

Wendell Berry and the Miracle of Community

Jamaica Plain, September 18, 2005, Rev. Terry Burke

Today we install our church leaders, our Standing Committee. In our first reading today, fictional character Jayber Crow falls asleep in his small town church, and dreams of all the people he's known in the congregation. They are all present out of time, together as a beloved community. Jayber Crow's author Wendell Berry is a great contemporary novelist, essayist, critic and poet. Now in his seventies, he left an academic career to return to his rural Kentucky home to write and farm. He is best known for his book *The Unsettling of America*, which speaks to the loss of American values in the decline of the small farm. Such farming connects people to the land and other people with respect and fidelity, and in community.

Jayber Crow, the novel's downwardly mobile hero, leaves his rural home to attend seminary and college. His deepening faith causes him to question conventional religion, and to abandon plans to become a minister. A great flood of the Ohio River sends him back to his home town of Port William, where he becomes the town barber. Jayber's home is above his shop, and his meager income is supplemented by serving as the church sexton and gravedigger. As an "ineligible bachelor," he loves a married woman from afar.

Berry has his character comment on the destructive effect of two forces on the town, what he calls "The War" and "The Economy." "The War," whether in the book it's World War II, the Korean War, or the Viet Nam conflict, takes away the young men, the future of the town. They die physically far away, but die truly back home in the hearts of those who love them. "The Economy" is Berry's shorthand for the contemporary greed for gain, the lust for faster, newer, "better," that pulls people away from the country and community.

Recently I visited my friends, former church members, Barbara Prairie and Michael Boardman in central Kentucky, not far from Wendell Berry country. As many of you

know, Michael is dying from a rare, incurable illness. Barbara told me that one of the reasons that she and Michael retired to the college town of Berea was that "it's not part of the money economy." People there live and act more according to older values of caring. I saw this in the way Michael was treated by his nurses and physical therapists, and when I pushed his wheelchair into a local coffee shop that he hadn't visited for several months, in the kind of greeting he was given by the owner. People are valued as human beings, not just as consumers.

Jayber Crow dreams of his church community as ordinary human beings all together. He loves them as a communion of flawed human saints in his vision of the town out of time. Jayber maintains his fidelity to his town and community of Port William and to the woman he loves, ending up as a "bootleg" barber in a Thoreauesque cabin in the woods.

As someone who grew up in middle class, Midwestern suburbia, and who has lived my adult life in cities, most of my experience of farms and rural life is the result of our late church member Robert Stannard Bristol. Growing up in our church, as a young man Stannard moved about 100 miles north of Jamaica Plain to North Sutton, New Hampshire. After college, he made his living there as a surveyor and dairy farmer, also serving as a justice of the peace, and for decades running the town board.

Stannard restored his historic farm house and its Muster Field Farm. His interest in historic buildings led others to donate to him such structures as a 18th century barn for preservation. At a low point in our church life in the early 1980's, Stannard would milk his cows on a Sunday morning, take the bus to Boston, chair our First Church Standing Committee meeting, attend the service, and take the bus home in time for the evening milking. He had a faithfulness to our church as well as to his land, and delighted in "weeding the woods" for trees for our sanctuary at Christmas time, a tradition he remembered from childhood.

I have fond memories of helping Stannard "walk the bounds" in 1984, re-establishing the boundary markers between the towns of Sutton and Warner. As promised by Stannard,

we were accompanied by "some colorful Warner types." I also remember that Stannard came down to Jamaica Plain for my first Easter Sunday as your minister. We were walking on Eliot Street shortly before the service when a gull dropped poop on the shoulder of my new suit. As I wiped it off, Stannard said, "Oh, that's good luck!"

Stannard's farm is now a working museum, but that fidelity to the land and to our church has been continued by the farm's manager Steve Paquin. Steve is a farmer and forester, a philosopher and writer. He has faithfully maintained the tradition of our church gathering Christmas trees for the sanctuary. In fact, you are welcome to come with us this December 4th! When I saw Steve this August, I remembered that his partner has kept a weekly anti-war vigil in the town of Warner since the start of the Iraq War; Steve says that about half the people honk in support, and about half make rude gestures.

When I came to this church 22 years ago, I saw in Jamaica Plain an urban ideal, a creative mix of races, classes, affectional orientations, and ethnic backgrounds, with the green wildness of the Arboretum, Jamaica Pond, and Franklin Park. We even have the green space of our historic graveyard behind the church. Serving this congregation and community is something like being a farmer - you plant seeds and try to help them grow, you prune and nurture, rebuild, shore up, spread the fertilizer, and, you dream.

Our church leaders, especially our standing committee, also are farmers of this community. Though, as in the Exodus reading, the people may murmur and complain, and change is the one constant of congregational life, your church leaders try to remain faithful to this community and its wonderfully flawed human beings, to see that all are truly fed. Let us faithfully cultivate our urban garden! In the tradition of great church leaders of the past like Stannard Bristol, I invite our Standing Committee forward at this time for their installation.

Closing Words: Human beings, not consumers; fidelity to a place and a people; dream.

Exodus 16:2-7

And the whole congregation of the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of God in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Then God said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring, it will be twice as much as they gather daily for the Sabbath." So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, "At evening you shall know that it was God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of God, because God has heard your murmurings. For what are we, that you murmur against us?"