

To Savor and To Save

Micah 4:1-4; Rev. 21:1-5

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 19) 2023

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Most evenings you will find me sitting on our porch. Often, I'm not doing anything other than just enjoying, savoring, relishing, and saying "amen." When the light fades and only the tips of the pine trees are golden with the light, I often reread Jane Kenyon's poem, "Let Evening Come":

[READ by Jane]

*Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.*

*Let the cricket take up chafing
as a woman takes up her needles
and her yarn. Let evening come.*

*Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned
in long grass. Let the stars appear
and the moon disclose her silver horn.*

*Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
Let the wind die down. Let the shed
go black inside. Let evening come.*

*To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop
in the oats, to air in the lung
let evening come.*

*Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.*

In Marilyn Robinson's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Gilead*, the narrator and his best friend are sitting on a porch talking about heaven. The friend says, "Mainly, I just think about the splendors of the world and multiply by two. I'd multiply by ten or twelve if I had the energy. But two is much more sufficient for my purposes." And the narrator comments, "So he's just sitting there multiplying the feel of the wind by two, [and] multiplying the smell of the grass by two" (p. 147).

Womanist cultural critic bell hooks writes that her grandmother imagined heaven as "one big porch where she was going to just sit and enjoy the warmth and cool sunshine." She continues, "I suppose the sunshine could not be hot because it might suggest she was in hell somewhere. No, she was up there on a heavenly porch just sitting and looking at the angels go by. Just as she sat on her porch in Kentucky and watched the world" (bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, p.164).

Both Scripture readings this morning are about the salvation of the world, and the vision of what it will be like someday. The prophet Micah says that someday justice will prevail and therefore, true wholeness and peace – shalom – will be known. Part of the vision is that of each and every person sitting under their own vines and fig trees in the shade – sitting on the porches of that day – and they will not be afraid.

Micah was writing in part to protest the rise of a kind of 8th century BC agribusiness that was taking over, consolidating and centralizing, the land of the small family-owned farms that had been the heart and soul of Israel for three centuries. The common people are afraid, and Micah says that God's will is that

the day will come when regular, small farm people can sit on their porches and not be afraid. The hope of God's salvation of the world is where people can sit on the porch and savor the goodness of the world and the blessings of God. It's a vision of the Sabbath stretched out over time. It's a vision of eternity, and we begin to participate in it now when we practice savoring and enjoying today.

The great rabbi from a generation ago, Abraham Joshua Heschel, once observed, "Unless one learns how to relish the taste of Sabbath while still in this world, unless one is initiated in the appreciation of eternal life, one will be unable to enjoy the taste of eternity in the world to come." In other words, the practice of savoring and relishing this life is a kind of training ground for the life of eternity, a preparation for the full reception and welcome of the presence of God (see Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight*, p. 24).

Notice that Heschel used the phrase, "relish the taste of Sabbath" and connected it to "enjoy the taste of eternity." Sabbath is about tasting and relishing, enjoying, and savoring. We savor today what will become salvation someday.

In the eyes of the get-it-done-productive world of management and profit and deadlines there is no payoff for sitting on porches, relishing the moments of watching birds and trees and squirrels, and savoring the taste of good food, good conversation, and good company. But then again, this productive world worships the wrong gods.

In the eyes of the True and Living God, enjoyment is essential. Savoring God and God's gifts and God's world are indispensable in knowing God. We can't know God if we do not learn to savor. And we certainly won't know God's world without savoring.

The essayist E. B. White, once said in a *New York Times* interview in 1969, “I arise in the 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.”

What I want us to know this morning is that the choices between savoring and saving are not as stark as we might think. Indeed, there is a congruency between savoring and saving according to God’s vision.

Now, we are well aware we are a church that works hard at saving the world. We’re busy and we’re busy about good things that make a difference. We care about teaching children, we care for Creation, we care about education, peacemaking, health care, justice, poverty, immigration, racism, and reconciliation. We serve others, teach, make quilts, volunteer to feed the hungry, cook food, serve food, till gardens, cut and haul wood, go to meetings, have meetings, organize meetings, write articles, read books, write grants, work for candidates, get out the vote, run for office, show up at planning and zoning meetings, city commission meetings, school board meetings, county commission meetings, write letters to our political leaders, write letters to the editor, make phone calls, recycle, ride bicycles, drive hybrid cars, drive electric cars, walk, run, do counseling, go to counseling, and do all of this while sending texts, talking on our phones, or posting on social media.

At the same time, our calling is to savor God’s good world. We are to enjoy it but sitting and savoring does not come easily, and we likely feel guilty about simply savoring. After all, there is always something that needs to be done.

But let’s think about this. First, when I speak of “saving” I’m not talking about trying to run the world or make it come out the way we want it. By saving I mean its root meaning to “heal” and to make “whole.” To make whole has to do

with renewing and reconnecting all things in God and with each other. It's close to the word reconciliation and the word atonement – at-one-ment. Salvation is being whole and helping heal and make whole. This is what Judaism calls “the tikkun olam, the repair of the world.” Getting saved in the Bible has to do with involving ourselves in God and God's healing of all creation. Getting saved is about participation in what God is already doing in healing and bringing wholeness.

By “savoring” I mean the enjoyment of this life and this world. Like what Rabbi Heschel said earlier, it means the tasting of God's good world, the receiving of it in joy. The word savor is rooted in the Latin word “sapere” which means, “to taste.” The ancient and medieval church taught that true wisdom was sapiential wisdom based upon this same word. Sapiential wisdom is more than head-knowledge, more than getting the facts or information. Sapiential wisdom is wisdom that participates and connects the knower with what is known. It is getting your teeth into it.

This older understanding says true wisdom, true knowledge has to do with savoring God and savoring this world in a mutually involving kind of way. Savoring and saving are two sides of the same coin. Instead of competing for our time, splitting our attention, savoring and saving are about the same thing in God. We are to relish and receive this world and in so doing we're also participating in saving it. Without savoring we don't really know what kind of saving God wants to do.

Augustine of Hippo, the great theologian of the late 4th and early 5th century made a distinction that I find helpful. He said early in his book *On Christian Doctrine* that there is a difference in what we “use” and what we “enjoy.” He said that some things are to be enjoyed, which means participation in joy and in God's

joy of that person or that thing. To enjoy means there are no other agendas, we simply savor. We abide in the joy of the moment.

We begin to grasp this when we are in those rare moments of simply being in the presence of someone we love and who loves us. When I see my daughters Emily and Callie and my sons-in-law Nick and Ivory, I'm truly joyful in their presence. I understand what Augustine means. We love them for their own sake and who they are or what they are in Christ. I savor them and I savor the moment.

It is also true that we get a clue to what God is up to and what is good for us and good to us when we properly enjoy.

[Jane READS] “The Peace of Wild Things” by Wendell Berry

*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.*

Augustine further said that some things are to be “used.” To use something, as God would have us use, means to treat it for the purpose for which it is made. Sometimes, in the truest and Christian sense, “enjoy” and “use” come very close to

one another. For example, a few years ago I used an old-fashioned scythe a lot. I learned how to care for it, sharpen it, and to use it. And when I used it like it was supposed to be used, I found myself enjoying it. The work was hard but satisfying and enjoyable.

But what often happens in our fallen world, we end up *misusing* and *confusing* God's intentions. Augustine believed this is the essence of sin and as a result we use and exploit what God wants us to enjoy. And we enjoy what should be used. This is a definition of idolatry. We enjoy money or power, or we enjoy guns, for example. They become something more and bigger than they should and we immerse our lives in them until they become addictive and destroy us.

Or think about how we use God's good Creation rather than enjoying it. As a result, we are destroying the Earth. Or we think of people in terms of their use to us. You get the idea of when we confuse enjoy and use.

But here is the gospel: God loves us and loves this world and God's intent is to renew it, heal it, and make it whole. Furthermore, God enjoys us and enjoys this world. And salvation is our participation in God's enjoyment and love. We join and involve ourselves in God's enjoyment and love, which brings healing and wholeness, delight and harmony, justice and peace.

In other words, God's Presence is in the savoring of God's blessings. And when we don't savor, we miss God.

Hear Mary Oliver’s poem “Messenger,” as she invites us to participate with her in the joy of God:

[Jane READS]

*My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.*

*Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still half-perfect? Let me
keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,*

*which is mostly standing still and learning to be
astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,*

*which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
that we live forever.*

Mary Oliver says all this is gratitude. So, this week let’s practice gratitude and find ways to combine savoring the world and saving the world. Learn to enjoy the good gifts God has given us and to use those things that should be used in the way God intends.

Back before Covid, I watched Jim and Kerry Lemon and others of you, at T. J. Rusk Elementary School, with a bunch of school children, as Jim dug up and turned over the soil in the garden, he was putting in. He stuck his hand down in the soil and came up with a handful of earthworms and the children exploded with joy and questions and laughter.

Wendell Berry says, “I can think of no better form of personal involvement in the cure of the environment than that of gardening. A person who is growing a garden is improving a piece of the world.” Jim and Kerry and the children were participating in the cure of the environment and the salvation of the world, while also savoring and enjoying the world.

Don’t get me wrong. There is much work to do and a lot of it is tedious and tiring, even frustrating. But there are times when the work of saving the world gets close to savoring it. Let’s pay attention and notice it and give thanks to God.

Hear Wendell Berry on our work to do and our rest and joy in this poem, called “Amish Economy”:

[Jane READS]

*We live by mercy if we live.
 To that we have no fit reply
 But working well and giving thanks,
 Loving God, loving one another,
 To keep Creation’s neighborhood.*

*And my friend David Kline told me,
 “It falls strangely on Amish ears,
 This talk of how you find yourself.*

*We Amish, after all, don't try
To find ourselves. We try to lose
Ourselves"-and thus are lost within
The found world of sunlight and rain
Where fields are green and then are ripe,
And the people eat together by
The charity of God, who is kind
Even to those who give no thanks.*

*In morning light, men in dark clothes
Go out among the beasts and fields.
Lest the community be lost,
Each day they must work out the bond
Between goods and their price: the garden
Weeded by sweat is flowerbright;
The wheat shocked in shorn fields, clover
Is growing where wheat grew; the crib
Is golden with the gathered corn,*

*While in the world of the found selves,
Lost to the sunlit, rainy world,
The motor-driven cannot stop.
This is the world where value is
Abstract, and preys on things, and things
Are changed to thoughts that have a price.
Cost + greed – fear = price:
Maury Telleen thus laid it out.
The need to balance greed and fear*

*Affords no stopping place, no rest,
And need increases as we fail.*

*But now, in summer dusk, a man
Whose hair and beard curl like spring ferns
Sits under the yard trees, at rest,
His smallest daughter on his lap.
This is because he rose at dawn,
Cared for his own, helped his neighbors,
Worked much, spent little, kept his peace.*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.