

“The river of life-giving water, clear as crystal, which issued from the throne of God and of the Lamb, and flowed down the middle of the streets.”

Years ago, I read an essay in The New York Times by Bassey Etim (Bossy Edum), who grew up in Milwaukee. He was born and raised on the northside of the city, in a predominantly poor and black neighborhood. He went to school on the eastside of the city, in a more affluent, largely white neighborhood. He writes, “On many days I felt as if I was being shuttled between two different cities, two different worlds.”

In the article, he goes back and forth in his descriptions of these two places to draw out their differences:

In the north there is resentment, skepticism;  
In the east, practiced obliviousness

The north is sharp and hot, stolen bikes and growing gangs  
The east is soft and vague, inconsequential smiles and protected lives

In the north, reckoning was expected. It was inevitable, a source of pride and loathing.  
In the east, the future was expected. It was a birthright, a source of frenetic energy.

You can feel, can't you, how his writing draws lines so that we can see the map, see the distinctions and divides between these two worlds.

The infectious anger of the streets to the north, Etim says,  
and the cloistered shell of liberalism to the east,  
Never intersected  
never touched.

Except, they do intersect and touch. They collide in the life of Bassey Etim. The discomforts and problems of the north and the east. The comforts and promise of the east and the north.

The name of this article is “Milwaukee’s Divide Runs Right Through Me.” Runs right through him. And this morning I am wondering, isn’t that what living water does? Runs right through us?

The living water flowing right through the streets of the heavenly city. Not dividing but bringing abundant life.

In our Gospel story, Jesus and the disciples walk by this pool that, when its water stirs up, is said to have healing powers. Jesus begins talking to a man who cannot walk. He has been ill for 38 years and the gospel says Jesus can tell he’s been by the pool a long time, hoping to be restored. Exactly how long? We aren’t told. The whole 38 years? We aren't told. However long he had been waiting, Jesus thinks it is too long. Jesus asks the man one of those questions that can go right through us, “Do you want to be made well?”

The man tells Jesus that, because he cannot move on his own, each time it is his turn to go into the pool, someone steps over him, taking his place. Over and over and over again. Then, Jesus heals him. The man stands up, picks up his mat, and walks away.

Imagine the pool in our gospel story. A contained body of water. An orderly system for getting your turn. Waiting for God’s healing to be doled out, one at a time. We know this set-up isn’t perfect, but most of us can afford the imperfections and inequalities of systems like these. And those who cannot are usually the easiest to hide and ignore.

The last line of our gospel says the healing happens on the Sabbath. And that will get Jesus in trouble with the religious leaders. What Jesus does is the wrong kind of stirring up. Jesus restored this person’s life. But he also broke the rules. The divides get blurred. Just like with Bassey Etim.

The Sabbath part becomes the entire focus of this encounter in the verses that follow. And there is a time to explore the Pharisees' reaction as a genuine struggle with how to live out God’s commandments, balancing community structure with spiritual discernment. Rev. Claire did that incredibly well in her sermon last Sunday.

But there are also times to recognize that, especially when imagined in our own time, the Pharisees' criticism is kind of baloney. A red herring that distracts us from the reality that a suffering person sat right next to a healing pool and no one would put him in the water. People stepped over him so they could get into the water instead. Over and over and over. Was it because they believed there's not enough of God's healing? Or they felt just as desperate? Or they deserved it more than this man? Did they say anything to him? "Sorry" or "Just wait a little longer." Or "You're not trying hard enough"? Did they talk about it at home? Or decide it wasn't polite to discuss? Over and over and over. Under the facade of a calm, contained pool. And *Jesus* is the one breaking God's commandments?

I decided to look up what Etim had been doing since that article from 2016. Scrolling his Twitter timeline, I saw a video he posted of Garnell Whitfield, a former fire commissioner whose mother, Ruth Whitfield, was murdered in last Saturday's mass shooting in Buffalo. The video title was, "You expect us to keep doing this over and over again."

<https://twitter.com/nytimes/status/1526305256791060481?s=20&t=hqbVNZFHlgzld7YhWbf5gw>

The echo thousands of years later from our neighbor – You expect us to keep going through this, over and over again... We don't know all of the details of the man by the pool's world, what made it possible for him to be overlooked and mistreated again and again. But here are some details about ours:

The 18 year-old shooter who carried out the Buffalo supermarket massacre planned his attack for months. He chose his location after researching that the 14208 ZIP code in Buffalo has a higher Black population than the other locations he was considering. The shooter considered attacking a church or an elementary school but ultimately chose the supermarket because of the number of people that go to grocery stores, he wrote. He referred to Google's "popular times" graph for the Tops Friendly Market in determining the time he would plan his attack -- so the grocery store would be busiest.

In a manifesto, the suspect detailed how he viewed Black people as “replacers” of white Americans. The massacre shined light on the “great replacement theory,” a kind of ideology that we can no longer soothe ourselves by saying lives only on the fringes of society.

If you are like me, you can convince yourself that clinging to the pool is enough for our life with God.

But Christ is the living water. He doesn't wait for the pool to be stirred up. He is the current. His Spirit plants Lydia beside the waters of baptism. He hears the man by the pool, the woman at the well, the fire commissioner in Buffalo asking, “give me this living water, so that I will never be thirsty.” And Christ will quench their thirst. The river of life-giving water, clear as crystal, which issued from the throne of God and of the Lamb, and flowed down the middle of the streets. The living water that flows right into us. And Christ asks us, “Do you want to be made well?”

I cannot shake that there, where the living water can run right through us, is where Christ is at work.in.us. I believe that is the place where Christ meets us, where Jesus is breaking bread with the poor and the sick; where he is trying to invite the Pharisees; and you and me. Right there, in the pain our systems ignore and even create. That is where God is at work, healing and binding up, making all things new.

I pray we will choose life in the living water. Where we give each other permission and support to be in the messy, uncomfortable places; where we do not ignore pain for our own comfort; where we invite the current of Christ's love to run right through us and set us free, again and again. May it be so. Amen.

Claire and I received an email this week, as we do from time to time, criticizing how often St. Peter's speaks out against white supremacy. The person said that race should only be mentioned sparingly, and only when absolutely necessary, if ever. And that naming systemic racism is, itself, racist. Like the Pharisees squabbling about rules, I think that's baloney too. A distraction disguised as civility. That ignores Jesus' propensity for planting himself in the pain of the world. That underestimates apathy and downplays evil.

I want each of you to know that I struggle with criticisms about preaching against white supremacy. I struggle with my sermons. I pray I am being faithful. And my biggest worry is not getting emails like that, but that, as members of this congregation, you agree with this person. Feel frustrated with me. Or, even more, that as you go through your own life – its blessings and its difficulties – you feel like I care more about dismantling white supremacy than I do about you. That is not true. I love you. But the worry and doubt – the love for you – is enough to wonder, "Am I making things worse?"

But when I heard that video –