

Sermon 2009 Easter 5
May 10, 2009
Text: John 15:1-8
Theme: "Swept Away"

As I take youth on trips, they learn that I can find theological parallels in almost everything. God has given us a world of object lessons and we have only to open our eyes and our ears. One of the best teachers in nature is white water.

There are things about white water rafting that simply defy common sense. When you're driving a car and it starts going too fast, you take your foot off the gas right? But, when you are in the rapids, guess what? There's no gas pedal. You cannot control a river! That river is going to take you just as fast as it wants to. But we all work hard to maintain our illusion of control so when the river begins to speed out of control, the novice white-rafter will stop paddling and just sit up in the boat. BAD IDEA! I know it seems right according to common sense but you can throw common sense out the window on this one. When the river speeds out of control and you are flying down those rapids, you lean into the person in front of you and paddle like your life depended on it. See, the tension of leaning into the paddle and the water pushing back on the paddle tends to lock you

down on the boat. It's when you stop paddling that you get thrown out of the boat.

Sometimes life moves too fast. Those rapids in life can be either good or bad but either way, we have all experienced life when we were bouncing through the rapids hard. So, maintaining the illusion that we can control life, sometimes we pull in the paddles and sit up in the boat. We withdraw from life, from each other and from God as though we somehow have the option of deciding when to participate in life. There're no rest areas in life. You either paddle like heck or you get dumped out of the boat and getting dumped out of the boat in life looks like loneliness, isolation and depression.

Now in the rapids, when you do get dumped out of the boat, common sense would say that you should swim for shore right? Nope – wrong again. It is appealing to reach shallow water and stand up on your own two feet. But there are several things wrong with that. First, in a rushing river, four or five inches of water will sweep the strongest among us off his feet. Second, while you're swimming for shore, the rest of your rafting party is racing down river without you. Third, it is in shallow water that the most danger exists because it

hides branches and rocks that will snag you, bruise you and drag you under. And finally, along the banks is where there are big rocks that have been undercut by centuries of the river flowing against them. If you get sucked under one of those rocks, you will most probably drown because the river forms a suction that holds you in that undercut for a good long time.

Sometimes we get bounced out of the boat in life too. Someone hurts us or we suffer loss of someone we love or loss of health or income or all of the above. Our nature immediately seeks shallow water believing that in shallowness we will be able to protect ourselves and stand up on our own. We will be able to control our position in the river. Of course you and I know that shallowness always ends up in more pain and suffering as we find ourselves, snagged by sin (sometimes the very sin that hurt us in the first place). We find ourselves battling to stand up by ourselves as everyone else sails on down the river and leaves us to drown by ourselves in the very shallows we created.

When you get bumped out of the raft in the white water (probably as a result of panicking when things got too fast and

stopping paddling), you are told to trust in the life vest – you’re not going to sink, and you’re told to swim for the deep water where you will fly like crazy in safe deep water and eventually you will catch up to your raft where you will be pulled back into the boat.

When life is flying and the stress is unbearable, it’s hard to go against common sense and swim for deep water. It’s hard to trust yourself to the deep water. It’s hard to believe that God is with you and will bear you up through the rushing river. And I understand folks, when you let the current take you, you might not end up where you wanted to be or where you thought you deserved to be. Don’t worry. Wherever you end up, it will be better than anything you planned. God promises that he turns all things for the good of those who love him. But it is okay to be afraid. There is no shame in fear. Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is persistence in pursuing something tenaciously because you believe that what you are pursuing is more important than fear.

Now Jesus looks at us today and says “Abide in me and I in you. I am the vine and you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him bears much fruit...” This is not a command to be better people.

I used to hear it that way, as though Jesus were saying that if we wanted him to abide in us, we had better straighten up and fly right!

With that theology, we become the sin police, running about and warning everyone who is making choices with which we don't agree. We warn them that they are not abiding in Jesus and that he's going to cut them off and throw them in the fire. Who among us has no sin? Who has set any of us up as judge over another? I have enough of my own sin to worry about without trying to snoop out yours. I have enough guilt and shame in my own life to overcome and while shaming you might distract me for a while, it does not solve my problem. My brothers and sisters, we are called to a much higher place in this world than sin police. We are evangelists.

I know that evangelism is a scary word but it just means "good news." I am not called to monitor your sin. I am called to tell you good news. I am called to tell you of the promise that Jesus made to all of us. A promise of salvation and eternal life with him in paradise! I am called to call you into the deep water with me where we can be swept down God's river together and while we don't know where we are going or what will happen around the bend, we will be together

and we will be lifted up by our Savior as we race through the rushing waters, comforted by his holy word and fed by his body and blood.

This text is his holy promise to us friends. Abide in me and I in you! Don't be afraid. You are connected to Jesus Christ the son of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and you will not be overcome. You will rise above every snag. You will overcome every undercut. Don't be afraid of the deep water because your Lord is with you and I am with you and together we will see things and do things of which the person who fights to stand in shallowness will never even dream.

AMEN.