



Come On In—The Water's Fine!

A Sermon on Acts 2:15-19, 37-40—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
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1.

Let's talk about swimming in pools.

Now this may feel like a cruel thing to do in the middle of winter, especially with the cold snap returning.

I can hear you say, 'Thanks, Adam, now I'm thinking about the Caribbean, or Africa, South America, or Australia, where it's summer. There's somebody in those places at a pool doing the backstroke or just relaxing on a chaise lounge, while we sit next to the layers we had to peel off once we got inside because we live in an icy tundra! If only the Puritans who founded this city when they traveled from Boston to New Haven and then to the Wepawaug River, had put their heads together and agreed, "Let's keep following the coast until we find us some hot springs and palm trees?" "Milford, Florida", has a nice ring to it. I'm sure there's no bad weather to deal with in Florida!'

I lived in central Florida for five years—this confuses people who know I lived in Chicago and that I graduated high school in Wisconsin.

'Wait, you lived in warm places, too? I thought that wasn't allowed until you retired!'

Yes, I lived in Florida from 1986 to 1991, one of the longest stretches in recent decades when no hurricanes touched the peninsula (thank you, God!).

In Florida so many people have pools. They practically come standard in backyards there; except ours. No pool for us. This only added to my curiosity about pools, though.

What I found out is that the only thing as important as having a pool is the temperature of its water. One of the first times I was invited to swim at a friend's house, my friend got in first then gave the universal assurance, "Come on in, the water's

fine!" and I naively believed him, so I jumped in and became petrified in shock over what seemed to be freezing cold water. "Oh, you'll get used to it soon enough," he said.ⁱ

When my family drives to see my in-laws we usually have to stay overnight at a hotel. Without fail, Ashley and I are dragged by our kids to the indoor swimming pool. The pool is THE highlight of the hotel stay for the kids (okay, that, plus not having to do chores, AND the free continental breakfast). But Ashley and I—we're not the biggest hotel pool fans. Partly it's the smell of the bucket o' bleach they use or the glow of the fluorescent lightsⁱⁱ, but mostly we assume the water will be cold. So we tend to see who can out-do and out-guilt the other into being the designated parent to actually go in the pool: "I slept less last night"; "I drove longer today"; "I gave birth to four children." (To which Ashley responds: "No you didn't.") Whoever goes in usually tries to persuade the other one to join: "Come on in, the water's fine!"

2.

Water and church are most closely associated with baptism. Let me first say that you all have been very supportive of me in baptizing kids since I began serving here 16 years ago. The first couple years, some of the long-time members would come up to me after a baptism and say, "Oh, you hold the babies so nicely." And I naively believed them and said, "thanks!" But I should have known better that to congratulate myself back then. Once Ashley and I started raising kids, people then admitted after baptism Sundays, "Oh, you've gotten SO MUCH BETTER at holding the babies!" and I'm thinking: "Was I really THAT bad?"

Once I became a parent, I did realize how important the temperature of the baptismal water was especially for infants. You don't start with cold water; you put warm really water in the bowl so

that in 20 or 30 minutes, when the baptism occurs, you don't shock the baby by sprinkling frigid water on their foreheads!

Today's scripture describes the splash that the Pentecost event makes on Jesus' followers before its effects ripple out beyond Jerusalem. To review: about two months earlier, Jesus is arrested and dies, the disciples hide in fear that they're going to be arrested and killed next. Jesus rises again and appears to disciples. Jesus ascends into heaven after promising that they while John baptized with water they soon will be baptized with the Holy Spiritⁱⁱⁱ.

Ten days later, on the Jewish day of Pentecost, while the disciples were still hiding in fear, the Holy Spirit descends like flames and inspires them to speak in different languages that are heard by people who can understand what they're saying. Some witnesses who don't understand most of the languages, wonder aloud if they're drunk.

"No," Peter says, "It's like this: God said that the Spirit would be poured out UPON ALL FLESH so that our children will appreciate the future and people young and old will see visions and have dreams. This is to fulfill God's hope for humankind that was embodied in Jesus, who was raised up and who promised us the warmth of the Holy Spirit."

Apparently, there were many there who got caught up in this Spirit and asked, well, if we accept this Spirit, now what do we do?

Peter says, 'It's easy: admit that you haven't done right, admit that you need and rely on God's love, and be baptized so that through it you may experience God's forgiveness, and you'll receive the Holy Spirit. Because,' Peter tells them, 'the promise [of Jesus and the Holy Spirit] is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord calls.'^{iv}

It's like Peter has jumped into the baptism waters, and invites these new hearers of the Good News to

jump in after him, saying, "Come on in! The water's fine—they're warmed by jets of the Holy Spirit!"

"Come on in! The water's fine! No matter where you're from, there's a place for you in this swimming hole."

"Come on in! The water's fine! This is the water helps us have dreams of a better future!"

3.

Julie Lythcott Haims, former Dean of Stanford University, writes about a moment of her childhood in the 1960s. She was swimming "in the above-ground swimming pool at a friend's house...with a bunch of other kids." But one of the other kid's parents got wind of what was going on—that Julie, who is biracial, was swimming with his kid—and so he came over and "said he wanted to bring his child home...to rescue his boy from the pool that had been polluted by the presence of [in Julie's words] little ol' black me."^v

On this Martin Luther King weekend we remember bigotry like that, the attempts to cut off the warmth of community and perhaps the Holy Spirit from people because of race. Real pools have in many cases been opened to all people. Some of Martin Luther King's dream has come to pass. But before we naively start to congratulate ourselves too early, let us remember also that prejudice and bigotry remains in the hearts of all people, maybe some more than other, but not only still because of the color of people's skin but also because of their sexuality, gender identity, nationality, political affiliation, age—the list goes on and on.

4.

As the church we may consider ourselves to be keepers of the baptismal waters, the ones who invite people to our pool in spoken and unspoken ways. But these waters don't belong to us. Just as water and warmth are gifts from God, so too the gift of baptism and the Holy Spirit are gifts from God. We are simply stewards of this pool, the ones

who take care of the baptismal waters in this place and time.

Baptism is the visible sign of God's transforming acceptance of us. By coming to the waters of baptism, we admit that within us are sin AND goodness, prejudice AND love. When we enter into the waters of baptism our first time and then return to those waters on Sunday mornings or whenever we minister, we accept the gift of God's forgiveness that enables us to then expand that forgiveness and love to others. God calls us into the waters of baptism, saying, Come on in! The water is transformative! Come on in! Join Jesus and all who follow him!

Come on in! Then, once you're in, maintain the health and warmth of the waters by practicing the love and the forgiveness that are symbolized through baptism, to practice the love, support and care that we promise every time we baptize sons and daughters, young people or old people. Come on in! Then extend that care to children through our faith formation ministries, but also to adults through the ministries we do together, the connections we make in our common bonds as God's children.

God calls us in to come on in, then to share the baptismal waters with those who aren't here. It's scary for many to even imagine dipping their toes in our waters. Messages in our culture tell people that churches are the frozen chosen, chilly or downright cold, judgmental toward those who might enter in. That's the message many people here.

But when I look out at the people in our pews, I see people who intrepidly make their way here even in questionable weather and driving conditions

ⁱ Kelsey actually shared with me this week that in Maine, where she's from, her family judges the temperature of the ocean by whoas, as in how many times a family member says whoa when they walk in the water. 'Four whoas.' 'Not bad!'

ⁱⁱ See Jim Gaffigan, "Indoor Pools," *Mr. Universe*, 2012.

because of the love and healing and hope of this faith community that they maintain and offer to others. I see people who reach out in holy love to cultivate unconditional love in worship and Sunday school classes, in music rehearsals and youth group meetings, Women's Fellowship and men's meetings, RE-Group and Bible study, Food 2 Kids and Beth El Center, Sojourners Haven and Emma Davis Medical Equipment Ministry.

We are not perfect, but we strive toward the love of God embodied in Jesus Christ and showered upon us by the Holy Spirit. In a world that has felt increasingly cold and untrusting toward one another, this place for many is an oasis of hot springs.

God calls us—as God called Peter on Pentecost—to articulate what God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit mean to us as a community, and to invite people to take a dip in this pool.

Come on in—the water's awesome!

Come on in—Here we care about character instead of demographics!

Come on in—Here we care about the whole people of God!

Come on in—Dip in your toe next Sunday, or come back if you've been gone a little while! It may take a little while to get acclimated, but the Holy Spirit keeps it warm.

We don't care if you're swimsuit's in style, if you're a good swimmer or diver, or you need swimmies. We're excited to share in the waters of Christ's baptism!

Thanks be to God for warm pools of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 1:5.

^{iv} Acts 2.

^v <http://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2017/10/18/julie-lythcott-haims-real-american>