



# These, Too, Are Water

*TEXT*  
*Hebrews 3:12–14*

September 6, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Brandon Frick

*<sup>12</sup> Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. <sup>14</sup> For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end.*

In these last few months, many of us have been afforded space and time to look anew at things we had maybe taken for granted: our families and friends, our jobs and schools, our priorities and values. At times, this taking stock has been comforting, and at others, challenging, and at others both. For example, there are some parents, I am told, who take delight in their kids’ personalities, and simultaneously can be ... overwhelmed by them. So I’m told. Whatever our discoveries, they have allowed us to reflect on important things that, despite being right before our eyes, have previously gone unseen.

It’s not only happening for us as individuals, but for us as a country, too. Since the public death of George Floyd, and that of so many others, we

have been forced to look inside our institutions, and ourselves, to reckon with the sin of white supremacy — the belief that white people and white culture are superior to all others, and should remain so, even if it means oppressing other people and cultures.

Many of us find ourselves wondering how we’ve missed the enormity of white supremacy all this time. I believe it is, as our text for today puts it, because of the deceitfulness of sin. Sin is a silver-tongued scammer that hides its most evil and damaging schemes in the last place we’d look: in plain sight. Without even noticing, Hebrews tells us, sin hardens us to its presence and to one another, making us stubbornly resistant to seeing it or its shadowy presence in our daily lives. Despite tearing our country to shreds, we have failed to notice it at work around us, or within us. Now, when you hear the words “white supremacy,” you might immediately think of white men in white hoods standing around burning crosses — or wearing black jackets with swastika patches and goose-stepping in black boots. Yes, white supremacists embody

white supremacy in its crudest, most obvious form, but white supremacy saturates can be found in our everyday lives.

In 2005, writer David Foster Wallace told the graduates of Kenyon College this story: “There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes ‘What ... is water?’ The point of the fish story,” Wallace said, “is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about.”<sup>1</sup>

The two young fish hadn’t given a moment’s thought about what surrounded them, the environment in which they lived and moved, and yet that water permeated every aspect of their lives. We too are surrounded by water we do not see — the waters of white supremacy — in our media, our government, our education systems, our work places, our parks, playgrounds and neighborhoods and yes, in our churches. This is where we

swim, even if we despise it and work against it. This is the sin that deceives us and hardens us. This is water.

My first indication of its true depths came after nine Black Christians were killed at Bible study in Charleston, South Carolina, by white 19-year-old Dylann Roof. He believed it was his job to start a race war with people of color, who he deemed intellectually and morally inferior to whites. In 2015, this heinous act sounded alarm bells about the dangers of white supremacist terrorism. But for many of us, it stopped there. We condemned the white supremacist and went on with our lives. But, as David Foster Wallace reminds us, we should look harder for the things happening right in front of us.

I know the waters in which Dylann Roof moved. We lived just miles from one another in South Carolina, him in Lexington and me in Chapin, where white and black neighborhoods were maintained by strict, though unspoken boundaries; where that kind of segregation is deemed natural; where Confederate flags surround you on coffee mugs, key chains, t-shirts, hats, bumper stickers, flying in front yards and, until recently, at the state capitol just down the road.

Like me, Dylann proudly flew that flag, and told everyone it was about heritage, and not hate. He flew his on his license tag; they were special issue in South Carolina at the time. And I, with no sense of

the irony, flew my Confederate flag over the nightstand where I kept my Bible.

But, as teenagers, our lives went in different directions. That's when Dylann got sucked into the deep recesses of white supremacist online chat groups, and I realized I had to choose between that flag and my Bible. In him, I see a white supremacist, but I also see a guy who, along with me and countless others, swam in the same waters, engulfed in the sinful swell of white supremacy.

It is so deceptive. It wants us to see violence done unto those Black Christians at the Mother Emanuel Bible Study. But it also wants us to get lost in the chaos and destruction of that moment. It wants us to view this *one* incident like a dam bursting, a tragic accident caused by a lone white supremacist. It doesn't want us to see, much less to grieve, repent and amend our part in it. Sin does everything it can to deceive us, to blind us to this truth: The waters of white supremacy that burst free that night have been swirling around and within Dylann Roof, me, you — every one of us — for over 400 years. From the moment the first African person sailed the Atlantic as property of white slaveholders, white supremacy has hidden in plain sight, exploiting Black, indigenous and people of color to keep white people and our culture on top, convincing us that's where we naturally belong. This is the sin of white supremacy that continues to deceive us as it

lives among and within us. It is the dark water that envelops and infects us.

Now I'm worried that some of you might hear a son of South Carolina talking in this accent about a white supremacist from South Carolina and think this is just a Southern problem. I wish that were true, but I need to show you something right here in Johnson County.

[Filmed at the creek] I'm standing here in Southern Johnson County at 151<sup>st</sup> and Kenneth Road at a very important creek with an anachronistic name that I'll say only once, and only so you can look into it for yourselves. This is Negro Creek. I saw it on a map a couple years ago, and it has quite a story to tell. I'm thankful to Village member and historian Dr. Trenton Smith for spending time with lots of old maps to bring it to us.

This creek was a landmark on the path to freedom for enslaved people fleeing slave state Missouri. If they could just make it to Lawrence, a known stop on the Underground Railroad, they would have a real chance of making it to a northern free state. Though Westport offered the most direct route, it was a hotbed for slave patrols, so it had to be avoided. And Johnson County, though on the Kansas side, was a pro-slavery county, meaning anyone a fleeing Black slave encountered might turn them in for a reward. So, they had to be careful, almost certainly hiding by day and traveling by night.

After following the Blue River south, they would follow this small creek west. If they took it all the way to the end of the line [filmed at Antioch and 152<sup>nd</sup>], they would end up here at about Antioch and 152<sup>nd</sup>. And from here, look for the Santa Fe Trail. The trail cuts straight through this part of Johnson County, so they could have jumped on in any number of places, but I want to take you to a spot a quarter mile directly north of where I'm standing [filmed at 150<sup>th</sup> and Antioch].

It was right here, across from what is now Village on Antioch, that the trail crossed. Enslaved Africans running for their freedom would take this trail west, and then the Oregon Trail north to Lawrence, and with any luck make it to a free state where they would be no man's property.

[VOM sanctuary] Now some of you are wondering why you don't know about this place or story? The answer: This is how the sin of white supremacy deceives us; how, like those two young fish, it keeps us from seeing the water that surrounds us. You'll find no markers along this creek. It runs along factories and businesses, subdivisions, parks and even through a golf course. One person told me last week that they walk along this creek every day and never knew it even had a name, much less a story like this. But that's exactly white supremacy's M.O.: to remain unseen and active, hiding in plain sight all around us. You see, sin won't allow us

to tell the story of this creek as a pathway to freedom because that also means we have to tell a much larger story of oppression; a story of land taken and swindled from indigenous peoples,

- of a declaration of independence that said all men were created equal but didn't mean it, and a compromise that said we could count a person with black skin as only three-fifths of a human ...

- a story that includes an anemic emancipation, Jim Crow, housing covenants and red-lining ...

- of Black teens with skittles in their hoodies, Black women sleeping in their beds, and Black men handcuffed and laying on the ground — not safe in a country whose soil is already soaked with the blood, sweat and tears of their ancestors.

So, when we say on our signs and in our actions that Black Lives Matter, we mean that despite 400 years of evidence to the contrary, they do matter — to God, and therefore should matter to us — lives now, lives then and lives to come.

White supremacy deceives us with the lie that it is only a problem in the past, or when a teenager gets radicalized. But it shapes our world daily, turning paths for Black liberation into water features on golf courses. This is the water in which we swim, but do not see.

Our scripture tells us that there are two things we can do to confront the deceptiveness of sin, within our institutions

and in ourselves. First, we must hold on to the certainty that we have been called as Christ's partners, to point to who he was and what he did, and then with him work for the deliverance of captives, for sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed. This is hard work, so we must "exhort" one another, Hebrews says, on any day that ends in "y." That means we must encourage one another and also speak truth to one another. Only then will we see the truth of the sin that deceives us and have the collective courage and strength to confront the white supremacy that has contaminated the water in which we swim.

When the Black Lives Matter protests were just beginning on the Plaza in May, I jumped in the deep end with a protestor who came to disrupt it with an assault rifle slung over his shoulder. He was there to intimidate and reassert the eminence of whiteness over a crowd gathered there to contest it. That day I saw the lengths white supremacy would go to in order to stay on top. With the help of another white ally, I was able to de-escalate the situation and walk him through the crowds to the police. But there has not been a week when I haven't thought about how violently it could have ended — and the look on Aaryn's face as she tells Nathan and Levi that I wouldn't be home that night or any other night.

Every March demonstration and protest I've been to since has required me to face

that fear, so hear me when I tell you I get that this is scary stuff. But when I am surrounded by Black, indigenous and people of color, just asking for a fair shake, for justice, and peace, I am convicted by the need to see this injustice, do what I can to make our world better today and tomorrow, and I am reminded, in lament and hope, that those who need me and you to be courageous right now have never reaped white supremacy's benefits like I have, and have suffered from and fought against it for far longer than I. We are called to be partners with Christ and allies in the struggle.

When we embrace that call to "be with," we find ourselves surrounded by waters of justice, streams of righteousness and the baptismal waters of repentance and regeneration [at the font]. These, too, are water, offered to us by God, who calls us to overcome the sin of the world, and who is renewing it and us with the Son and Spirit today and forever more. Amen.

<sup>1</sup><https://fs.blog/2012/04/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.