

LESSONS IN LIVING

How to Be a Person

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Robert Jensen
July 17, 2011

Scripture Reading: Psalm 104: 1a; 5-15; 24; 35b (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Our pastor here at St. Andrew's, Jim Rigby, often talks about the role of art in our spiritual and political lives, and he routinely suggests that we think of scripture as a form of poetry. If scripture is poetry, then poetry certainly can serve as scripture, at least when the Doctrinal Police aren't watching. So, for today's scripture, we turn to the Book of Berry, as in Wendell Berry, and his poem "How to Be a Poet."

Just as I am going to embrace an expansive conception of scripture, I suggest an expansive reading of these verses. I am not a poet myself and have no plans to take up poetry. For our purposes, let's generalize Berry's message and retitle this scripture "How to Be a Person."

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/30299>

How to Be a Poet (to remind myself)

by Wendell Berry

i

Make a place to sit down.
Sit down. Be quiet.
You must depend upon
affection, reading, knowledge,
skill--more of each
than you have--inspiration,
work, growing older, patience,
for patience joins time
to eternity. Any readers
who like your poems,
doubt their judgment.

ii

Breathe with unconditional breath
the unconditioned air.
Shun electric wire.
Communicate slowly. Live
a three-dimensional life;

stay away from screens.
Stay away from anything
that obscures the place it is in.
There are no unsacred places;
there are only sacred places
and desecrated places.

iii

Accept what comes from silence.
Make the best you can of it.
Of the little words that come
out of the silence, like prayers
prayed back to the one who prays,
make a poem that does not disturb
the silence from which it came.

Berry's counsel on how to approach the writing of poetry seems helpful in how to approach the living of life. In a wired world, he suggests we unplug. In a world focused on the short term, take the long view. In a world obsessed with the manufactured, seek the unbuilt. In a noisy world, he suggests we find silence.

Berry makes a point that Rigby also returns to often: A healthy spirituality will ground us in nature, and the struggle to find our place in the larger living world is aided by our creative capacities in both art and science. But instead of marveling at human creativity for its own sake -- instead of thinking, "Oh my, aren't we clever" -- we should use our human creativity, artistic and scientific, to help us recognize the far more profound creativity of that larger living world, of which we are a small part. Rightly employed, human creativity should deepen our humility, not entrench our arrogance, helping us see our place in a Creation that has a creative force beyond anything humans can muster or imagine.

If we understood that, we would see the sacred not in particular places; we would look for the keys to the sacred not in doctrine or dogma. If we had a sense of the limited scale of our creativity in the context of a profoundly creative natural world, we would recognize, to quote Berry: "There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places." Temples and churches are not especially sacred places. Prayers and hymns are not especially sacred words. And, most certainly, priests and preachers are not especially sacred people.

The way we humans divide up the world into the sacred and the unsacred is born of our arrogance, a belief that we understand the world and can rank the value of places. As Berry argues, either all the world is sacred or none of it is. It is not up to us humans to make those designations. We are not the creative force behind this world, but are simply one small part of this world. The sacred survives wherever there is a deep reverence for life. When that reverence recedes, desecration advances.

After several centuries of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution, the consequences of human arrogance are clear, as is our choice: Either we treat all the world as sacred or we condemn to death the world as we know it. Once we start assigning special sacredness to some places, the implication is that other places can be desecrated, and if they are so designated, we can be certain those places will be desecrated.

When we look around the planet we see that, in fact, we have desecrated most of Creation.

It is easy to agree with this idea in the abstract, but the implications are difficult to incorporate into our lives. Let's make it as tangible as possible: If we want to claim this church as sacred space, then will we also make that claim for the concrete patio outside this sanctuary, where some of our homeless brothers and sisters sleep? Do we treat that space outside in the same way we treat this one?

Let's take this one step further: If all the places of Creation are sacred, then surely all the creatures in Creation are sacred, too. Do we treat life with such reverence? Do we treat all human beings as sacred?

The question answers itself in a world of such grotesque inequality. One need not travel to the favelas and slums of the developing world to face the question. Look outside and you will see the answer.

This truth is uncomfortable: There are parts of Creation that we have abandoned. We have, as a society, accepted that they will remain desecrated for the foreseeable future, maybe forever: The toxic waste dumps, strip-mined land, burned-out sections of urban areas. And there are populations we have abandoned as well: The permanently poor of the so-called "underclass," the chronically mentally ill, indigenous peoples displaced by the dams, mines, and factories of the industrial world.

Even more uncomfortable is this truth: In an affluent society hooked on high-energy/high-technology, this is inevitable. You cannot build the world we live in without desecrating other parts of the world. We cannot live as comfortably as we live without denying the sacredness of other people.

The first time I read that poem, those lines unnerved me: "There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places." They still unnerve and unsettle me. When I read them, the enormity of our crimes against Creation comes into focus. I feel disturbed and distressed. My efforts to contribute to social justice and ecological sustainability seem pitiful in the face of this desecration.

I wish the same unnerving, unsettling, disturbed distress for all of you. The goal is not to guilt-trip people into feeling bad but to struggle to retain our ability to feel the sacredness of Creation. Our embrace of the sacred is meaningful only when we have the courage to face the desecration. When we face honestly the desecration, we hold onto the possibility that we can honor the sacred in more profound ways than saying certain words in certain buildings.

Berry advises us: "Stay away from anything that obscures the place it is in." Religion often obscures the place it is in, not only the constricting fundamentalist strains but sometimes even the cutting edge of progressive religion. Let us make sure that at St. Andrew's we don't obscure the place we are in.

That is not easy to do in a world full of screens, electric wire, and conditioned air. I wrote this sermon on a computer screen powered by electricity in my excessively air-conditioned office at the University of Texas. I may well watch a movie tonight. I do not take Berry's warning against these distractions as a haughty claim that he knows best how to honor the sacred and the rest of us must fall in behind his commands. After years of reading and teaching his work, I had the pleasure of hearing him speak last year, which reinforced my assessment of him: He's a kind and decent person, genuinely humble and stubborn. How much of that stubbornness is a longstanding personality trait and how much of it comes from his pain of living in a desecrated world, I cannot say.

Whatever the source of Berry's stubbornness, I suggest we not dismiss his recommendations as unrealistic. A common response is that such recommendations aren't pragmatic given the system in which we live. Perhaps not, but that attempt at diversion reminds me of the insight of my friend Justin

Podur, a political activist and environmental scientist: “Pragmatism in this system is insanity for the planet. Pragmatism for the planet is fantasy in this system.” The claim that one isn’t pragmatic within an insane system doesn’t end the discussion; it simply demands we ask why we are willing to accept a system that is insane, a system that is based on the routine desecration of Creation.

No politician or pundit -- and certainly no preacher or priest -- can give us a simple way out of this quandary. In pondering Podur’s paradox, each of us might consider following Berry’s advice: “Accept what comes from silence. Make the best you can of it.” If collectively we could do that, then we have a chance to make a life that does not disturb the silence from which it came.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

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We are a More Light congregation. (www.mlp.org)

We are an affiliate of The Center for Progressive Christianity. (www.tcpc.org)

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
 - believers and agnostics,
 - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
 - women and men,
 - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
 - those of all races and cultures,
 - those of all classes and abilities,
 - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
 - striving for peace and justice among all people,
 - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and
 - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)



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