

“What We Need is Here”---

A Sermon by Rev. Ted Tollefson inspired by

"The Wild Geese" by Wendell Berry

preached at All Souls UU Church, Sioux Falls SD 3/3/2019

*“Horseback on Sunday morning,
harvest over, we taste persimmon
and wild grape, sharp sweet of summer's end”...*

In many rural areas and the American South,
what you do Sunday mornings qualifies as your “your real religion”.
For many years, Wendell Berry stayed home and wrote a sonnet each Sunday
that was later gathered in a collection called Sabbaths.
For Wendell Berry and many others, the Word is best served
by well chosen words.
May it always be so.

As this poem opens the poet’s persona is enacting a favorite Sunday ritual:
riding horseback, with someone he loves (“we”), sharing a natural communion
of wild grape & persimmon---sacred fruits of two traditions he honors in his work:
Biblical faith where grapes hold the promise of resurrection
from the first miracle of Jesus turning water into wine to the Last Supper

and Chinese Taoism
where “5 persimmons” represent the 5 elements, 5 seasons
and our place nested in the rhythms of nature.

By partaking in this multi-leveled communion
the poem celebrates the rest and sweet taste
that comes at the end of harvest
or any day spent in honest labor.

When we accept our place in the cycling seasons
and complete the good work entrusted to our care
there is sweetness all around to be savored, shared, enjoyed
and sanctified by well-chosen words.



***“...In time's maze
over fall fields, we name names
that went west from here, names
that rest on graves.”***

When we reach a certain age
or have accumulated enough personal losses
almost any reverie is composed of memories,
some would say sacred memories,
of all those we have known and loved
who have walked this earth
done good work
raised their families
made their marks upon the land and human history
and then passed on.

To remember and thereby honor the dead
can lend depth to our living.
We feel in our bones
that we are not alone
that we are part of a larger tapestry of human-kind.

When we recall with heart, mind and lips
the names of those we have known
who no longer inhabit a body of flesh
our visions widens.
In another poem, Wendell Berry celebrates
this larger circle of living and dead

The Larger Circle, by Wendell Berry (# 646 in *Singing the Living Tradition*)

*We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
And the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each other's arms
And the larger circle of lovers,
Whose hands are joined in a dance
And the larger circle of all creatures
Passing in and out of life
Who move also in a dance
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
Except in fragments.*

To acknowledge this larger community of all beings,
human and animal, living and dead
to whom our lives are inextricably connected
enlarges the margins of our imaginations
and widens the compass of our compassion.

To recognize how tender, transient
and interdependent our lives are
might make us despair
if we had our hearts set on good times
that will never end,
joys unsalted by sorrows
and beloved companions
who will *always* be by our side
to give and receive the nectar of kindly attention.

But we could also consider ourselves invited
to savor the bounties of embodied life,
which become even sweeter
when we know in our hearts
that they can not last forever.

*Less than a week ago
in 10 heart-breaking hours
we learned that our beloved dog Gryff
had cancer in his spleen and liver
and god knows where else.
Surgery was possible
but not likely to give him a better life.
So with some good coaching and a nudge or two
we said “good-bye” and “thank you”
to our dear furry boy
as he was gently put to sleep.*

*Now we are followed by a dog-shaped hollow
that is connected directly to our hearts.
He is teaching us how to let go and give thanks
how to give and receive love.
The heart-ache we feel
is in direct proportion to the love we gave and received
from Our Dear Boy, Gryffindor.*

Whenever our lives are turned inside out
by the whirlwind of love and loss
many things that we might ordinary over-look
glow in the light
of awakened compassion:

***“... We open
a persimmon seed to find the tree
that stands in promise,
pale, in the seed's marrow.”***

Remember the persimmon that was eaten
in an outdoor rite of communion?
It's come back again as a seed
--- a seed filled with promise.

For Wendell Berry as for Henry David Thoreau
each seed is a promise
which points like an arrow through time
towards its genetically determined purpose.

It's purpose, our purpose perhaps,
is to grow, to unfold, so that our potentials are gathered
in a life of promises kept,
by an internal code
tiny and powerful as the mustard seeds
in the parables of Jesus and Old Buddha
which reveal the promise of resurrection and the reality of suffering.

When we live into this natural faith
nurturing and allowing the seeds
to unfold according to their internal dictates
then the Universe begins to reveal its purposes
to us and through us...

***“... Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear,
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here.”***

When we live in accord with nature
“Angels” can appear---messengers of natural grace
in the form of Wild Geese.
What holds them aloft:
is it gravity or grace? physics or beauty?

When we open our hearts, minds, bodies senses
the Natural World sometimes responds
as if we belonged here
as if we were a verse of the Book of Life
or a significant melody in the larger symphony
of the Universe including us.

The wonder of moments like this
is that these ambassadors of natural beauty
keep returning and then leaving
when **they** are ready
whether we think it is the “right time” or not.

Gryff, Kristen and I are lucky to live
on the edge of the Mississippi River---
an international flyway for migratory birds.
Gryff was initially upset by the sound of wild geese
until I renamed them the “wild flying dogs of Frontenac”.
As we watched and listened closely,
we learned something about their guidance system.
In addition to changes in temperature, humidity and light,
these geese did a lot of consulting.
Some of them appeared to be Unitarian geese:
they would take off towards the east
and honk a lot, then they’d honk some more and turn south,
then fly west, honk some more and return where’d they started.
It took them a long time to reach consensus
that it was “Time to Fly South”
but they seem to enjoy the process.

What is the “ancient faith” praised in this poem?
What holds us and the wild geese in our way “clear”
and shows us “what we need is here?”

The poet chooses his words with intelligent care.
When he writes “***Abandon, as in love or sleep, holds them to their way...***”

he could be paraphrasing Emerson's first essay "Nature" where "Nature" is defined as the powers outside and within us that are beyond our conscious control including weather, seasonal rhythms, but also sleep, dreams, great desires and overwhelming compulsions. Great love, great grief teach us how these autonomous powers, beyond our conscious knowledge or control, can grab hold of us in sleep, dreams, love and loss---- and carry us along towards a destination we can sometimes feel but rarely see from a distance.

The "ancient faith" celebrated in this poem is rooted in the natural unconscious forces which shape and direct our lives whether we like it or not.

Poets, musicians and artists
draw inspiration from such powers.
Psychologists and therapists
attempt to *mobilize* these unconscious powers
in the service of healing, wholeness
and the possibility of a renewed life.
Priests and shaman *praise* a larger Kindness beyond our ken.

This lovely poem by Wendell Berry ends with a prayer which reveals, I think, a decisive shift towards a natural faith:

***"And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye
clear. What we need is here."***

The prayer which is directed towards an anonymous source breaks with one strand of Biblical faith that has been insisting, ever since the second creation story in Genesis, that there is something fundamentally *wrong, broken, sinful* in ourselves and the world around us.

woman against man,
man and woman against nature,
nature against god....
Very funny religion!

Wendell Berry's poem is siding with the affirming voices
in Biblical, Eastern and Indigenous faiths
which proclaim that this world is enough
that is beautiful *just the way it is*.

What might sometimes need adjusting is our attitude:
***“And we pray,
not for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye clear.”***

There are many paths that lead towards
the promised land of *this* world experienced as *enough*:

We can honor the presence of beauty
by appreciating and creating beauty through art.

We can build communities where we can celebrate
the beauty of nature and human nature
bound together by *mutual* respect, care and compassion.

We can learn to quiet the heart and mind
and clarify the senses through mindfulness
so that we see the universe including us
not as a means towards our selfish ends
but as a community of shared life and convivial purposes.

And finally, we can learn to listen with
an open heart, mind and senses
so that we can attune ourselves to the music of another person
and help them become more fully who they are.

What we need is here!

in this world and not any other

What we need is here!

***imprinted in these human instruments---
body, heart, mind and senses***

What we need is here!

in this beloved evolving community.

