

You may find this hard to believe but when I was in college I had a phone interview to be a river guide. One of those summer guides that sits on the back of the raft and yells at the thrill seeking teenagers or out of shape adults to paddle left or paddle right or paddle harder, harder, harder. The guide that makes sure everyone is safe and that the raft stays out of the dangerous water pools or jagged rocks.

The guide that hoists the rafts over their head to carry them to the river and picks them up out of the river. Yes, it is hard to believe that me with my scrawny little body ever interviewed to be a river guide in West Virginia. Not surprisingly, I did not work that summer as a river guide.

But I think the image of being in a river raft as it tumbles down a fast flowing river is a pretty good analogy of what life is like for many of us. Many of us are finding out that our life is like a fast flowing river and we are being tossed this way and that way and we don't know what is coming ahead of us. We are worried that the river is too rough or too unpredictable and our raft is not going to sustain us.

Ask, "Who here has ever been on a white water raft? Got any good stories of being on that raft?"

When I was in about 8th grade, our church youth group went whitewater rafting on the Chattooga River along the Georgia/ South Carolina state line. The site of the filming of the horror film "Deliverance." I was the small one in the group and not a great daredevil. It was a typical white water raft. Big inflated sides with a plastic bottom. We sat along the sides with our feet into the middle.

The section we rafted that day included a Class 4 rapid. Rapids are designated from 1 to 5 with 5 being the most dangerous. Class 4 is the highest level that you are going to find in this area that amateurs are allowed to raft. We had been on that river for some time hitting some type 1 and 2 and even a couple of 3 rapids. It was quite fun and not difficult.

But then we came upon the class 4 rapid called “Bulls sluice.” When you get to “Bulls sluice,” the guide makes you exit from the raft and she takes you up on a rock to tell the group how we are going to navigate this stretch of river. She tells you that she is going to guide you over to this side of the river and then we are going to go here and then we are going to hit it just like this. It will not be easy and we will need to follow her instructions well.

Along the rock are also sadistic onlookers who have packed a lunch and a cooler of their favorite beverage so that they can watch these amateurs wipe out as they try to navigate this dangerous passage of water.

When it was time for our group to navigate the waters, the 8 of us listened intently as she told us to paddle left and then to paddle right. We did everything that we were supposed to do and we got to the top of the fast flowing water as it prepared to rush us between these two huge rocks and over the waterfall.

But me, being the less secure one, found myself leaning a little too far into the boat. So as my guide yelled out to paddle harder and harder, the crowds of onlookers watched as I fell into the middle of the boat and then screamed out, “I can’t paddle, I ain’t got one.” Yes, I had lost my paddle, was lying in the middle of the boat, and was no help to any of my fellow rafters.

When we look at life around us, many of us feel as though we are in that boat. Except in our boat, we feel as though there is no guide. We find ourselves in a class 4 rapid but we long to be back in the type one pool. We yearn to be in the portion of the river where you just kinda float along and there is no danger and you know what is ahead of you.

Paul in our biblical story once lived life in that class 1 river bed. In our passage, he refers to the time in his life when he knew exactly what he was supposed to do with his life. It was actually a time when he used a different name. He went by the name of Saul and he knew that his job was to protect the Jewish faith from these Christians who were leading people astray. He was very good at what he did and was very content.

He would receive reports about these Christians who were teaching people about Jesus and he would show up and “influence” them to stop teaching what they were teaching. He was very good at this because he “influenced” lots of people.

But then Saul encountered a white water rapid that changed his life forever and changed the life of the Christian witness forever. On a trip to Damascus to “influence” a few Christians, he was stuck down by a bright light and the voice of God informing him that he was not doing what he was supposed to be doing. He was not supposed to be persecuting Christians but instead he was to become one of them.

And so he did. His life changed forever. So Paul moved from a life where everything was black and white and easily explainable to one that was like rushing down a raft within fast flowing white water.

And Paul’s life did not become easy after his call experience. Today’s text witnesses to all of the places that Paul went to visit and share the gospel with people who either did not know him or who did not trust him. But it was here in this free floating and constantly changing white water rapids where God used Paul to spread the good news to people who were longing to hear it.

In the class 1 gentle waters, we, like Paul, can become trapped by our traditions. We can become trapped into rigidity and be flat out wrong. Paul was just flat out wrong when he felt like God wanted him to persecute Christians. Only when God threw his life in chaos and led him into the white water was he able to trust God to guide him into places where God wanted him to make a good and positive impact.

Many of us live in class 4 rapids. Our life is constantly changing and doesn’t make a lot of sense sometimes. We live lives that are constantly under stress for one reason or another.

And our world is changing so fast. I sit in class where everyone has a laptop in front of them and can respond to the professor with information in a second that we glean from the internet. Through social networking sites we can find out info about our families quickly. We can instantly email and text one another.

So maybe rather than trying to get back to a class 1 rapid we work to build a good boat with good people. We strive to make a strong and vibrant faith community with people who will support and encourage and help one another as we navigate this strange world together. And maybe we place our trust in Christ to be our guide to navigate us through the tumultuous waters.

And maybe just maybe in this river we will discover some things about ourselves that we wouldn't be able to find out otherwise.

There is an African proverb which says, "If you want to run fast for a short distance, run by yourself. If you want to run fast for a long distance, run with others." We need strong boats with strong people inside.

And one more thing. I think it would be really cool if someone took the initiative to organize a church wide whitewater river trip. I would like to go with ya on it. But only if we have a good guide. AMEN.

-McKensie, Alyce, "One Nation Under God Under a Lot of Stress," Washington Post, and found at http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/patheos/2010/06/american_dreams_and_discontent.html?hpid=talkbox1

-Text: Galatians 1: 1-24

-Given: June 6, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)