

“The Carp Dance”
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Texts: Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-16 and John 14: 1-14

Norfolk, Nebraska, in the mid-1990s, the carp dance was born. I was with the senior minister of the church I served at the time, and we’d gone to his native Nebraska for a fishing trip. I’m not much of a fisherman, but it was a good opportunity to get to know Rodger better and do something I didn’t normally do. We did not go searching for carp, of course, as we, like most North Americans, find carp to be nuisance. We fished for game fish. Honestly, we didn’t have much luck. One evening, just for fun, we went fishing in this pond. All of the sudden I was in a fight. I was catching the fish of my lifetime – so I thought – and I fought. It was a large fish. Rodger says I danced when I landed it. The bad news, it was a carp. Honestly, it was pretty gross for a fish! And so, the “carp dance” was born.

What does that have to do with today’s message? First, I started down this path with the help of our national United Church of Christ as it celebrates the contributions of Asian American/Pacific Islander populations to our church and to the world. It was through the church that I learned about the koinobori, or koi, fish. It is of the carp family, although there is argument about how closely it is related to the North American carp. But in Japan, this carp relative is celebrated on May 5, which is

children's day across Japan. I know about as much about Japanese culture as I do about fishing...which isn't much...but I was intrigued about how this fish became a celebrated part of a longstanding Japanese tradition to honor children.

Like us, the Japanese hope that their children will have courage and determination, and that the children will grow up healthy. The koi, like other carp, are known for their ability to swim upstream, and they represent these qualities of courage and determination. It doesn't hurt that they also, unlike American carp, are beautiful in color and in fact, are often kept as pets.

I'm sure that you'll agree that in order to make it in this world, people need courage and determination. Often, life feels like a swim upstream. We need something to hold onto, something to draw us forward, something to give us strength for the rough journey that life can be. In faith circles, we call this source of strength and courage and determination God. In Christian circles, we specifically speak of the third person of the Trinity, Jesus, when thinking of these qualities.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus does tell us he is the "way, the truth, and the life". Many Christians have chosen to use this as an exclusive statement, even weaponizing it against those who do not consider themselves Christian. I'd like to dive into the text a bit and see where this phrase comes from and see if Jesus might have had something more in mind than just another way to divide up humanity into teams of right and wrong.

Jesus says this statement to Thomas in John's Gospel. Thomas has just heard Jesus talking about going to prepare a place for him, and for you, and for me. We often use this text in a funeral when we think about the afterlife...heaven, if you will. Jesus has gone before us to prepare a place for us when our life is over. That is one interpretation of this scripture. Regardless of what the place is that Jesus is preparing, the point is that we have somewhere to go. We could debate whether it is in this life, or the next, or both. For today, I'd like to you think about it in terms of this life. Jesus going ahead of us, preparing for us...clearing the path. Now think about Thomas' question: "Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?"

It is to that question that Jesus tells us that he is the way. Said another time in another way, "follow me". Thomas' question though, is still valid. How do we know where Jesus is going? How are we to know that we are following him? Have we chosen the way, the truth and the life, not just in our acknowledgement of Jesus as Savior, but in truly trying to follow him? In order to follow him, we'll need a few things: courage, determination chief among them.

The Psalmist is no different, although it's true that the writer would not know Jesus. The writer did know, however, about leaders. In fact, this Psalm is written for the leaders. I invite you to hear again the first line of each section of this Psalm: In you, O Lord, I take refuge. Incline your ear to me. You are indeed my rock and my fortress. My times are in your hands. The Psalmist is calling on the Lord to do the same thing

that Jesus says he will do for us in John's Gospel. The Psalmist well knows that life can be difficult, and can feel like we are swimming upstream. There is suffering in the world. Pain in the world. Sadness in the world. But perhaps the most disconcerting is not knowing where to go next, how to proceed, and where to find the strength and the fortitude to move forward.

Carp have these strengths in their genetics. I would argue that we do as well. However, our path is not as clear and direct and linear as is the path for a spawning fish. And we don't like it. We get frustrated when the path isn't clear. We blame God, others, ourselves, or some combination thereof, but the main problem is we don't like uncertainty. And we're not sure we have the strength to survive it. We hold ourselves back, get protective and angry, or just plain give up. Then we wait around for Jesus to save us. The truth is that Jesus is already ahead of us, but needs our participation to move us and all humanity forward.

Richard Rohr, in his *Daily Meditations* on Thursday of this week, ended this way:

Revelation 3:20 tells us that Christ stands at the door and knocks. Too many of us want to show up at the doorway looking prim and proper and perfect. We stuff our egos and anxieties in the front hall closet so Christ won't see them when we open the door. But Christ isn't showing up to see our perfect selves. Instead, we are invited into a real, deep, transformative conversation, there on the threshold between who we are and who we can become, if we are willing to let go of what holds us back. [2]

We're invited to swim like the koi...beautiful in our colors, and also full of strength, determination and character. Jesus has gone on ahead to prepare the way, if we'll but follow. The Lord will be our refuge, our source of strength, our hope.

Together with our strengths and God's leading, we can be transformed, freed, grown, matured, and whatever else we need for ourselves, and our world. With the right perspective, we can see that even a carp dance can be the dance of life.

We can dance, if we want to.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.

