



Praying with the Poets

T.S. Eliot * Mary Oliver * Emily Dickinson * Langston Hughes * Tagore
Maya Angelo * Jane Kenyon * Dylan Thomas * Rumi * Wendell Berry
Thomas Traherne * Scott Cairns

Community Christian Church – 4601 Main Street – Kansas City Missouri
Session #9 – Wendell Berry

Wendell Berry (August 5, 1934 - ___) – born in New Castle, Henry County, Kentucky; graduate of University of Kentucky (B.A. & M.A. degrees in English) Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University; professor of English at University of Kentucky. Off and on, until 1993; committed farmer on a 125 acre family homestead farm; dedicated to making previously abused land productive again and becoming environmentally responsible; eschewer of engine-driven tractors, preferring instead horse-drawn plows; recipient of many awards, including T.S. Eliot Award, Aiken-Taylor Award for Poetry, Jean Stein Award, Friends of America Writers Award, Lyndhurst Prize; married to Tanya Amyx (whom he also relates to as “my critic, my best reader, my fellow worker”); father of two children, Mary Dee and Pryor (Den) Clifford; author of 16 works of fiction, 30 works of nonfiction; 32 books of poetry – is regarded, at once, as one of the premier poets and environmentalists in the U.S. A person of abiding Christian faith, he also bears within his relationships and his writing a deeply sensitive ecumenical spirit.

Day #1: Generosity – In *A Timbered Choir*, what may be his most remarkable literary effort with religious sensibilities, Berry collected poems he had written on his Kentucky homestead stretching over two decades. In the following excerpt taken from that collection, Berry gives voice to how life can move us ever toward a posture of generosity.

*No, no, there is no going back.
Less and less you are
that possibility you were.
More and more you have become
those lives and deaths
that have belonged to you....
Now more than ever you can be
generous toward each day
that comes, young, to disappear
forever, and yet remain
unaging in the mind.
Every day you have less reason
not to give yourself away.*

Pray today that God will impart an attitude of generosity within you “toward each new day,” starting now.

Day #2: Love – For Berry love – daily, local, enfleshed, earth-rooted, heaven-inspired love – is the key to all of life. In the essay “*Word and Flesh*,” in his book *What Are People For?*, Berry describes the twinned mystery of love’s immeasurable transcendence and its absolute incarnational necessity in human life.

“Love is never abstract. It does not adhere to the universe or the planet or the nation or the institution or the profession, but to the singular sparrows of the street, the lilies of the field, ‘the least of these my brethren.’ Love is not, by its own desire, heroic. It is heroic only when compelled to be. It exists by its willingness to be anonymous, humble, and unrewarded.

“The older love becomes, the more clearly it understands its involvement in partiality, imperfection, suffering, and mortality. Even so, it longs for incarnation. It can no longer live by thinking.”

Pray today by giving thanks for the specific incarnations of love in your life that still may baffle you but also still move you to live each day with exhilarating joy.

Day #3: Given – In the poem “*What We Need Is Here*,” Berry describes the givenness of life’s multitude of graces.

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

Pray today a prayer of joyous thanks that what you need is available to the grasp of your heart, mind, and soul. And do not only say “Thanks,” but receive the “*given*,” the graces that are yours.

Day #4: Sabbath Prayers – In another of his “Sabbath” poems, Berry gives a multi-faceted, almost cosmic view of what his Sabbath experience is on his farm.

*Another Sunday morning comes
And I resume the standing Sabbath
Of the woods, where the finest blooms
Of time return, and where no path*

*Is worn but wears its makers out
At last, and disappears in leaves
Of fallen seasons. The tracked rut
Fills and levels; here nothing grieves*

*In the risen season. Past life
Lives in the living. Resurrection
Is in the way each maple leaf
Commemorates its kind, by connection*

*Outreaching understanding. What rises
Rises into comprehension
And beyond. Even falling raises
In praise of light. What is begun*

*Is unfinished. And so the mind
That comes to rest among the bluebells
Comes to rest in motion, refined
By alteration....*

*Your Sabbath, Lord, thus keeps us by
Your will, not ours. And it is fit
Our only choice should be to die
Into that rest, or out of it.*

Pray today for an understanding, plain or mystical, of how the keeping of Sabbath, initiated by God, helps to keep us whole and fit and ever more moving into the resurrected life that God intends for all of the earth.

Day #5: Thanks for Teachers– In his book *What Are People For?*, Berry writes a reminiscence about the writer Wallace Stegner. In his essay, Berry comments on the importance of teachers and the impact teachers have, directly and indirectly on our lives.

A teacher's major contribution may pop out anonymously in the life of some ex-student's grandchild. A teacher, finally, has nothing to go on but faith, a student nothing to offer in return but testimony.

Give thanks for your teachers whose contributions to your life are “popping out” even now and may yet

do so even more in the future, in your children, among your friends. If you are a teacher, seek God’s strength to keep going on in faith. If you are a student, pray for an occasion to give testimony.

Day #6: Sit and Be Still – In his most recent book of new poems, *Given*, Berry takes up his Sabbath poetry-writing practice again and offers insights about truly seeing and hearing in the context of prayer.

*Sit and be still
until in the time
of no rain you hear
beneath the dry wind's
commotion in the trees
the sound of flowing
water among the rocks,
a stream unheard before,
and you are where
breathing is prayer.*

Pray today that God will lead you ever closer to that place and time where and when “breathing is prayer.”

Day #7: Five Possibilities for Prayer Today – Sometime this day, use each of the following ways of praying which have been inspired by Wendell Berry.

- * Quiet your mind, heart, and soul with a time of rest and reflection and consider the realities which really last and are part of God’s eternal nature
- * Pray that your daily routine will be commensurate with an ecologically sound approach to conserving the earth as the home for coming generations.
- * Ponder the place & power of “home” in your life.
- * Pray for God to give you good work to do, and pray for strength to give to God and your neighbors the best work that is in you.
- * Count the ways that Sabbath has happened for you this week.

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