CHRISTIAN FAITH AND CARE OF THE EARTH: THE WITNESS OF WENDELL BERRY

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Tonight I wish to speak on Christianity and Creation with special reference to the witness of Wendell Berry, his life and his tri-form writings: poetry, essays and fiction. Berry writes:

I would not have been a poet
except that I have been in love
alive in this mortal world,
or an essayist except that I
have been bewildered and afraid,
or a story-teller had I not heard
stories passing to me through the air,
or a writer at all except
I have been wakeful at night
and words have come to me
out of their deep caves
needing to be remembered.¹

Recently Bill Moyers interviewed Wendell Berry on his PBS "Moyers and Company" program. As introduction to Berry I offer a few clips:

We can rightly call Wendell Berry a prophet in the classical sense of a Hebrew prophet. A prophet in the Hebrew language is described as a "seer," one who sees visions and sees Reality, and as a *nabi*, one who is "called." A prophet is one given visions and seeks to apply those visions to the realm of "plain history, real politics and human instrumentality," to use Paul Hanson's phrases.² It is not too late. The prophet speaks, to use the words of the cowboy poet, "just before beyond redemption."

The prophet reveals what is happening in the starkest and most vivid terms and warns disaster if the people do not change their ways. It is said of the bravery of a book that it looks away from nothing. Berry the prophet looks away from nothing.

The prophet is also given vision of what the world can be if we walk in the ways of God, join God's passion for earth and help create a world compassionate, beautiful and just where all things human and non-human dwell together in harmony, a world reconciled and redeemed. Berry the poet/prophet gives us sight of a world being desecrated and destroyed and of a world being restored.

The Hebrew prophet Jeremiah went through the streets of Babylon wearing a wooden yoke around his neck prophesying that the Hebrew captivity in Babylon would last awhile longer. A rival prophet whose own prophecy promised the people swift salvation and return to Zion accosted Jeremiah, tore the yoke from

Jeremiah's neck and smashed it into pieces. Jeremiah then found an iron yoke, put it on and continued prophesying as God revealed the harder truth to him.

Berry, like Jeremiah, bears a hard truth to us, a word that is hopeful only in its hardness. He puts on a yoke of essays. When that one is torn off, he puts on a yoke of poetry. When that is torn off, he takes up fiction and puts it on. If that is torn off, he goes to the fields, then starts all over again.

So tonight we look at Christian faith and care of the earth through biblical eyes, and through the eyes of Wendell Berry.

I

I order tonight's presentation by developing first a Theology of Creation and Care of the Earth; then a Spirituality of Creation and Care of the Earth; and finally an Ethic of Creation and Care of the Earth. All these partake in a Theology of Redemption, for the God of original and ongoing creation is also the God of ongoing redemption, a this-worldly, this-earthly redemption.

A Theology of Creation and Care of the Earth begins where the Bible begins, with this belief: *The world is the creation of a good God who blessed it and called it good*. Berry works from the faith premise that Creation is the act of a Creator who loves and takes pleasure in the Creation. "Life is a miracle," as Berry has titled one essay. God is great and God is *green*.

Berry critiques modern science turned into a Scientism which goes beyond what it can know and reduces the world to blind materialism. Of the relationship of science and religion, Berry writes:

There is no reason, as I hope and believe, that science and religion might not live together in amity and peace, so long as they both acknowledge their real differences and each remains within its own competence. Religion, that is, should not attempt to dispute what science has actually proved; and science should not claim to know what it does not know, it should not confuse theology and knowledge, and it should disavow any claim on what is empirically unknowable.³

Moreover, the Creation of God is an ongoing reality with ourselves as called partners with God. To quote Berry:

We will discover that the Creation is not in any sense independent of the Creator, the result of a primal creative act long ago and done with, but is the continuous constant participation of all creatures in the being of God.⁴

With all the creatures and elements of earth we are part of an interdependent web of being. We are "members of one another" to use a Pauline phrase Berry likes. He calls it "The Membership," which includes the entire created realm. In a short story, Burley Coulter speaks of this membership:

The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't.⁵

The "membership" requires certain obligations along with its gifts which moves us to the next theological motif.

"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." (Ps.24:1) Thereby we are placed here to be grateful and skilled stewards of the earth. The earth, as Berry reminds us, is "a gift – not a free or deserved gift, but a gift given with certain rigorous conditions." The Bible, writes Berry, is "the story of a gift." It is a book "greener" than we know, as biblical scholar Ellen Davis is showing us - not only in its commands to care for the land, but also in its instructions on how to do so.

So the Torah instructs us to "dress and keep" the garden of a planet we've been given. But the Hebrew prophets cry out against God's people for ignoring Torah and destroying nature along with it. In Isaiah, God sings the song of a lover spurned. God gave us a vineyard, cleared it of stones and provided choice vines. God hoped for sweet grapes but instead got sour grapes. As Isaiah put it,

God looked for justice, *mishpat*but instead bloodshed, *mishpach*God wanted righteousness, *tsedakah*but behold a cry of distress, *tse'akah*. (Isaiah 5:7)

What then is required of the human creature in partnership with God is to be a steward:

The divine mandate to use the world justly and charitably, then, defines every person's moral predicament as that of a steward. But the predicament is meaningless until it produces an appropriate discipline: stewardship. And stewardship is hopeless and meaningless unless it involves long-term courage, perseverance, devotion and skill.⁹

Moreover, stewardship is sacramental work, for life given by God is holy. And bad work? Listen to Berry:

To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.¹⁰

Which leads us to the third motif in a theology of Creation and Care of the Earth: What is called in Christian theology "the Fall." *If Creation began in innocence and sheer goodness, something happened and still happens to mar Creation.* In Jewish thought we have a good impulse, *yetzer hatov*, and an evil impulse, *yetzer hara*, and all too often the latter prevails. We call it "sin." (British writer Francis Spufford calls it by formula HPtFtU – the Human Propensity to Foul Things Up. 11) Berry describes our fallenness more elegantly as "deficient in wholeness, harmony and understanding." 12

The prophets decried a world fallen where our disobedience has wreaked havoc relationally, communally, spiritually and in the natural world. Everything is connected, nothing or no one escapes the consequences of sin. Hear Isaiah again:

And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest, as with the slave, so with the master . . . as with the creditor so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled The earth dries up and withers, the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt. Therefore

the inhabitants of earth dwindle and few people are left. (From Isaiah 24:2-6)

As Berry has written, "Beware the justice of nature." The prophet Jeremiah joins his lament:

Take up weeping and wailing for the mountains,

and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness,
because they are laid waste so that no one passes through,

and the lowing of cattle is not heard;
both the birds of the air and animals

have fled and are gone.

And, again, why?

Because they have forsaken my law . . . and have not obeyed my voice or walked in accordance with it. (From Jeremiah 9:10-14)

I think now of the horrors of mountain top removal and Berry's words when he first saw a mountain in Hardburly, Kentucky destroyed in industrial greed:

Standing there in the very presence of it, one feels one's comprehension falling short of the magnitude of its immorality. One is surrounded by death and ugliness and silence as of the end of the world Standing and looking down on that mangled land, one feels aching in

one's bones the sense that it will be a place such as this that the balance will finally be overcast and the world tilted irrevocably toward its death. . . . Since I have left Hardburly I have been unable to escape the sense that I have looked over and seen, not the promised land vouchsafed to a chosen people, but a land of violence and sterility prepared and set aside for the damned. 13

Looking at the devastation of mountain top removal today we hear Berry's prophetic lament in his poem "Dark With Power."

Dark with power, we remain the invaders of our land, leaving deserts where forests were, scars where there were hills.

On the mountains, on the rivers, on the cities, on the farmlands we lay weighted hands, our breath potent with the death of things.¹⁴

Berry the prophet writes of how our best powers have become powers of death, our best capacities turned destructive. And nowhere better than in his "Mad

Farmer" poems. Listen to a portion of a poem titled, "The Mad Farmer Flying the Flag of Rough Branch Secedes From the Union:"

From the union of power and money,
from the union of power and secrecy,
from the union of government and science,
from the union of government and art,
from the union of science and money,
from the union of ambition and ignorance,
from the union of genius and war,
from the union of outer space and inner vacuity,
the Mad Farmer walks quietly away

Come all ye conservatives and liberals
who want to conserve the good things and be free,
come away from the merchants of big answers,
whose hands are metalled with power;
from the union of anywhere and everywhere
by the purchase of everything from everybody at the

lowest price

and the sale of anything to anybody at the highest price; from the union of work and debt, work and despair;

from the wage-slavery of the helplessly well-employed.

From the union of self-gratification and self-annihilation, secede into care for one another and for the good gifts of Heaven and Earth.¹⁵

I turn to the question of the relationship between Christianity and the care of creation. Professor Lynn White has made the much discussed charge that Christianity, following the verse in Genesis 1:28 that we were called to "subdue" the earth and "have dominion" over it, has led the way in the exploitation and destruction of the earth. Wendell Berry agrees that Christians and Christianity are guilty of exploitation of earth, but he objects that the Bible is the culprit. We have mis-read the Bible. The dominion given us by God is a dominion exercised under the dominion of the Creator. The better verbs to describe God's call to us are not "subdue" and "have dominion" from the first Creation account in Genesis 1(a liturgical poem), but in the second Creation story in Genesis 2 where God places us in the garden and commands us "to dress and keep it." (Gen. 2:15)

The problem as Berry sees it is not with the Biblical instruction, but in our following of it, "the virtually catastrophic discrepancy between Biblical instruction and Christian behavior." And not disreputable Christian behavior, but "allegedly respectable Christian behavior."

The certified Christian seems as likely as anyone else to join the military-industrial conspiracy to murder Creation.¹⁷

In a trenchant critique of the church, Berry writes:

The organized church makes peace with a destructive economy and divorces itself from economic issues because it is economically compelled to do so it cannot survive apart from those economic practices that its truth forbids, and that its vocation is to correct. 18

When it comes down to a choice between the fowls of the air, Berry says, and the church building fund it chooses the church building fund over and over again. I cannot see the difference between the church of pre-civil war days justifying the slave economy with the Bible and today's church in thrall to the industrial economy turning its eyes from the damage it does to the earth.

The crux of the problem, Berry believes, is the *disembodiment* of Christianity which has divorced spirit and matter and disowned matter, what philosopher Norman Wirzba calls a "disincarnate" form of Christianity. The spiritual life is cut off from the physical body, from the community and from the body of earth. The world is no longer seen as holy. Too much of Christianity through the years has believed that how you treat your body or the earth is

immaterial to the faith, thereby creating an immaterial faith, and this in the name of God who *became* matter in Jesus.

This form of Christianity is a variant on the ancient heresy of Gnosticism and has left a terrible spiritual vacuum. A world no longer considered holy is left to be exploited by the greedy, the powerful and the ignorant. Our destruction of the world, Berry writes:

... is not just bad stewardship or stupid economics, or a betrayal of family responsibility; it is the most horrid blasphemy. It is flinging God's gift into His face as if they were of no worth beyond that assigned to them by our destruction of them.¹⁹

Berry calls for a *reincarnate* form of Christianity that believes all reality is sacred and deserving stewardly care.

Berry calls us to a re-reading of the Bible in light of the ecological crisis.

The Bible, he says, "is best read and understood outdoors, and the farther outdoors the better."²⁰ As we do we will see a world loved by God and we called to love it ourselves. As we do we will see the stewardly concern of God for the world and we called into partnership with God in the care of creation. A reincarnate Christianity will not leave the world nor leave our authentic economic responsibilities in the hands of the most monied and most powerful.

I now move to a Spirituality of Creation and Care of the Earth.

- 1) It is first of all a spirituality awake to the world in wonder and praise. It "considers the lilies." As Emily Dickinson wrote in a letter: "The only Commandment I ever obeyed 'Consider the lilies."
- 2) Secondly, it is a spirituality where the poetry of protest is joined by the poetry of praise. Poet Denise Levertov wrote:

A passionate love of life must be quickened if we are to find the energy to stop the accelerating tumble toward annihilation.

So "sing awe," she writes, "breathe out praise and celebration."²²

Wendell's Sabbath poems are sheer praise of creation. They see the world in its created goodness and beauty and so help us see.

To sit and look at light-filled leaves

May let us see, or seem to see,

Far backward as through clearer eyes

To what unsighted hope believes:

The blessed conviviality

That sang Creation's seventh sunrise ²³

Berry blends prophetic lament and praise in his famous poem, "The Peace of Wild Things:"

When despair for the world 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 with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.²⁴

And this, from the poem, "Look Out":

Leave your windows and go out, people of the world, go into the streets, go into the fields, go into the woods and along the streams. Go together, go alone.

Say no to the Lords of War which is Money which is Fire. Say no by saying yes to the air, to the earth, to the trees, yes to the grass, to the rivers, to the birds and the animals and every living thing, yes to small houses, yes to the children. Yes.²⁵

- 3) Thirdly, a spirituality of creation should be a spiritual practice, embodied, an active care of creation. It is prayer and work, ora et labora, to use the monastic phrase. Berry describes his work as giving thanks for precious things and defending precious things.²⁶ In a famous N.Y. Times interview in 1969, E.B. White said,
 - . . . I arise every morning torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.

A world not worth savoring is not worth saving, and spiritual practice which is not practiced is not a practice, which leads to the last major section of the lecture: An Ethic of Creation and Care of the Earth.

III

First, the care of the earth as a form of the love of God and neighbor. To care for creation is to love God and to cherish the world as God cherishes it. To ignore the care of creation is a renunciation of the love of neighbor and exposes the neighbor to want. Early on in an ecological emergency, the poor of the earth will suffer first, but surely, as the prophet Isaiah saw, as the destruction continues everyone will be affected. Care of the earth is an act of devotion to God and is the active love of the neighbor with whom we are bound as members of one another.

A corollary teaching is Jesus' Golden Rule which Berry paraphrases: "Do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do unto you."

Secondly, *it is an ethic of affection*. We will not improve a world we do not love. In his Jefferson Lecture, "It All Turns on Affection," Berry writes that morality, even religious morality, is not enough as a motive for care of the earth:

The primary motive for good care and good use is always going to be affection, because affection involves us entirely Without this informed practical and practiced affection, the nation and its economy will destroy this country.²⁷

Berry's fiction shows that while he is a contrarian, he is not a *misanthropic* contrarian, but a *philadelphian* contrarian: he loves this world, and its creatures human and non-human. His stories and novels show human goodness and embodied virtue.

In a short story, "The Wild Birds," Old Jack, a master farmer, sees to it that Elton, a friend who has worked Jack's farm with great skill and love, will get a chance to buy the land at a price he can afford. So he worked out his will with his lawyer, Wheeler Catlett, to see this happen. Catlett at first does not understand. Then one day he stops at a distance and watches Elton at work.

Wheeler saw that the plowlands were laid out correctly.

He saw the quality of thought that had gone ahead of the work, the design of the year's usage laid neatly and considerately upon the natural shape of the field. Elton

was working a team of black Percherons. He had them stepping, urging them and himself, and yet there was an appearance of ease in their work that to Wheeler bespoke the accomplishment of a workman: the horses were fitted and harnessed and hitched right; the plow was running right Wheeler . . . sat and looked He felt himself in the presence of a rare and passionate excellence belonging to his history and his country, and he was moved.²⁸

In affection, Berry writes, "we find the possibility of a neighborly, kind and conserving economy." An *authentic* economy would be based on "thrift and affection and on connections to nature and one another."²⁹

3) A third dimension of Berry's ethic is the kingdom of God which he brilliantly re-images as "the Great Economy," a this-worldly, kingdom of God. "The first principle of the kingdom of God," he writes,

... is that it includes everything in it, the fall of every sparrow is a significant event Another principle, both ecological and traditional, is that everything in the kingdom of God is joined both to it and to everything else.

A third principle is "that we as humans cannot know either all of the creatures that the kingdom of God contains or the whole pattern or order by which it contains them.³⁰

This last principle speaks to a primary virtue in Berry's pantheon of virtues: *humility*, the acknowledgement of the limitations of human intelligence, goodness and power.

In contrast to the Great Economy of the kingdom of God is the modern Industrial Economy founded, in Berry's words, "on the seven deadly sins and the breaking of all ten of the Ten Commandments." The two great aims of the industrial economy are "the replacement of people by technology and the concentration of wealth into the hands of a small plutocracy." When asked by Bill Moyers about the "natural logic" of capitalism, Berry replied:

That you have a right to as much of anything that you want and by extension, the right to use any means available to get it.³²

The Great Economy focuses not on individualistic "rights," but on our connection and duty to one another and to all that is.

3) Thirdly, *it is an ethic of patience in time of emergency*. An ethic of patience will not resort to violence or be led astray by "global solutions" which betray our lack of acknowledgment of human limitations. It is willing to work on a

smaller scale trusting by hope that God will use our small work in God's great work.

Hear Berry's ethic set as a series of imperatives

Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.

Say that your main crop is the forest

that you will not live to harvest.

Say that the leaves are harvested

when they have rotted into the mold.

Call that profit. Prophesy such returns.

Put your faith in the two inches of humus

that will build under the trees

every thousand years.³³

That from the poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front." Now this set of imperatives from his essay "The Futility of Global Thinking:"

Make a home. Help to make a community.

Be loyal to what you have made.

Put the interest of the community first.

Love your neighbors – not the neighbors you

pick out, but the ones you have.

Love this miraculous world that we did not make, that is a gift to us.

As far as you are able make your lives dependent upon your local place, neighborhood, and household – which thrive by care and generosity – and independent of the industrial economy, which thrives by damage.

Find work, if you can, that does no damage.

Enjoy your work. Work well.³⁴

Berry's ethic is an ethic of resistance to the powers of death in our world, but it is a non-violent resistance. Jesus commands such, Berry says. As a last resort it practices civil disobedience as an act of witness and hope.

Fourth, *Berry's ethic stretches our moral imagination to include the non-human neighbor and yet to be born persons*. The moral challenge of this day pits the present against the future. Will we act only to satisfy our present wants, or will we consider our children and their children? Deep morality considers the neighbor we cannot see and the neighbor not yet born.

Conclusion: A This Worldly Redemption

I close with the practical vision of Redemption. The God of Creation is also the God of Redemption, a this-worldly redemption. God's kingdom is meant for earth. We are partners with God not only in the ongoing act of creation, but also the ongoing redemption of the world. We join God in the restoration and renewal of the world, which Jewish mysticism calls *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world.

The ancient prophets gave us a clear vision of their present crisis, but they also gave us vision of a world redeemed. As Isaiah spoke of "swords beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks," and wolf and lamb lying down together (Isaiah 2:4 and 11:6). So does Berry. Here is Berry's vision, captured in his poem, "A Vision."

A VISION

If we will have the wisdom to survive, to stand like slow-growing trees on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it, if we will make our seasons welcome here, asking not too much of earth or heaven, then a long time after we are dead the lives our lives prepare will live there, their houses strongly placed upon the valley sides, fields and gardens rich in the windows. The river will run clear, as we will never know it, and over it, birdsong like a canopy. On the levels of the hills will be green meadows, stock bells in noon shade.

On the steeps where greed and ignorance cut down

the old forest, an old forest will stand,

its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.

The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.

Families will be singing in the fields.

In their voices they will hear a music

risen out of the ground. They will take

nothing from the ground they will not return,

whatever the grief at parting. Memory,

native to this valley, will spread over it

like a grove, and memory will grow

into legend, legend into song, song

into sacrament. The abundance of this place,

the songs of its people and its birds,

will be health and wisdom and indwelling

light. This is no paradisal dream.

Its hardship is its possibility.³⁵

¹ Wendell Berry, A Timbered Choir (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), p. 186

² Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 11-13

³ Wendell Berry, *Life Is A Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*, (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 98

⁴ Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," *The Art of the Commonplace* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2002), p. 308

⁵ Wendell Berry, *The Wild Birds* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), pp. 136-7

⁶ Wendell Berry, "The Gift of the Good Land" in *The Art of the Commonplace*, op.cit., p. 295

- ⁷ Berry's phrase in Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. x
- ⁸ Scripture, Culture and Agriculture, op. cit.
- ⁹ "The Gift of the Good Land," op. cit., p. 299
- ¹⁰ "The Gift of Good Land" op. cit., p. 304
- ¹¹ Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic* (N.Y.: Harper One, 2013) pp. 27-8. He uses a more crude vernacular for "foul."
- 12 "The Gift of Good Land," op. cit., p. 309
- ¹³ Wendell Berry, *The Long-Legged House* (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969), pp. 28-9
- ¹⁴ Wendell Berry, "Dark With Power," *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint Press, 1998), p. 28
- ¹⁵ Wendell Berry, Selected Poems, op. cit., pp. 162-3
- ¹⁶ "Christianity and The Survival of Creation," op. cit., p. 306
- ¹⁷ Ibic
- ¹⁸ Wendell Berry, "God and Country," What Are People For? (Berkeley: North Point Press, 1990), p. 96
- ¹⁹ "Christianity and The Survival of Creation," op. cit., p. 308
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 311
- ²¹ Emily Dickinson, letter 904
- ²² Denise Levertov, "Poetry, Prophecy and Survival," in *New and Selected Essays* (N.Y.: New Directions, 1992), pp. 144
- ²³ Wendell Berry, A Timbered Choir, op. cit., p. 8
- ²⁴ Selected Poems, op. cit. p. 30
- ²⁵ Wendell Berry, "Look Out"
- ²⁶ Interview with Bill Moyers
- ²⁷ Wendell Berry, It All Turns On Affection (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012), pp. 32-33
- ²⁸ The Wild Birds (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), pp. 70-71
- ²⁹ It All Turns On Affection, op. cit., pp. 14 and 20
- ³⁰ Wendell Berry, "Two Economies," in *The Art of the Commonplace*, op. cit., p. 220
- ³¹ "Christianity and The Survival of Creation," The Art of the Commonplace, op. cit., p. 309
- ³² "Moyers and Company," October 4, 2013
- 33 "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," The Selected Poems, op. cit., p. 87
- ³⁴ Wendell Berry, "The Futility of Global Thinking"
- ³⁵ Selected Poems, op. cit., p. 102