

Sustainable Prophet

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Based on Bill Moyer's interview of Wendell Berry, November 29, 2013

In times like these we need places and people who remind us what truth is. Wendell Berry is one of those people for me, and his poem, "The Peace of Wild Things" is one of my favorite poems. The poem describes a moment of despair for the world and for his children and it concludes by finding peace in the wild things of nature and the grace of the world. It is a poem that holds gently and firmly, both despair and grace, darkness and light. It is an honest poem and it is a reassuring poem.

When despair grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting for their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

This morning I would like to let you know that Wendell Berry can also be quite contrary at times, not just as a writer but also as a non-violent activist. The source of what I want to say about Wendell Berry this morning is a Bill Moyers interview that took place at an event that brought together advocates of sustainable agriculture, environmentalists, leaders in the local food movement, and others who recognize Wendell Berry as a visionary. In his introduction of Wendell Berry, Bill Moyers said

For Wendell Berry, the defense of the Earth is a mission that admits no compromise. This quiet and modest man who lives and works far from the center of power on a farm in Kentucky where his family has lived for 200 years has become an outspoken, even angry advocate for a revolution in our treatment of the land.

As he nears 80 years of age, Wendell Berry is going beyond words to civil disobedience. In 2011 he joined a four-day sit-in at the Kentucky governor's office to protest the mountaintop removal of coal, which devastates the rivers, the air and the mountains. Bill Moyers, in his kind Texan, "bless-your-heart" kind of way asked Wendell Berry, "What prompted your act of civil disobedience? A man your age?" to which Wendell Berry replied, "Well good company." Then he went on to say

What prompted me was the thought that when you have a major problem in your state, to which state government is utterly indifferent, and you've taken every obvious and legitimate recourse, trying to meet and talk and influence and demonstrate and speak and write and nothing has worked, ...we chose to confront the governor and tell him we weren't going to leave his office. And the governor then made a very, very clever move, he invited us to stay. And we did stay the whole weekend, did a lot of publicity for our side and were beautifully treated by the security staff, and people who sent us food and bedding and good wishes and even came in and gave us massages. And it was all together one of the loveliest weekends I've ever spent in my life.

BILL MOYERS: What did you want to tell the Governor?

WENDELL BERRY: That the issue of clean water in eastern Kentucky has, so far, not been possible to raise in the halls of the government. That the streams are still flowing dirty because of the outflow of the strip mines. That's a tragedy and it's to be suffered. That's why we went down to the governor's office. This is intolerable. There's no excuse for it. And there's no justification for the permanent destruction of the world. My belief is that the world and our life in it are conditional gifts. We have the world to live in and the use of it to live from on the condition that we will take good care of it. And to take good care of it we have to know it and we have to know how to take care of it. And to know it and to be willing to take care of it, we have to love it. And we've ignored all that all these years.

BILL MOYERS: Many years ago you said if you make a commitment and you stick to it to the end, there will be rewards. Can you talk about what sustains you?

WENDELL BERRY: Well, that comes under the heading of faith.

BILL MOYERS: Faith. You still consider yourself a Christian.

WENDELL BERRY: I still consider myself a person who takes the gospels very seriously. And I read them and am sometimes shamed by them and sometimes utterly baffled by them. But there is a good bit of the gospel that I do get, I think. I believe I understand it accurately. And I'm sticking to that. And I'm hanging on for the parts that I don't understand. And you know, willing to endure the shame of falling short as a price of admission. All that places a very heavy and exacting obligation on me as a writer. A lot of my writing I think has been a giving of thanks for precious things, and defending them. So that enforces the art (and my actions).

BILL MOYERS: The grace of the world. You wrote about it in "The Peace of Wild Things." Take that a little further for me.

WENDELL BERRY: I meant it in the religious sense. The people of religious faith know that the world is maintained every day by the same force that created it. It's an article of my faith and belief that all creatures live by breathing God's breath and participating in God's spirit.

And this means that the whole thing is holy. The whole shooting match. There are no sacred and unsacred places, there are only sacred and desecrated places. So finally I see those gouges in the surface mine country as desecrations, not just as land abuse. Not just as human oppression. But as desecration. As blasphemy.

BILL MOYERS: What do you say to those people who say, "Wendell, please tell me what I can do?"

WENDELL BERRY: All right. Well, you've put me in the place I'm always winding up in and...that is to say well, we've acknowledged that the problems are big, now where's the big solution? When you ask the question *what is the big answer*, then you're implying that we can impose the answer. But that's the problem we're in to start with; we've tried to **impose** the answers. The answers will come not from walking up to your farm and saying "This is what I want and this is what I expect from you!" You walk up and you say "What do you need?" And you commit yourself to say, all right, I'm not going to do any extensive damage here until I know what it is that you are asking of me. And this can't be hurried. This is the dreadful situation that young people are in. I think of them and I say well, the situation you're in now is a situation that's going to call for a lot of patience. And to be patient in an emergency is a terrible trial.... I say to the young people, don't get into this with the idea that you're going to save it and solve all the problems even in your lifetime. The important thing to do is to learn all you can about where you are and *if* you're going to work there it becomes even more important to learn everything you can about that place to make common cause with that place and then resign yourself, becoming patient enough to work with it over a long time. And then, what you do is increase the possibility that you will make a good example, and what we're looking for in this is good examples.

BILL MOYERS: But this will take a lot of patience, won't it?

WENDELL BERRY: It'll take a long time.

BILL MOYERS: Do we have time?

WENDELL BERRY: We don't have a right to ask that question. We have to ask "What's the right thing to do?" and go ahead and do it and take no thought for the morrow.

BILL MOYERS: What have you seen over a long life that prevents you from being fatally pessimistic?

WENDELL BERRY: Well, hope. In my work, I've always been trying to construct or lay out, map out the grounds of a legitimate, authentic hope. And if you can find one good example, then you've got the grounds for hope. If you can change yourself, if you can make certain requirements of yourself that you are then able to fulfill, you have a reason for hope.

BILL MOYERS: That reminds me of your poem, "A Poem on Hope", if you will read this.

WENDELL BERRY: All right. [The following lines are excerpts from the poem.]

It is hard to have hope....

Hope then to belong to your place by your own knowledge of what it is that no other place is, and by your caring for it, as you care for no other place....

Be still and listen to the voices that belong to the stream banks and the trees and the open fields.

Find your hope, then, on the ground under your feet. Your hope of Heaven, let it rest on the ground underfoot....

The world is no better than its places. Its places at last are no better than their people while their people continue in them....

At that point Bill Moyers concluded the interview by saying "Thank you Wendell Berry."

Yes, thank you Wendell Berry. Thank you for your life and your words. As I gathered these thoughts of Wendell Berry, I thought about how they might help us as we work together on this farm known as Community Congregational Church, United Church of Christ. Here are some of his lines again in our context here, in this place, at this time.

The world is no better than its places. Its places at last are no better than their people while their people continue in them. My belief is that the world and our life in it are conditional gifts. We have the world to live in and the use of it to live from on the condition that we will take good care of it. And to take good care of it we have to know it and we have to know how to take care of it. And to know it and to be willing to take care of it, we have to love it. The place that we live in. The way that we patiently ask of this church, what do you need? The way that we faithfully ask God, what are you calling us to? Reading the Gospel, having faith in good company. Being a good example in good company.

Community Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, you are meant to be a beacon on the hill – welcoming, compassionate. Now is the time when we are preparing the soil for the future, because this place is holy. The way in which you offer your time, the way in which you offer your pledges of financial commitment, the way in which you wholeheartedly participate in the questions and decisions that are before us, will have a direct bearing on the quality of this land, this beloved community, this place.

May we all be good examples to one another. May we be in good company, each person playing his or her own part, in being church. It isn't easy. There may be times when you feel like you have been run over by a bus. But you'll be in good company.