

Last year a group of us went kayaking on the Muskegon River. Pat Clifford, one of the group's members, took us on a bit of a different route than I had been on before. Frankly, this route was a bit treacherous. The river in the section we went in was filled with downed trees. At one point in the float, the flow of the river took hold of me and headed me right toward a large, sharp-edged branch. I couldn't stop my kayak, and at the last moment, I leaned to the left to avoid a part of the branch that was coming toward my face. And as I leaned, the whole boat turned over and quickly filled with water. I was in the fast-moving stream, caught by the current. The kayak got away from me. Eventually I steadied myself, and with a little help from Pat, my boat was rescued.

Getting caught up in the current sometimes can be dangerous. And sometimes it can be wonderful. I have floated down the river in a tube and found myself to be so energized by that experience. I didn't have to do much work; the water just took me. It was marvelous.

There is a lot of water in our texts for today, a lot of flow, a lot of movement. And this current seems particularly strong. It's definitely going someplace. While Paul doesn't mention water, what he speaks of today feels like a current, like a flow. He says, "Since we are justified by faith," since our status before God, our worth as human beings, comes through simple trust in the gift of God, we have peace with God. Justification leads to peace. Discovering that your worth before God comes not by your earning it, but simply by receiving it as a gift, frees you up, calms you down.

You don't need to renegotiate your worth every day. Yesterday I felt pretty good about myself. Today is a whole different matter. My achievement has been low. People haven't patted me on my back as much as I have needed it. My ego is feeling quite fragile. No, I have worth. It's sheer gift. And flowing from it is a peace—a peace with God, a peace with others, even a peace with myself. Bad days are not an indication that

I am worthless. Criticism doesn't mean that life is falling apart. The center of our story is love. And love is a current, is an energy that flows. Worth given leads to peace.

And that peace leads us to the hope we have, as Paul says, in sharing in the glory of God. Worth given and peace experienced are a foretaste of sharing in the full light of God. This is, Paul says, something we can boast about, rejoice in. It's a phenomenally good thing to know that you are justified by God's grace. It is a beautiful thing to trust the peace that is your gift. And by the way, Paul goes on to say, your suffering cannot take away that beautiful thing. Paul says that not only do we rejoice in sharing the glory of God; we boast or rejoice in our sufferings.

Now in order to grasp this, you have to get what Paul is facing as he writes. He lives in a shame-based culture. For people of his day, suffering and weaknesses were often thought to be a matter of shame. Paul's opponents probably used this reality against him. We don't know for sure but maybe Paul wasn't so good to look at. Perhaps he had some physical deformities. Without a doubt, he mustn't have been the greatest speaker. In First Corinthians he says, "I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom."

Paul's opponents thought that whatever his weaknesses were were a sign of his deficiency, an indication that what he was about mustn't be that good, because if God were truly on his side he, Paul, would be much more polished, a winner.

Paul will not go down that road. He says that he rejoices, brags about his sufferings. They aren't something to be ashamed of. They don't take away the flow of love that began it all. In fact, suffering has this way of creating its own current. Quoting what seems to me to be a proverb of his own time, Paul says: "We boast about our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."

Now truthfully, I think we have to be careful with this kind of proverbial wisdom. People use it to downplay suffering. I think this is a temptation for us and others in the midst of our suffering. "Oh, this is just going to make you a better person. Hold your chin up; all things happen for a reason." In the midst of our suffering, this kind of dismissal is not helpful. Sometimes we need to feel the pain of our suffering. Sometimes we will not know why things happen. We don't need friends like Job's friends who are quick to analyze why we are going through what we are going through.

But often when looking back, we discover that our sufferings are included in the flow of the love that began it all. They need not be a matter of shame. In fact, our challenges can produce a sense of resilience. I must admit that I worry these days that sometimes we protect the youngest among us from experiencing the challenges of life and thus reduce their ability to be resilient. I have been involved in endurance athletics for a long time, and while I am not recommending that you ride your bike for 100 miles in one day like I do, I am aware of this: the suffering that comes with endurance athletics has produced within me a sense of resilience that I would not have had I avoided the pain. There is a definite flow from suffering to endurance and then to character and then to--and this is the one that intrigues me most--hope.

I believe that the biggest personal ethical challenge for us Christians is character development. We want to build character, not morally squeaky-clean people. And character involves knowing who we are and living out of who we are. The flow, the energy, that comes from people who know their status as loved children of God is so life-giving. And knowing who you are is a matter of embracing the suffering, embracing the vulnerabilities. And for some strange reason, those whose character has been developed tend to be more hopeful. And perhaps that is due to the fact that they, shaped by both a sense of great worth and a sense of remarkable vulnerability, live out life in community. People whose

character has been fully developed know that they need other people. And hope is often birthed in the context of relationships. Despair is often birthed in the context of loneliness. Character leads to hope. It's how the flow goes. Character has this way of transmitting energy that produces hope.

Paul says that hope doesn't disappoint us because hope is the energy that flows from the love that the Spirit of God gives us. Hope is about love. It all starts in love, and it is about the flow of the energy of love. And the invitation is for us to get lost in the flow, to get caught up in the current.

Now I have to tell you that there is some danger that occurs when you and I get caught up in the current. This current that we are talking about is not, as I experienced on the river, without its challenges or surprises, especially if you are flowing with Jesus. Yes, there is a wonderful flow that comes from the love that Jesus swims in and invites us into. Jesus himself says that, "Those who drink of the water that I give them will never be thirsty. It will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Oh, it's a wonderful flow that comes from Jesus. It is a life that is good, real, and always full, a life worth living.

But you better be careful. When you get caught up in the flow of Jesus, wild things are going to happen. Just ask the Samaritan woman. You are going to *have* to go through Samaria. You will want to avoid it, because, after all, this is where your enemies live. You have every good reason to stay away from Samaria. The struggle with them has been long and arduous. Your people have never liked their people. But when you are caught up in the current with Jesus, you won't be able to avoid the Samaritans.

When you are caught up in the current with Jesus, you will discover that women and men who shouldn't be talking with one another are talking with one another. When love flows, life changes; the rules change. When love flows, all people are treated with dignity. Women are not left

out. Of course, they are included, so included that their testimony is what causes many to believe in Jesus. When you get caught up in the flow of Jesus, the notion that certain people because of their gender, their orientation, their ethnic background aren't to be listened to, aren't able to speak for themselves, ⁶⁹are not to be fully included is proven to be ridiculous, almost laughable. The energy that flows from Jesus is an energy that welcomes, gathers, and includes. You better get ready for that. Life is not going to be the same again.

When you get caught up in the loving current that flows from Jesus you also better be prepared to encounter something that knows you fully. "He told me everything I have ever done." We don't know what that means for the woman. I don't think it is an indication that she is somehow morally bankrupt. Her many husbands are about her being a morally loose woman. I think the many husbands are a symbolic statement about the many peoples and gods that the Samaritans have connected to. But whatever the case, the woman knows that Jesus knows her. And for her, that is a source for good news. But let's be honest. Being known can be a threat. This is the kind of threat that you will have to deal with when you get caught up in the current that Jesus creates. You will encounter your own vulnerability.

Get caught up in the current anyway. It is a current whose source is love, whose goal is love, whose energy, whose flow is love. It won't be easy, but love is indeed a spring of water that gushes up to eternal life. Get in the stream. Go with the flow, and be prepared for a wild, new life.