

UUFM Sunday Order of Service
“A River Runs By It”
Zach Strasser and Lee Ganske
8/6/23

Gathering

Music: God is a River – Peter Mayer (on CD)

Welcome

Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato, where some of our space is virtual, but all of our worship is not. Our worship is entirely real and vital, life-giving and life-sustaining in all times, including in these times.

All you here today, you are all welcome in this time we make sacred together. All are loved, worthy, and needed. Our human differences are sacred and make us strong. All histories and experiences, all abilities and beingness, all identities and genders. All those seeking companionship and a sense of purpose, ready to embrace and to fulfill our Unitarian Universalist values. Here, you can bring your whole self.

In these times and in all times, may we move into action to create the world of equity and liberation about which we dream. May we hold reverently and tenderly this one life, the here and now of which we are certain.

Before European colonization, the Dakota peoples were stewards of the land on which our Fellowship building sits. In Dakota language, Ina is the word for both mother and land, a word reminding us that we are all relatives. The land does not belong to us, though it holds the history of our conflicts and our attempts at reconciliation. This congregation commits to an ongoing and intentional journey of humble connection with Indigenous peoples, characterized by understanding our shared history, accepting responsibility for restoration, and building relationship in the here and now. Thus, we seek to be good relatives.

I am Lee Ganske, a member of this congregation, honored and humbled to work with Zach Strasser to bring you today's service.

Thanks to:

Greeter, Deb Fitzloff

Tech Squad, Kat Clements and Andy Roberts

Family Support, Deb Fitzloff

Music, Edward and Justin Ganske

Additional presenter, Anika Rossow Strasser

Announcements

Here we are, gathered through Zoom and in the Sanctuary. We are grateful for technology and loving volunteers making it possible for us to be one congregation. If you know of people who don't like either the Zoom format or the in-person format, please let them know that they can find next week on our website a reading copy and a video of the sermon.

If you are new to the Fellowship, we are grateful that you are expanding the “we” who is “us”!

You can complete an online Newcomer Participation form if you like. There is also a form in the entryway a Greeter can help you find and on a yellow strip in the pews.

There will be a chance to visit together after the service at coffee hour in the Fellowship Hall as well, provided by Diane Dobitz. Thank you!

Those of you in the Sanctuary, we have collected the Joys and Sorrows you wrote at the table in the back of the Sanctuary. Feel free to make a note at any time during the service for me to read, and someone will run them up to me here.

Having so long been unable to gather as we wish, some of us still not able, these continue to be hard times indeed. Sunday morning worship is not yet again part of our weekly habits. And it is a feeling of belonging to community, to something larger than ourselves, that can help to get us through the loneliness and alienation. No one is alone, no one. And in the words of Bill Withers, "no one can fill Those of your needs that you won't let show." So, let us lean on each other in these times.

Chalice Lighting

Let us now move into a time of worship, shaping worth and meaning from the ordinary as a way to honor the gift of life we all share. Together, let us kindle a flame symbolizing our co-creation of sacred space. If you are joining by Zoom, please write in the Chat that a chalice is lit on your street.

"We are a welcoming people of diverse beliefs who commit to nourish the spirit, broaden the mind, nurture the earth, and build community. May this flame we kindle remind us to strive, today and every day, to love beyond belief."

Song

Let us join together to sing "River" by Bill Staines. The words are on the screen.

(Chime)

Sorrows and Joys

I invite us now into a time to share the sorrows and joys at the heart of our religious community.

I will begin with Sorrows.

(Let us remember that there are undoubtedly sorrows that have gone unspoken)

And now we share our Joys with the community.

(We understand that there are many joys that we hold in our hearts)

Singing

Friends, I invite you to sing our song of comfort and joy ("Comfort Me") – Justin plays piano

Story for All Ages

Our Story for All Ages is Breath and Be, by Kate Coombs and illustrated by Anna Emilia Laitinen (<https://youtu.be/znNqox199K0>)

Meditation

(All Our Relations by Gary Kowalski)

And now I invite you into a time of prayer, reflection, and meditation.
Settle into your mind and your body as it is in this moment. . .
Close your eyes or simply soften your gaze. . .

Our time is short here on the earth.
Around us swirl immensities of time and space,
A universe infinite in all directions.
How small our hopes and cares seem
Amid the panorama of creation.
Yet we are not separate from the cosmos
But have evolved and grown out of it,
Like the leaves of a tree
Or the waves upon a sea.
And our thoughts are its thoughts,
Our lives a manifestation of never ending vitality,
Our spirits a microcosm
Of the beauty and creativity of the whole
Fill us then with reverence and compassion
For all who are our kin,
Cloud and sun, sibling and cousin,
The multitude of beings
Who share this improbable and never-to-be repeated moment,
All expressions, like ourselves,
Of the Mind-at-Large,
The Spirit-at-Play,
The Dynamism-at-Work,
In whom we live and move
And whom we will never know.

(chime)

Offering

The River of Community by [John Saxon](#)

A religious community is like a river formed from the many streams of our lives that meet and merge and flow to the sea.

As members and friends of this religious community, we share our time and energy, our creativity, imagination, and vision, our talents, skills, and gifts, and the streams of our individual lives to create a river that is both deep and broad: a river that is made of many streams, sustains life, and refreshes the land through which it flows. But the river of this community also depends on our shared financial support that makes real our shared values and vision.

We will now receive an offering for the support of this religious community and its work in the world. You are invited to give generously and joyfully as you are willing and able.

(Piano music River Flows Through It – Justin Ganske plays)

Reading – “River” by Mary Oliver

The river of my childhood,
That tumbled down a passage of rocks and cut-work ferns,
Came here and there to the swirl and slowdown of a pool
And I say myself—
Oh, clearly—
As I knelt at one—
Then I saw myself as if carried away,
As the river moved on.
Where have I gone?
Since then I have looked and looked for myself,
Not sure who I am, or where,
Or, more importantly, why.
It’s okay—
I have had a wonderful life.
Still, I ponder where that other is—
Where I landed,
What I thought, what I did,
What small or even maybe meaningful deeds I might have accomplished
Somewhere among strangers,
Coming to them as only a river can—
Touching every life it meets—
That endlessly kind, that enduring.

Sermon

Lee’s part:

A River Runs By It

The premise of today’s sermon (or talk if you will) is that our Fellowship sits in a remarkable location - and there may be some value in learning about and reflecting on that. Our Fellowship is perched on a terrace above the Blue Earth River about a half mile above the Blue Earth’s confluence with the Minnesota River. Because the Blue Earth is a tributary to the Minnesota, and the Minnesota is a tributary to the Mississippi, the Blue Earth is as true a source of the Mississippi as is Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota.

At the opening of every service, we acknowledge that our Fellowship sits on the homeland of the Dakota people. I imagine however that due to its proximity to the Blue Earth and Minnesota rivers, this was especially important and sacred land. Rivers of course provided food, transportation, drinking water, and protection; I presume the sacredness encompassed those things and more.

Zach and I are sharing the sermon today. Having spent a career as a river scientist, I'm going to first provide some information and statistics. Then I'm going to share why rivers are important to me personally. Zach will close with a couple readings on the larger spiritual dimensions of rivers.

I'd like to do the facts and figures with your assistance. I'll pose a few questions and invite you all to provide answers.

- How did the Blue Earth River come by its name?
- In what state are the headwaters of the Blue Earth River found?
- What river flows into the Blue Earth just a few miles upstream of the Fellowship?
- What are the names of some other tributaries to the Blue Earth and LeSueur rivers?
- There were once two dams on the lower Blue Earth River. The Rapidan dam still stands. Where was the other one?
- What two types of bedrock are exposed along the banks of the lower Blue Earth River?

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How are rivers important to me personally? Perhaps some of you might share some of these feelings.

Rivers sooth me. The gurgling sound as their water moves over and around rocks. The dancing of light off their surface. When I scramble down the bank just off the northwest corner of our parking lot and get down along the Blue Earth, I feel a great release. This despite the highway bridge and gargantuan soybean processing facility just a few hundred feet away. I don't know if it's because you're lower down by the river, but their noise seems muted and distant.

Rivers connect me to history – both natural and human. We talked about the two types of bedrock exposed along the banks of the lower Blue Earth. That exposure represents 10,000 years of downcutting through glacially-deposited material to an ancient time with shallow seas covered this area. Dakota history and European history lives along the river. This clay jar and bottle are a couple of my finds – refuse from the past.

Rivers give me hope. In this area dominated by such intensive agriculture, the river valleys are small ribbons on nature where one can find an astounding variety of plants and animals. Any future restoration of ecological balance to south-central Minnesota will in my view radiate out from the river valleys.

Rivers still provide food and water. It is so satisfying to me to be able to offer my extended family and friends meals of walleye and catfish caught on the Blue Earth just below the Fellowship, or on the Minnesota River. Our drinking water in Mankato is largely a mix of Blue Earth and Minnesota River water filtered by approximately 50 feet of sand beneath the rivers. Not pure and pristine by any measure, but certainly drinkable with proper treatment.

Finally, rivers are a source of immense joy to me - canoeing, kayaking, swimming, fishing, snowshoeing on their frozen surfaces, picking up rocks and shells on a sandbar. I especially love our rivers in the fall when the water tends to clear up and have a turquoise tint.

To counter all this romanticism, let me end my part by acknowledging that in many ways our rivers are in poor ecological condition. They often turn muddy during even modest rain events – or green during hot dry spells. Their banks erode at rates far in excess of what they should. They often contain high levels of nitrates and other pollutants. The amount of fish a person should eat is limited due to contaminants absorbed by the fish. To counter this dreary picture, however, let me say that I still find our rivers wonderful and I know ecological recovery is possible.

Zach's parts:

This is an excerpt from “How Many Rivers are There?” by Jay McDaniel:

How many rivers are there? There are rivers of moonlight in which we can walk on dark and starlit nights, holding hands with our lovers. There are rivers of melody in which we can be immersed as we listen to the blues, or to the whispering of the wind, or to the laughter of children. There are rivers of bitterness, with tastes of blood and clay, which can flood our hearts and wash away our dreams. There are rivers of hope, which can cleanse our hearts and renew some of those dreams.

There is also the river of our individual soul, forever fluid like the waters of the Nile, changing ever so slightly with each new circumstance. And there are the rivers of other souls – human, plant, animal, and mineral – which intersect with our own who deserve our respect and care. Who knows? Maybe even the soul of the universe – maybe even God -- is a River. Or an Ocean into which all rivers flow. Buddhists, too, know that the soul is fluid like a river, changing at every moment. They know that there is no "thing" called the soul, there are only the many events -- the many rivers -- that make up a person's life.

Every moment of a person's life – and every face we see at any given moment -- somehow contains the many rivers of life – the universe a network of jewels, each of which has an infinite number of facets, and each facet of which reflects every other facet. When you look into any of the jewels you see every other jewel because each jewel mirrors all the others. This means that when you look into any river and see your reflection you are also seeing the whole of things. And when you look into the eyes of a stranger you see the whole universe, too.

Beth Norcross, Founding Director of the Center for Spirituality in Nature, extends this connection in her essay “The Spirituality of Water”:

There's something about water.

There's something about the river, the sea, the pond, the lake — something that refreshes us, moves us, quiets us.

In the forward to Wallace Nichols's provocative book, Blue Mind, Celine Cousteau, granddaughter of the well-known ocean explorer Jacques Cousteau, says: “We are beginning to learn that our brains are

hardwired to react positively to water and that being near it can calm and connect us, increase innovation and insight, and even heal what's broken.”

I think there is something more going on, too.

In every major religion, important rituals and sacred rites are held in and around water. The Hebrew Bible and New Testament have over 500 references to watery forms and themes. Often, water is a stand-in for the divine.

Why do we so often seek watery places for spiritual experience? What is it about water?

Well, we can start with the obvious. Our bodies are mostly water. We are connected with it in the most visceral way.

Furthermore, water is essential to all life, for every plant and animal, including humans. We can go without food for a few weeks. Without water, we will die in a few days.

Our ancestors in faith — all faiths — appreciated the critical nature of water in ways that most of us now do not. The scarcity of this crucial substance was often a life-threatening reality.

With this knowledge in mind, ancient peoples would then see this life-giving substance fall freely from the sky. They found depositories of it in flowing streams and rivers. They discovered pools of it under the ground as well. I think that they began to wonder: “What is providing this? Who is giving us this essential substance so that we can have life? Is there a god, or God, or Spirit in the water?”

In these ancient times, there was little separation between the spiritual and the physical. You could say that our ancestors experienced water “spirically.” Water, Spirit, life.

Is it any wonder then that water provides sustenance — both physically and spiritually, “spirically” — to each and every one of us? Is it any wonder that we routinely seek out oceans and streams and lakes and, of course, rivers when we need to be calmed, connected, or healed, as Ms. Cousteau suggests?

Each of us has a deep, rich connectedness with water. What would happen to our bodies and spirits if we were to more routinely “wade in the waters,” as that great old spiritual suggests?

Song

Let us join together to sing “Proud Mary” by John Fogerty. The words are on the screen.

Chalice Extinguishing

As we conclude our time of worship this morning, let us make a promise that through all this threshold time we will remain committed to sustained and robust relationship with each other, to the vision of our faith community, to the values of Unitarian Universalism, and to the interdependent web holding us all.

As we speak our unison words, I invite you to extinguish your chalice or candle at home.

“We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.”

Benediction

So are we bound together by [Elizabeth Lerner Maclay](#)

As drops of rain that find each other and build to become a track, a rivulet, a stream, a river, a sea, so are we drawn together; so are we fortunate to find each other; so are we bound together, on this shared passage toward an unknown ocean and eternity.

Friends, let us join in a final song together. Thus, we bless each other, and thus we are a blessing to each other. ("Long Time Sun") – Justin plays piano