

What Lies Beneath

Kathleen E. Moore

30 June 2019 at Emmanuel Baptist Church, Albany, NY

Luke 5:1-11

I want to start by acknowledging our presence here in the watershed of the lower Hudson River, on ancestral lands of the Haudenosaunee. The image on the screen¹ is of a sculpture by Maya Lin, the sculptor who did the Viet Nam War Memorial in Washington. It was made with melted recycled silver and it depicts the Hudson River from its source in the Adirondacks, to Long Island Sound.

If you would close your eyes for just a minute and imagine yourself in your favorite peaceful, spiritual place—a place where you feel close to God perhaps, where you feel connected to the Divine.

Now open your eyes, and let me know—was it something like.. this?



¹ Image can be found at: <https://www.hrm.org/exhibitions/maya-lin/> “Silver Hudson” 2011, Copyright Maya Lin.

Or...this?



Or... maybe a woodsy stream is more your style?



So I'm guessing a lot of you chose one or two or all three of those images, representing a place where you feel spiritually connected. And it's kind of amazing, how drawn we are to water in the natural environment, I mean, we're terrestrial creatures after all. But then again, water is quite literally life on this planet, especially for us. So maybe that affinity for bodies of water is

just a natural consequence or primal memory of life in the womb, or that life emerged from the oceans billions of years ago.

But what lies beneath the water's surface?

I. Beneath the sea, lake or stream

In our familiar Scripture passage, we hear Jesus telling the fishermen to go out again and drop their nets into the deep water. Confronted by the awesome-ness of the catch, of what was lying beneath the surface of the lake, what bubbles up from within Peter is a sense of his own sinfulness, a need for repentance. But the upshot of this unveiling of abundance, this denial of scarcity, is the call to discipleship, to follow Jesus, to be a student of Jesus'.

Now when *I* am confronted by something so awe-inspiring, something too beautiful and good for words, I have to say that has not been my own response. I'm thinking about our visits to Judy's brother's place in Florida which is in the Charlotte Harbor watershed—a place of astonishing awe-inspiring abundance of life of many forms, from dolphins to rays to tiny sea creatures whose names I don't know. Just the simple act of looking at the snook that gather under the dock lights at night causes me to be amazed.

[video of snook]



Yeah, I want to fall on my knees, I want to shout I LOVE YOU ! to the fish, to the abundant life they represent. And sometimes an "I love you!" does bubble up from the deeps within me. (But I try not to do that if Judy's brothers are nearby).

....Now I want to take a slight detour to talk about potatoes.

II. Beneath the soil

Have you ever grown potatoes? A few years ago, I planted potatoes for only about the 2nd or 3rd time in my gardening life, more or less impulsively, with the kind of exuberance that comes with the hope that characterizes a warm spring day.

When the October day came to dig them, I was trembling with anticipation—would there be any potatoes? Would they be of a size to eat?

Sure, the aboveground portions of the plants had been burgeoning, huge, green, healthy, but in the end I couldn't have been more astonished to see the number and size of the tubers that had grown down deep in the compost I had been adding all summer. Before I began to dig, I had even entertained the notion that there wouldn't be any potatoes at all!



I was hoping for the miracle of potatoes and at the same time afraid of the possibility of disappointment after a long summer of waiting and watching, should there be none. In the end I was awed by the abundance of what was lying beneath the soil in that simple 4 foot by 4 foot garden bed.

So, two stories of awe-inspiring, unexpected abundance. Sometimes we can imagine nature as infinite, unending, but what happens when the abundance is threatened?

III. Beneath the City Streets

Last fall I had the privilege of making a trip to Flint, MI, to learn about the water crisis there. I learned that *what lies beneath* the streets of Flint are lead service lines – the pipes that bring water into people's houses. Actually, millions of such lead pipes exist beneath the streets of cities across the Northern US, including Albany. Whether those lead pipes contribute to toxic water in people's houses depends on a number of factors, including the source of the water (the watershed) and how the water is treated by the city before it reaches the pipes. But be assured of this: In Flint, as in so many cities, the people who suffer are poor, generally people of color.

And *what lies beneath* the ground in Hoosick Falls? We know that the groundwater resource that is the water supply for hundreds of people was contaminated with PFOA. And we know that the Hoosick River is part of *our* watershed.

Beneath the streets of Albany, there is aging water and wastewater infrastructure that is vulnerable to the extreme rainfall precipitation events and other changes that are coming with

climate change. Urban areas in the northeast have been singled out in the National Climate Assessment² which warns,

“Poor, elderly, historically marginalized, recent immigrants, and linguistically or socially isolated individuals as well as those populations with existing health disparities are more vulnerable to precipitation events and flooding due to a limited ability to prepare for and cope with such events.”⁵⁹

Brothers and sisters, that’s within *our* watershed.

IV. Watershed Discipleship—

The eco-theologian Ched Myers has declared that the churches need to re-inhabit the biological environment—the particular watershed--in which they exist, and become more connected to it, to have more of a sense of place, and to work to save it. We need to not take for granted any of the abundance we experience, and we need to turn from (repent of) attitudes and practices that are creating scarcity for others. This is the call to watershed discipleship, for us to be students of our own watersheds—As Myers says, “*You can’t save what you don’t love. You can’t love what you don’t know*”.³

Scripture makes clear that Jesus was intimately acquainted with his natural environment, he “knew his watershed”. For one thing, he walked everywhere. Steeped in the ancient Hebrew traditions, he would have been familiar with the oldest texts in which the place, the geography (that is, the watershed) matters, it is relevant to the story. The geography was part of the theology. As Heather pointed out at our outdoor worship a couple of weeks ago, Jesus often used the natural materials at hand for his parables about the Kingdom of God.

We Baptists in particular, who practice immersion in water as a sign and symbol of our repentance, our changed way of thinking, should be providing the moral leadership that shows that how we interact with Creation, how we treat it, is an integral part of loving our neighbors and loving God.

If this form of repentance sounds hard, consider this quote from the poet and environmental activist Wendell Berry:

[We humans believe that] “we cannot change because we are *dependent on* what is wrong. *That is the addict’s excuse.*”⁴

Brothers and sisters, let us proceed to increase our knowledge and understanding of our watershed. It is a matter of justice, and it is a matter of hope. It is a matter of love.

² <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/chapter/18/#fn:59>

³ Myers, C., ed. 2016. *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, OR

⁴ *Ibid.*