really comfortable in bodies of water besides the city pool down the street.

So, it wasn't until I had moved away from home that I started to be a bit more adventurous on the water and to really enjoy recreational water activities.

I distinctly remember my first canoeing trip. It was with friends in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. I loved the peacefulness of it and our slow but steady pace down the river. But, then suddenly the person I was paddling with, someone who was also an inexperienced canoe-er, started to move around and shift his weight in search of something and before either of us knew it, our canoe had flipped and we were dumped into the river.

The water was fairly shallow and we had friends in another canoe nearby to help us, so we were able to laugh it off and get our canoe right side up again fairly easily.

I was amazed at how quickly this experience on the water could go from being peaceful and serene to having it all upturned.

I think we are all returning here or arriving here to the Unitarian Church of Montpelier for the first time having had some moments of peace this summer, perhaps even moments of joy, and also moments of upheaval.

Despite the beautiful sunny day we are enjoying here, I know that many of us this morning are concerned about Hurricane Irma as it reaches land in Florida. Especially with this following just days after Hurricane Harvey and the damage caused by the unprecedented amount of rain. And, meanwhile, the skies in the western part of the country are filled with smoke and ash as wild fires continue in eight states in that region.

These events just within our borders likely have some of you feeling a sense of doom and distress. It can be confusing and dispiriting how suddenly things can seem to upturn.

Others of you may simply see this as the predicted impacts of global warming truly coming to fruition. Ocean waters have been warming leading to more intense storms for hurricane prone regions, and drought and high heat have created ideal conditions for wild fires. Though the symptoms of an earth in distress seem to be coming on quickly, the causes have been mounting for years.

The summer, as brief as it was, was also full of a litany of disturbing and heart-wrenching events: continuing terrorist attacks around the globe, the rise of neo-Nazi, anti-semitic, and white supremacist hate groups within our borders, and continued attempts to disenfranchise the vulnerable in our society - the poor, immigrants, and people who are transgendered.

On a more personal note, we have each had our own sources of heartache, stress, worry, and loss amidst the recreation and fun of the summer season.

The waters we are in are churning. This moment we find ourselves in is churning with turmoil and disruption. And, it is a challenging time to find a sense of peace.

In this community, we bring all of this with us as we worship together, share meals, sit in meditation, share in reflection in small groups, teach our children, make music. We bring all of our angst, our despair, and our confusion. And, as tentative as it may feel at times, we also bring our hope, our happiness, and our gratitude.

All of this is welcome here.

And, though this might be easy to say - that we are all welcome and that all of who we are is welcome - I don't believe it is all that easy to live.

When we welcome all of who we are, we may feel discomfort. Discomfort within ourselves as we acknowledge the multitudes and paradox we contain within ourselves, and also discomfort with the diversity of opinions, backgrounds, beliefs, and choices we find within this gathered community. This kind of diversity can create turbulence.

Yet, I also believe that all of who we are in our collective humanity is needed to face the challenges, turmoil, and tragedy of these times.

Just as it is the fullness of our humanity that allows us in our everyday lives to face the everyday challenges of human living.

Sometimes we make it through the day with smiles and laughter. Sometimes we make it through with overflowing tears. Sometimes we just keep moving forward because there is no other choice.

Here, in this community, we welcome one another to ask the tough questions together, to seek answers that may only be adequate in the moment, to share of our gifts to face the tough days ahead.

Water is an appropriate element to have present amongst us as we begin again another church year. As Stephen Shick alludes to in his poem, water is so often the starting point of a new journey or a new way of being. Water can give rise to new possibilities and hope.

And, even when the waters are churning around us and it may seem like we have no options, we can do what we can, with what we have, where we are.

One story in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey demonstrates this well. As Hurricane Harvey bore down on Houston just days ago, the workers at El Bolillo Bakery on the southeast side of the city worked overtime to make enough bread for those who were stocking up. The bakery closed late that Saturday and most of the workers were able to get home before the worst of the storm. Four workers, however, found themselves trapped by the rising floodwaters. With nowhere to go and nothing they could do outside the walls of the bakery, they turned to what they could do. They baked. For two days.

Fortunately, the flood waters did not seep in and the store never lost electricity. The bakery's manager, who finally was able to get to them that Monday, estimates that they used over 4,000 pounds of flour. At night, the bakers slept on the floor, on makeshift beds, and on sacks of flour. The thousands of loaves of bolillos, kolaches, and pan dulce that were made were delivered to various shelters for those who had fled their homes throughout the city.

These loaves of bread won't stop the next hurricane from forming or assist in rebuilding devastated cities and towns.

But, perhaps they can inspire us to do what we can, in whatever ways we can.

To welcome our ability to help and to serve even in the most trying of times.

To welcome one another's humble gifts and offerings.

To invite and welcome gratitude even amidst life's sorrows and devastations.

Together, may we create living waters. Churning, vibrant waters to help us wash clean the world and to find our own inward sea.

So may it be.