

A River Runs Through It

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on September 26, 2021

Friendship Presbyterian Church

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever. (Revelation 22:1-5, NRSV)

There are a small handful of movies that every Presbyterian should go out of their way to see. You all know what I think of “Chariots of Fire” – for me and my money the greatest movie of all time and so very Presbyterian to the core! Well, another that fits into that company is the 1992 film “A River Runs Through It,” directed by Robert Redford, and starring Tom Skerritt and a very young Brad Pitt, among many others of distinction.

The film is a beautiful adaptation of what is an even more beautiful short novel published in 1976 and written by the late Norman Maclean, a long-time English professor (but first-time author) deeply rooted in his Scottish Presbyterian heritage. It’s a semi-autobiographical account of Maclean's family and their lives in beautiful and rustic early-20th-century western Montana.

Key to his story are his close relationships with his Presbyterian minister father (Rev. Maclean) and his wayward younger brother Paul. They are all very different people but are united in a shared love of going down to fish in the wild, beautiful rivers. You’ve got to love a story which begins with the line: “In my family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.”

In fact, rivers function throughout the story as a powerful metaphor. The arc of a river flowing through the rocks and canyons of Montana symbolizes the arc of a human life ... the turns and the twists ... and the wandering, and the mysteries. In one particularly beautiful passage, Maclean writes –

It was here, while waiting for my brother, that I started this story, although, of course, at the time I did not know that stories of life are often more like rivers than books. But I knew a story had begun, perhaps long ago near the sound of water. And I sensed that ahead I would meet something that would never erode so there would be a sharp turn, deep circles, a deposit, and quietness.

As Norman’s story unfolds, twisting and turning like a river, it becomes an elegy for his brother Paul, a newspaperman who, despite Norman's best efforts, was always in trouble – drinking, fighting, and womanizing in ways bound to have consequences.

But for all this self-destructiveness, Paul was also an exceptionally gifted fly-fisherman. Usually, the spectacle of man engaged with nature is not a pretty one (as any mediocre fisherman like me can attest), but Norman manages to show the extraordinary grace of his brother in action, standing in the river, a depiction made more poignant by its coexistence with a life that was otherwise a complete mess. Watching his brother in the quiet of the canyon, he writes –

At that moment, I knew, surely and clearly, that I was witnessing perfection. My brother stood before us – not on a bank of the Big Blackfoot River – but suspended above the earth, free from all its laws, like a work of art. And I knew just as surely and just as clearly that life is not a work of art and that the moment could not last.

And it didn't. One night, Paul was found murdered, his body dumped in an alleyway next to a famously rough bar. His murder was never solved. Rev. Maclean took it the hardest, struggling for more to hold on to, asking Norman again and again if he had told him everything. "Maybe all I really know about Paul is that he was a fine fisherman," Norman shot back in exasperation. "You know more than that," his father said. "He was beautiful." And that was the last time they ever spoke of Paul's death.

Ultimately, we find this story of their lives *is* in a way more like a river than a book. It winds around, it bends, it wanders ... its waters run rapidly or lie still in silence. It's a story about time and change and mystery and connection ... and ultimately, about what is constant, for it's a story about *love*.

With the Maclean men, we continually see their personalities and ways of life clash. We see Rev. Maclean fail to understand Norman's uncertainty about which direction he wishes to pursue in life after six years of college. We see Norman fail to understand Paul's resistance to accept help. And we see Paul fail to understand that you don't always have to be the toughest one. "It is," as Norman says, "those we live with and love and should know who elude us. But we can still love them – we can love completely without complete understanding."

It is this love – a love that loves completely without complete understanding – that binds together a father and his sons, and a brother to his brother, and brings them all to the banks of a river. And like that river, life rolls on, in all its high joys and ineffable sadness, and "a river runs through it."

Rivers have always been about life. It is no accident that the world's first civilizations arose on their banks ... the Tigris and Euphrates, the Nile, the Yellow River, the Indus, and the Ganges. They have always been valued as sources of fresh water and as natural places to hunt and fish, but then with larger settlements, proved to provide richly fertile land for cultivation. They facilitated transportation and trade and economic growth, and with these things, ever more complex levels of social organization, giving birth to the first city-states and nations and empires of our ancient past.

Being so critical to human life, it should be no surprise that rivers “run through” the Bible too, carrying both practical and deeply *spiritual* significance. The Book of Genesis speaks of a river that flowed out of Eden to water the primal Garden (Gen. 2:10). It was on the shore of the river Jabbok that the schemer Jacob wrestled with God all night and with the sunrise found himself re-named *Israel*, as one who strives with God and humanity and prevails (Gen. 32:22-31). Centuries later, his descendants would cross over the river Jordan to finally enter into the Promised Land.

More than a thousand years after the settlement of the Promised Land, it was in the Jordan that John baptized those who came to him for baptism, looking for the coming of the Kingdom – a Kingdom which would be inaugurated with Jesus’ own baptism in that river (Mark 1:1-8). And just as that Kingdom began at a river, it comes to its final fulfillment at one too – at the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God (Rev. 22:1-2).

In fact, these great images form the bookends of the Christian life: Our journey of faith begins at a “river” – like those sisters, brothers, fathers, mothers, and sinners who went “down to the river to pray” with John two thousand years ago – to be renewed in the waters of baptism. This is where it all starts. And then one blessed day, our long and winding journey comes to its fulfillment, expressed in the beautiful poetry of Revelation, in the perfect joy of gathering together at the river of the water of life, united forever in love:

*Yes, we'll gather at the river,
The beautiful, the beautiful river;
Gather with the saints at the river
That flows by the throne of God.*

Those are the beginning and the end. The Christian life, the Christian journey, is what we do with the in-between time. And we understand that the story of this life is more like a river than a book ... winding and bending ... often wandering ... not linear ... full of mystery.

But we don't make this journey alone. In our common baptism, we are united in Christ and become family to each other. And yes, like the Macleans, families are complicated! We often don't understand each other. Even those with whom we are the closest will always elude us, always remain mysteries to us. But on this journey, we discover the great truth about love – that we can love completely without complete understanding. It is this love – a love that truly does love completely without complete understanding – that binds all together, and will finally lead us home.

At the end of the movie and the novel, Norman narrates from his real-life perspective as an old man, looking back and reflecting on his own journey –

Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them ... Like many fly fishermen in western Montana where the summer days are almost Arctic in length, I often do not start fishing until the cool of the evening.

Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise. Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.

To the Glory of God. Amen.