

AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD

The Practice of Walking on the Earth: Groundedness

Promptings offered by Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
August 29-30, 2009 • Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

***"My beloved speak and says to me:
Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."***

Song of Solomon 2:10

After I first read chapter 4 of Barbara Brown Taylor's book *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, "The Practice of Walking the Earth: Groundedness" I wanted to scream! Who does this kind of stuff anyway? How often do you have the opportunity to walk around a lake in the dark with your husband, feeling the laurels breath on your neck, feeling your husband's presence leading the way? And who has the time to walk a labyrinth? I know, I know the labyrinth has been a big fad in more liberal, progressive communities of faith of late, but do I know anyone that does it with any regularity...do I know anybody who even *wants* to walk a labyrinth? And besides, who gets to walk a labyrinth in a private, wooded setting, with pine and sun and warm stones to smell and soft pine needles to walk upon? And for goodness sake, who goes barefoot anymore, walking "as if your life depended on it, placing your heel before your toes and getting a sense of just how much pressure you put on the grass, the clover –watch out of the honeybee! – the slick river stones, the silted streambed, the red clay, the pine bark on the woodland path, the black earth of the vegetable garden." (Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 67) Has this woman gone plumb mad?

That was my *first* thought! My first thought came as I was reading Taylor's book and trying to drown out and ignore the voices in my head that were shouting at me: You've got emails to return; You've got a worship service to plan and a sermon to write; You've got people to see and meetings to prepare for and attend; You've got justice to pursue; You've got a family to feed, a partner and children to love and be present with, laundry to be done, and a house to be maintained. Walk the earth? You've got to be kidding, right? That was my *first* thought!

My *second* thought was: Dear God, I *need* this practice in my life. I *want* this practice in my life. My *second* thought was: I, Mike Castle, need this practice in order to slow down this one precious life I have, and enjoy this day, this work, and all the people who grace my life. I need this practice to help me sort out all the demands on my life and on my time. I need this practice to find my center, to ground my being in the earth and in God, to bring some balance and harmony to my life.

Brothers and sisters, we've got a problem. Yes, I've got the problem. And I am increasingly aware that many of you have got the same problem. We are a people too far removed from the ground and the cycles of the earth. When we travel...be it to work, or to school, or to run errands, or to go on vacation, or to visit friends...we speed along to the next destination in our cars, or on a bus or plane. When we eat, we go to a grocery store or restaurants, not a garden. Our calendars are so full and so overly scheduled that none of us seems to have the time to stop and smell the roses along the way or to take in beauty or to ponder what is insightful, or to even center ourselves in God...in prayer.

And technology is NOT helping us!:

If you've ever had to take attendance, you know there are usually only two ways to record a person: They're either "present" or "absent." It's also possible to be "present but absent." According to *USA Today*, that's how psychologists now describe people who've become so engrossed in their virtual lives, that they often miss out on the real world around them. Some even refer to this detachment as "digital autism." Think of the friend you invite to dinner, who spends the entire meal texting, or the music fan who attends a concert, but spends the whole show posting video clips on YouTube, or the couple who goes on vacation, but spends most of the time Tweeting about their trip to friends back home.

Kenneth Gergen is a psychologist who says modern technology distracts us more and more from the real world around us. In one new study, researchers found that the average smart phone user now spends twice as much time surfing the Internet, compared to desktop computer users. Gergen says the danger of being "present but absent" is that people lose touch with their emotions, and have weaker social bonds.

We might also feel more stressed as a society. That's the word from Patricia Wallace, a psychologist who says we no longer have as much "forced downtime" as we used to, like the time we spent in theaters waiting for a movie to start. Or the quiet time we spent in an elevator waiting to reach our floor. Wallace says those were moments when people could generally relax, and gather their thoughts. Nowadays, technology allows us to fill every waking moment with work, a chat, or a Facebook status update. So there's less time to relax, and more time to feel stressed out.

<http://tesh.com/itrium/visit?path=A1x97x1y1xa5x1x76y1x243dx1x9by1x2442x1y5x1c166x5x1>

My point is this: our lives are wired for speed and convenience and overload. And because of that, we have lost touch with the ground, we have become uprooted from the earth, and we are increasingly, even scarily, out of touch with reality, and dare I say, out of touch with that which we call by various names, God!

This practice of walking the earth is indeed an oddity...a foreign concept to many of us. And if we are going to practice it, it will require some intentionality on our part. And to those who watch from the sidelines, this practice will seem subversive and counter-cultural. However, the Wisdom of the ages and the Wisdom of our own time and place, will not let us escape this essential and life-giving practice of groundedness, of what Taylor calls "the practice of walking on the earth."

Wendell Berry is one of our modern day Wisdom teachers. He is a writer, an academic, a social critic (particularly about environmental degradation) and a farmer. Believe it or not, but I first met Wendell Berry while I was a church planter for the Southern Baptist Convention. In Southern Baptist parlance, I was a Home Missionary. And part of my responsibility as a Home Missionary was to give a week of my time each year to tell my story of mission leadership to other Southern Baptists in some part of the country. As Home Missionaries, we would be sent to an association of churches somewhere in the United States, and once there, we would travel from church to church in that association telling about what we were doing to serve the Lord. Some Home Missionaries were church planters, like me. Others were chaplains and campus ministers. Others served in social services to the poor and needy.

The first time I was sent out, I was not sent to Hawaii, or California, or some other exotic or yet unexplored location in this grand country of ours. I was sent to Henry County, Kentucky, located somewhere between Cincinnati and Louisville, off Interstate 71. And one of the churches I was sent to was the Port Royal Baptist Church, in the small hamlet of Port Royal, Kentucky. This is the church where Wendell Berry worships.

Dummy me....I had never heard of him at the time. I got word that he was a famous writer, but that was it. It was years later that I realized the man I met back in Henry County Kentucky was *the* Wendell Berry. Did I buy one of his books and ask him to sign it while I was there? Did I ask to go for a walk with him on his farm that he has written so much about? Since I was there

on a Sunday morning, did I ask that he be allowed to read one of his poems or writings in worship that day? Nope. But I did get a Port Royal Baptist Church Cookbook which I still have to this day!

Anyway, Wendell Berry, the bard of Henry County, Kentucky, whose insights are recognized globally, is a Wisdom teacher and writer for our day. He knows the meaning and the power of the practice of walking on the earth. Listen to his 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.

Then there is the bard of Provincetown, Massachusetts, Mary Oliver. If there is anything you can say about Mary Oliver it is this: she is a walker of the earth. She is one who knows how to articulate the power and the mystic sense that comes from the practice of groundedness. She, too, is a Wisdom teacher and writer for our day. Listen to her poem "Invitation:"

Oh do you have time
to linger
for just a little while
out of your busy

and very important day
for the goldfinches
that have gathered
in a field of thistles

for a musical battle,
to see who can sing
the highest note,
or the lowest,

or the most expressive of mirth,
or the most tender?
Their strong, blunt beaks
drink the air

as they strive
melodiously
not for your sake
and not for mine

and not for the sake of winning
but for sheer delight and gratitude—
believe us, they say,
it is a serious thing

just to be alive
on this fresh morning
in the broken world.
I beg of you,

do not walk by
without pausing
to attend to this
rather ridiculous performance.

It could mean something.
It could mean everything.
It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:
You must change your life.

Since I have been reading Barbara Brown Taylor lately, I have been trying to practice a little more wakefulness, a little more reverence, a little more incarnation, a little more groundedness. And last Tuesday, I was preparing to whisk Aydan off to his second day of preschool and extended care at the Center for Jewish Culture and Education here in Centerville. Gideon was with us since he didn't start first grade until Wednesday. (Oh, and by the way, just so you know, Gideon has decided that he wants to be called "Big G" now! He does have a flare for the dramatic doesn't he!) Anyway, as we were pulling out of the driveway, Gideon said with great excitement in his voice, "Look Papa." What he noticed was that our street was aglow with the morning sun streaming through the tall trees. The sunbeams were visible and vibrant and absolutely gorgeous; they were mystical and enchanting. It was as if we had found ourselves in the midst of a great piece of art, full of light and wonder. If Gideon hadn't said something, I'm not sure I would have noticed...at least not in the same way. But taking his cue, I hit the brakes on the car. I rolled down the windows and we looked at the sunlight in awe and wonder for a little while. Even little Aydan seemed to be interested in our amazement. Then, I drove very, very slowly down the road. Sunbeams were everywhere! We even motioned another car to move on around us because we were taking our time! Our whole neighborhood was aglow with morning light; our little world was golden and dreamlike.

Perhaps this is just a little thing. Maybe my little story it is not very significant to many of you, but I have got to tell you, by slowing down and grounding myself a little more fully to the impulses and graces of the earth...with my children leading the way...I not only was aware, but I felt in my bones the Wisdom of Mary Oliver's poem that we read together as our call to worship. I felt *that* warm touching. I felt held in *those* great hands of light. I felt *that* happiness. I felt *that* kindness. Surely it was the kindness of God.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

Jesus walked a lot, and not only during the last week of his life. The four gospels are peppered with accounts of him walking into the countryside, walking by the Sea of Galilee, walking in the Temple, and even walking on the water...he walked everywhere he went, except for a short stint on a donkey at the end. This gave him time to see things, like the milky eyes of the beggar sitting by the side of the road, or the round black eyes of sparrows sitting in their cages at the market.

If he had been moving more quickly – even to reach more people – these things might have become a blur to him. Because he was moving more slowly, they came into focus for him, just as he came into focus for them. Sometimes he had a destination and sometimes he did not. For many who followed him around, he *was* the destination. Whether he was going somewhere or nowhere at all, going with him was the point. Food tasted better at the pace he set. Stories lasted longer. Talk went deeper. While many of his present-day admirers pay close attention to what he said and did, they pay less attention to the pace at which he did it. Jesus was a walker, not a rider. He took his sweet time. (Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pgs. 65-66)

Taylor reminds us that

Walking is one of the most easily available spiritual practices of all. All it takes is the decision to walk with some awareness, both of who you are and what you are doing. Where you are going is not as important, however counterintuitive that may seem. To detach the walking from the destination is in fact one of the best ways to recognize the

altars you are passing right by all the time. Most of us spend so much time thinking about where we have been or where we are supposed to be going that we have a hard time recognizing where we actually are. When someone asks us where we want to be in our lives, the last thing that occurs to us is to look down at our feet and say, "Here, I guess, since this is where I am." (Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 56)

Taylor says,

I noticed how much more I notice when I am not preoccupied with getting somewhere...

The beauty of physical practices like this one is that you do not have to know what you are doing in order to begin. You just begin, and the doing teaches you what you need to know...

I suppose this is frustrating to people who want spiritual practices to work the same way a treadmill does...spiritual practices are not like this. The only promise they make is to teach those who engage in them what those practitioners need to know – about being human, about being human with other people, about being human in creation, about being human before God. The great religious traditions of the world are so confident of this that they commend dozens of spiritual practices to their followers without telling those practitioners exactly what will happen when they do." (Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pgs. 58-59)

Our reading today from the Song of Solomon (sometimes called the Song of Songs) is one of the Hebrew Scripture lessons appointed for this day, the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, the Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time. Since I really didn't have a scripture reading in mind to coincide for our theme today, and since Taylor's chapter four didn't even offer me one, my heart leapt for joy when I read this text from the Song of Solomon. This is a perfect reading to compliment and highlight this practice we are talking about...this practice of walking on the earth, or groundedness. And besides, it is the only passage we get from the Song of Solomon in the entire three year cycle of the lectionary...so I thought I better seize the moment!

Nowhere in all the Bible do we find such sexually provocative language. The Song of Solomon is full of love, and passion, and desire, and longing. And on top of that, it is a completely secular book. Like the book of Esther, God is never mentioned, or even referred to on these pages. And it is also the only time a book of the Bible is offered with a feminine voice. Renita Weems says "Nowhere else in scripture do the thoughts, imaginations, yearnings, and words of a woman predominate in a book as in the Song of Songs." (Renita Weems, "Song of Songs," *The Women's Bible Commentary*, pg.156)

The Song of Solomon has always been a contentious book. Interpretation of the book has shifted between an allegorical love poem between Israel and God, or between Christ and the Church, on the one hand and an extended love poem between two human beings. Personally, I am in the human love poem camp. I find any attempt to allegorize this book as an effort to tamp down the raw sexuality of the Song. I marvel that such an erotic and unabashedly sexual book ever got into the library of books we call the Bible. I find it a welcome addition, and a healthy corrective to any religious way of being that has lost its sense of wonder, and abandonment and vulnerable love for some staid rules and tired predictability. The Song of Solomon offers human love without restraints, which stands in contrast to much of the Bible, where sexuality is talked about as needing careful regulation and where female sexuality in particular needs special restraint.

What we read about in the Song are a number of trysts...yes, trysts...between the woman and her male lover. One has noted that "Their trysts are often hidden, secret, and threats of violence come from the woman's brothers (8:8-9) and the town watchmen (5:7). In 8:1-2, the woman longs for the freedom to express her love openly. The male's speech calls the woman out into the freedom and budding sensuality of the world." (Julia M. O'Brien, "Song of Solomon 2:8-13," *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4)

For our purposes today, this passage is perfect! In this little passage of the Song, you can feel the love between two people...you can sense a love that is grounded in and in tune with the earth:

the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance.

The Song sings of the power of love that is present...that is real. It sings of paying attention to what is and the wonder and joy that can surround you when you do. It sings of being educated about life through all of your senses. It sings of experiencing joy and sheer delight throbbing in your body. It sings of having your feet planted firmly on the ground. And certainly the Song sings what Barbara Brown Taylor concludes: "as long as you are on the earth and you know it, you are where you are supposed to be. You have everything you need to ground yourself in God." (Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 68)

But more than anything, I sense a pull..a lure...in these poetic words. I hear an invitation in this little passage from the Song to the practice of groundedness. I feel the sheer delight of a knowing that comes when we allow ourselves the time and the space to put our ear to the ground and our hearts to love "on earth as it is in heaven." And there...right there...in our groundedness...experience God.

Can you sense that pull? Can you hear that invitation? Can you feel the sheer delight of that kind of grounded, earthy love? Can you discern God's presence that is found *there*? But what will it take for us to change our lives? What will it take for us to ground ourselves on this earth more fully, more passionately. What will it take for us to slow down long enough to practice walking on the earth and not go on speeding past it? What will it take? Will we do it?

Whether we will or not, there is this Still Speaking Love that calls to us:

"Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away." (Song of Solomon 2:10)