

Learning to Float

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, (July 21) 2024

Isaiah 43:1-7; I Corinthians 12:12-14, 27; John 15:4-17

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*As swimmers dare/ to lie face to the sky/ and water bears them,/ as hawks rest/ upon
air/ and air sustains them,/ so would I learn to attain/ freefall, and float/ into Creator
Spirit's deep embrace,/ knowing no effort earns/ that all-surrounding grace.*

-Denise Levertov, *The Avowal*

I learned to swim in a motel swimming pool when I was five years old. Every summer my parents went on vacation and vacation meant the same thing until I was in high school. It meant that we vacationed three days – one day driving, one day vacationing, and one day driving back home. Most years of my childhood, it meant driving to Arlington, getting a motel, and going swimming. Then spend one day at Six Flags Over Texas, and the next morning swim some more in the motel swimming pool before packing up and heading home. It was there in a motel swimming pool that I learned to swim.

I remember that my mom sat on the edge of the pool holding my toddler brother while my dad had me in the pool teaching me standard lesson #1: how to float. Floating was not easy for a five-year-old. It meant learning to trust the buoyancy of my body and trust that the water would hold me, and I wanted to fight the water, attack it, because I was afraid of sinking and drowning. But Dad persisted. Learning to float was an essential skill if you're on a long swim and get tired. Floating allows the swimmer to rest. I eventually learned that sometimes there is no greater joy than floating in a pool, but especially on a lake, or in the

ocean, looking up into the vast sky at the birds soaring while resting in the waters of something so much bigger than we are.

Have you ever had the sensation of trusting that you are a part of something much bigger than yourself? That you can trust that you belong to something so large that you can relax, let go, and just be – that is what floating is for me.

When we first moved to East Texas among so many trees, I felt claustrophobic. I felt closed-in, I couldn't see the horizon and it bothered me, until I read a comment by a teenaged girl who spent her entire life in a big city of asphalt and concrete, noise, and crowds describe how it felt to go to church camp in the woods in the summertime. She said that the trees and woods made her feel safe. "Just going to chapel, I think I almost cried ... because it was so beautiful. You're looking out ... surrounded by trees, and it's like nature is hugging you" (from *In Deep Waters* by Talitha Amadea Aho, p. 69).

Here we are, Austin Heights, surrounded by trees. Let's feel embraced by these trees and the Loving God is who is so much larger than us.

Sometimes I walk into my study here at the church on days when there is no one else around. It is quiet and I sit at my desk surrounded by my books. I look over on one section and there are books by St. Augustine from the early 5th century, Aristotle who lived in the 4th century before Christ, and St. Thomas Aquinas of the 13th century. Shakespeare is over there and just above him is Dante and Chaucer and John Donne and Denise Levertov, over there is Flannery O'Connor and further over is Martin Luther King, Jr. Here is Toni Morrison and Wendell Berry and there is James Cone with Walter Brueggemann and Dietrich Bonhoeffer nearby. Central to them all is the Bible covering 12 to 13 centuries. Surrounded by books, I have this wonderful sense of belonging to a great

conversation that has been going on for a long time. I kind of float in the grace of it all.

And every Sunday is a sermon that is, at its best, an excursion into that large conversation.

Novelist and essayist Marilyn Robinson says part of the reasons she reads theology is the same reason she reads popularizations of string theory or quantum mechanics – “because of their description of the scale of things.” She says it is beautiful to think of the vastness of reality (see www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week829/interview.html).

All our scripture readings today are reminders of the vastness of reality, encouraging us to float in the reassurance that we belong to God, we belong to God’s creation, and we belong to each other.

Isaiah speaks to the people of Israel when they were at their lowest. They were distraught, feeling isolated, and cut-off in exile in the Empire, God reminds them that they belong. They/we belong to God and therefore, God will never forget us or give up on us. Fear not for God created us, formed us, calls us by name, and will bring us through the rough times ahead.

The Apostle Paul, in I Corinthians 12 reminds us that in our belonging to God in Jesus Christ, we also belong to one another in the body of Christ. We are connected. We belong to one another organically as different parts of a body that is mysteriously larger than we can imagine.

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus says, “*I am the vine, and you are the branches.*” This “you” is plural, as in “I am the vine, and *y’all* are the branches.” Jesus is not urging an individualistic spirituality where you meet him in

the isolation of your easy chair, but an organic gathering of his followers rooted in him and connected to one another. *“Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you all can do nothing.”*

Abide has to do with belonging, making a home, remaining, dwelling. But it is a belonging that perseveres and continues; it lasts. It has staying power. It endures, hangs in, holds on to us and in us. It has to do with trust and intimacy, a kind of resting and trusting and belonging that is deep and healing. Most especially during the hard times, abiding never lets us go.

The old, old story tells us that God created, and we belonged and are included but sin and evil resulted in fragmentation, disintegration, disconnection, and dismemberment. God’s redemption, salvation is that in Christ Jesus we are reconciled and included. In Christ, the process of belonging and healing for the whole world has begun. In Christ, we belong again as members of the body of Christ called the church. We are loved, we belong, and we can rest in the vast beauty of God’s arms around us.

I remember the first time Jane came to hear me preach. While in seminary, I was the interim pastor of a vibrant, small suburban church outside of Louisville, KY. I didn’t know she was coming that Sunday, I simply looked up and out there in the congregation there she was smiling that gorgeous smile. Oh my! In one moment, everything changed. I knew that this was not a one-time lark but was a new beginning. I walked into church that day alone as a single person. I walked out of church embraced and belonging.

Do you know you are loved and that you belong in God’s great mysterious embrace? No matter how much hate and bigotry we hear every day from politicians playing on people’s fears, the gospel says the bottom-line, the default

position is you are God's child. You belong and are beloved. And you can relax and rest, you can float in God's grace-filled embrace. Because in the world we're facing, we have a long swim in front of us.

My uncle, the family hero, used to tell my brother and me, of the time in high school he swam across the large local lake, the reservoir that provided water for our town and some of the surrounding towns. I think he did it on a dare, but he was an extraordinary athlete in top-notch condition and liked the challenge. He told us that a couple of times during that swim, he had to rest and float before continuing.

We have a long swim in front of us. We had better learn to float.

On a long swim we want to take with us that which helps us endure and put aside those things which entangle us or weigh us down. Theologian Robert McAfee Brown used to say, "We need to have a shake-down for action." To change back to the metaphors of John 15, Jesus says, God prunes away the old branches which no longer bear fruit, while other branches are pruned and trimmed so they will bear new fruit or more fruit (John 15:1-2).

Some months ago, I raised the question of Austin Heights dropping the word "Baptist" from our name. We would remain baptist in who we are and how we do things – congregational polity, autonomy of the local church, our continuing belief in the separation of the church and state. Which, by the way, most assuredly includes our opposition to Ten Commandments and Bible teaching in the public schools. We do not want people in Austin ill-informed or misinformed about the Bible, forcing it upon our school children! Hear me clearly, these are among historically baptist doctrines and convictions! When people ask, "What kind of Baptist church are you?" Jane and I will often answer, "We're Roger Williams

kind of baptists. We're radical baptists!" Part of the problem is that people no longer know who Roger Williams was and their understanding of radical baptists is often some sort of Baptists who hate more extremely.

We have a long swim in front of us, and we had better learn to float – *together*. Part of that means, I think, removing any barriers that induce fear among those of us who are LGBTQ and helps folks, helps students, know this is a safe place, a church in which we can rest in the embrace of a loving God. It is sad to me, but I think dropping the word Baptist might help that. And I think that come the Church Business meeting at the end of September, we'll likely vote on such a proposal.

We have a long swim in front of us. And together we want to learn to float. Let's learn to rest and renew and re-examine what we do well that produces fruit and what needs to be pruned away. How we do church education and formation, for example? Obviously, we need to be teaching and training for the long-haul swim in front of us. That means swimming lessons. And that means practice, practice, practice. Judy and I are reassessing how we can better do that? Different times and perhaps different days? More of this, less of that? We need input from you. And come the Fall, we'll need you to show up.

And come the Fall, we'll need you to give financially and perhaps learn to tithe. If you want there to be an Austin Heights Church for the long swim in front of us, you need to show up and you need to give.

It is hard to swim in waters full of random debris, floating trash, flotsam of hate and demagoguery, and the wreckage of broken lives, disappointment, and despair. It is easy to sink down into the depths of cynicism. It is easy for young people and young couples to look around at our national and state politics and

policies and say, “No one believes our lives and our planet are worth fighting for. No one believes we are beloved and belong, because if they did, they would fight for our future.”

Can we be a place, a people, a church who says, “Come on! You are loved by God and belong. Together we’ll fight for your future. Let us surround you with grace and love and learn to float together in God’s great embrace.”

We have a long swim in front of us. Let’s learn to float.

Former Catholic priest and now psychotherapist James Finley, who was a young protégé of Thomas Merton, the Catholic writer and monk, tells a parable of learning to float in a crisis so that our lives are transformed. He says:

Imagine you’re on a large boat with a lot of people crossing a vast expanse of ocean, and there’s a big party going on. Music is playing, people are dancing, and in a moment of carelessness, you fall off the back of the boat and nobody notices you have fallen.

You’re waving your arms and yelling, but the music is so loud no one hears you. You watch the boat disappear in the distance.

You realize you can’t tread water for very long, but you can float for a long, long time. So your strategy is to float until they recognize you’re missing and come back to look for you.

Now in order for you to float, you have to relax, because if you tighten up, you sink. So you’re out on the vast ocean there, lying flat on your back, the big swells of water rising and falling, rising and falling, and you’re there relaxing.

How would you be relaxing? You'd be relaxing very seriously because your life depends on it. It's a life-saving relaxation!

Hours pass. Darkness falls. You're floating on the water, face-up to a sky full of stars that are brighter than you have ever seen before. Hour after hour, rising and falling in the swells, you wait for morning to come.

Unexpectedly in the darkness, a feeling comes over you, seemingly out of nowhere. You look up at the night sky, stars sparkling like diamonds. The swell of the waves feels like the rhythmic breathing of the Earth and suddenly, you feel part of it all. Floating on the depths of the ocean, beneath the depths of the sky, you feel an unimagined depth open within you, and in that depth, you feel a poignant awareness that whatever happens, you are alive right now, in this moment. You feel yourself embraced in an infinite generosity that will uphold you whether you live or die. Birth and death, beginning and ending, all are taken up into one unfathomable gift of being alive and grateful and awake in this moment, now. You are so overwhelmed by this mysterious feeling of awakening that words fail you and you begin to cry.

Soon, dawn breaks, and out of the corner of your eye you see the boat coming back to look for you.

When your fellow passengers pull you aboard, you are hugging them, saying thank you, thank you, thank you. You begin to laugh. You are so glad they found you.

That night you have a nice meal. You take a long hot shower and you're lying in your bunk in a room on the boat, in the dark. You're so grateful they saved your life. But you know, on some deep level, that your life was really saved out

there on the sea, amid the rise and fall of the waves, under the stars, in the darkness, just before dawn.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.