

The Circulation of Love.3 Nicodemus  
Romans 8:22-25 John 3:1-9  
May 31, 2015 Alan Claassen

Five years ago I was serving the First Congregational Church in Murphys.

Murphys a little town in the Sierra Foothills two hours south of Sacramento  
and two hours north of Yosemite.

One year, right at this time of the year, Betsy and I, and our son and my father  
went to Yosemite Valley.

As we all know, Yosemite Valley is a sacred place.

It inspires reflection, humility, joy, and gratitude.

It also gifts us with deep questions, such as the one I asked Betsy,  
while were looking up at one the waterfalls,  
water cascading over the cliff hundreds of feet above us.

I asked, “When does a river know that it is about to become a waterfall?”

To which Betsy quickly replied, “Too late!”

And then she took the question to another level by asking,

“When do the fish know, that their river is about to become a waterfall?”

We didn’t have an answer for that one.

Yosemite Valley is a sacred place.

That asks us:

“What do I do when my life suddenly changes  
from stream to waterfall?”

Will I become a stream again,  
or has life forever changed?”

So as my family and I walked through Yosemite Valley,  
got baptized by the mist of the dispersed water  
at the foot of Bridal Veil Falls;  
watched children play with sticks and rocks  
along the bank of the river,  
seeing a wedding about to begin  
on the beautiful grounds of the Awahnee Hotel

I was thinking about the river,  
That becomes waterfall,  
That becomes river again on a new level.

And because of a book I was reading at the time  
I also began thinking about the Trinity.  
Yes, I was thinking about the Trinity,  
the idea that is blasphemous to some and troubling to many,  
that portrays the nature of the Holy One  
as the Holy three.

The book that inspired me to remember the Trinity while in Yosemite Valley  
is entitled, The Wisdom Jesus, written by Cynthia Bourgeault.

In her book, Cynthia Bourgeault  
imagines a great waterwheel of a grain mill, with three buckets,  
Going round and round,  
constantly spilling-over into one another.

And as they do so, the mill turns,  
and the energy of love,

becomes manifest and accessible. (pg 71)

As the waterwheel turns and the buckets  
filled with water empty themselves,  
their water fills the bucket below them,  
and the waterwheel turns.

This circulation of love reveals  
God's innermost nature  
through a continuous round dance of self-emptying. (pg 72)

My bucket is filled with love and I empty it into yours,  
God says to creation.  
Let there be light.  
And it is good.

My bucket is filled with love and I empty into yours,  
Jesus says to humanity on the way to the cross,  
Let there be peace.  
And it is good.

My bucket is filled with love,  
The Holy Spirit says to the lost disciples,  
Let there be community, and it is good.

This is how I saw the Trinity in the river above,  
the river below  
and the waterfall in between.

Just as a waterwheel turns

And the buckets filled with water empty themselves

So that their water fills the bucket below them...

Love moves from river above

To river below,

With the self-giving release of trust, courage, and transformation.

This is how I saw God,

as I stood in one spot on the valley floor.

God, as complete unknowable mystery,

is the Yosemite Valley in its awesome entirety.

There is no way to describe Wholly Love, Holy Mystery

best to just immerse oneself in its glory and say Amen!

God, as when we name God, is the river before it becomes waterfall,

High above the Valley floor.

Jesus the Christ is the complete act of trust in God,

Self-emptying love; bringing love to the valley floor.

The Holy Spirit is the water become river again,

Nourishing the meadow,

And the animals,

Providing a place of joy for the children,

And place for the fish to swim.

And then, I placed my life in this image:

as river above, thinking that I know where my life is going...

become waterfall, falling, losing shape, trusting, letting go,...

become river again, the next step in my journey, ...

where I can find my place with a new life and a new community.

As I saw myself in the three phases of the river,

I begin to sense

a way to pray our way into an answer to the question

I asked earlier in this sermon,

“What do I do when my life suddenly changes  
from stream to waterfall?”

Will I become a stream again,

or has life forever changed?”

Meditating on the wisdom of the waterfall

I caught a glimpse of the reality that my true self is not

Defined by a riverbank,

Or a job,

Or a relationship.

These aspects of life are when I am defined by my work or personal relationships.

They are important, they are good they are life-giving, identity-giving.

But sometimes they fall away.

Sometimes the course of our life changes;

just as for a river that knows too late,

it is about to become a waterfall.

Meditating on the wisdom of the waterfall, the Trinity, the waterwheel,

I caught a glimpse of the reality that my true self is water

That can and does take many forms.

How do I ride the falls?

What do we do when our life has changes from a river to a waterfall?

From Waterfall to river that provide habitat for life

as it nourishes the land and the Tree that will not be moved?

How do we ride the falls?

How do we ride that impatient moment when something new is born within but it has not yet taken shape or form?

How do we expectantly wait for a new vision for

a renovated sanctuary and a minister who will walk with the Ladies and Gents and children of this church?

Perhaps we need a trail guide,

someone who knows the Yosemite Valley very well.

Listen to this story a book by John Muir, entitled Yosemite.

I personally think that he is saying the same thing to us that Jesus was saying to Nicodemus and Paul was saying to early church in Rome.

Here is how John Muir says we can ride the falling

When the avalanche started I threw myself on my back  
and spread my arms to try to keep from sinking.  
Fortunately, though the grade of the canyon is very steep,  
on no part of the rush was I buried...  
and as the whole mass beneath and about me  
joined in the flight there was no friction,  
though I was tossed here and there  
and lurched from side to side and came to rest  
I found myself on top of the crumpled pile without a bruise or a scar.  
This was a fine experience.  
This flight  
in what might have been called a milky way of snow-stars  
was the most spiritual and exhilarating of all the modes of motion  
I have ever experienced.

Rather than fighting the avalanche in fear  
John Muir rode it in trust  
and had the time of his life.  
He sounded like a little kid.

We can give ourselves to trust and love rather than fear and doubt.  
We can chose to remember that God is with us  
in the river above,  
the river falling,  
the river below.  
And remember that just as John Muir had the training,

to know what to do when falling down a mountain side,  
we have the training that comes from our spiritual practices  
and from being in community together.

We can empty our water bucket,  
Filled with love, and regret and brokenness, fear and confusion,  
Trusting that we will be filled again,  
Trusting that our life,  
Will once again be one that nourishes our true self  
and our community.

And will move out of that waterfall that lasted too long,  
we groaned  
That will move from that not-knowing-what-was-next  
that lasted too long,  
we groaned  
That will move out of that feeling of helplessness that lasted too long,  
we groaned  
and then we stopped fighting it, we opened up our arms and we let go  
and we laughed.

In other words, First Congregational Church in Sonoma, United Church of Christ,  
I have news for you.  
You are old  
and you are pregnant.

I would like to close with more words from Maya Angelou's poem, *On the Pulse of a New Morning*.  
Lift up your hearts

Each new hour holds new chances  
For a new beginning.  
Do not be wedded forever  
To fear, yoked eternally  
To brutishness.

The horizon leans forward,  
Offering you space to place new steps of change.  
Here, on the pulse of this fine day  
You may have the courage  
To look up and out and upon me, the  
Rock, the River, the Tree, your country.

Here, on the pulse of this new day  
You may have the grace to look up and out  
And into your sister's eyes, and into  
Your brother's face, your country  
And say simply  
Very simply  
With hope --  
Good morning.

Let the people say: Amen.