

## Lent 4

Samuel 16:1-13 Ps.23 John 9:1-14

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 3-15-26

Our Lenten Bible study this year is an immersion into the poetry of Wendell Berry, who is known as a Kentucky farmer, a naturalist, an essayist, a critic of modern capitalistic ventures, and above all, a poet...

The study we're undertaking asks us each week to read the Gospel text appointed for the coming Sunday, and then after reading it and having some conversation about it, to read a selected poem by Wendell Berry, with an eye open for ways in which the poem might deepen our understanding of the Gospel text...

So this past Wednesday we began Bible study by reading the story from John's Gospel which we just heard read about Jesus' healing of the man born blind... A story that will always remind me of the seminary professor who asked his students one day (of which I was one), how many blind people there are in the story... A seemingly ridiculously simple question, to which we all answered, "one... there's one blind man, to whom Jesus brings sight, leaving no blind people at the end of the story."

Our response to the question leading the professor to say, "Well, let us look at the story a bit more closely... because if we see what John the Gospel-writer wants us to see, we will see that all the characters in

the story, except the man born blind, were actually blind to what Jesus was hoping they would see...

The thing is, we might say that the entirety of John's Gospel is an attempt on the author's part to get the readers in his late first century Christian community to see what Jesus was trying to help people see through his ministry some sixty years earlier... Which was a kind of seeing that has nothing to do with these eyes (*point to my eyes*)...

But more to do (almost) with the kind of seeing exemplified by the first grader who once told a teacher friend of mine that inside a grain of sand is the universe... Or more to do (almost) with the kind of seeing exemplified by the monk who suggested to his colleagues that inside an apple seed they would find an orchard...

The problem with the characters in this morning's Gospel text is that their seeing was limited to what was visible to the eyes in their heads... limited also to what they expected to see as prescribed by the political, religious and cultural norms of the day...

Which is why the disciples, when they saw the man born blind at the beginning of the story, could only see a sinner, as the traditional religious understanding of the day saw all illnesses, misfortune and maladies being a result of sin...

And it's why the religious leaders, irate that Jesus had healed the man born blind on the Sabbath, could only see an egregious breaking of the law, perpetrated by a guy who seemed to preference people (even the "unsavory" ones), over the law every chance he got...

And it's why the neighbors of the man born blind argued about whether or not it was really him after his sight had been restored, as the only identity marker by which they had ever seen him or recognized him was his blindness...

And it's why the man's parents, hesitant to align themselves with Jesus for fear of being cast out of the synagogue, could not admit that the man they saw healed by Jesus was their son...

Into all this blindness Jesus came, and through mud and spit and water and spirit, opened the eyes of the man born blind, leading to a kind of seeing for him that went so much deeper than the kind of seeing we equate with the eyes of the head, as evidenced by the way the man once blind moved from referring to Jesus as "the man named Jesus," to calling him a "prophet," to saying "he must be from God," to claiming Jesus as his "Lord"...

(As if to imply that the seeing that came to the man through these eyes [*point to the eyes in my head*] was only a vehicle or a portal of sorts for opening him to a deeper kind of seeing... The kind of seeing John the Gospel writer was trying to speak of throughout his Gospel...

The kind of seeing our Bible study materials suggested we might come to better understand by reading Wendell Berry's poem "Remembering That It Happened Once." (The very poem, oddly enough, that I used in my Christmas Eve sermon this past year)...

A poem in which Wendell Berry writes about going out to his barn toward one long cold night's end to do chores, opening the door ("*a latch thrown open countless times before*"), and seeing there ("*because*

*it had happened once in the very world where Wendell Berry lived”),  
“the Christ child bedded in straw,/ the mother kneeling over Him,/ the  
husband standing in belief/ He scarcely can believe”.... The air and light  
around them “like an April morning light, joyful as a choir”....*

*“We stand with one hand on the door,” writes Wendell Berry,  
“Looking into another world that is this world... And we are here/ As we  
have never been before,/ Sighted as not before, our place/ Holy, though  
we knew it not.”*

I will tell you that when we read this poem in Bible study last Wednesday, there was this moment when it was as if Wendell Berry was inviting all of us to look through his eyes... to move through the cold winter darkness toward the barn where the same chores as ever awaited us... And then, our hand on the door, (*“a latch thrown open countless times before”*), we saw what Wendell Berry saw... the Holy Family lit in April morning’s light, *“the air around them joyful as a choir”*... And along with Wendell Berry, standing with one hand on the door (despite the cattle all awake... despite the chores yet to do... despite our own white frozen breath hanging in front of us)... we saw *“another world that is this world... there, as we had never been before... seeing as we had never seen before... sighted as not before... that place Holy, although we knew it not...”*

It was, I think, for many of us, a collapse of so many things... a collapse of time mostly but also of place (because it had happened once in the very world in which we ourselves live), as through an ordinary door, in an ordinary barn, on an ordinary winter’s night, amongst

ordinary cattle and ordinary chores, we saw a glimpse of the Holy Family ... all of it lit in the light of an April morning, the air joyful as a choir... right in Wendell Berry's barn... and then seeing deeper still...right in the parish hall of St. Brendan Episcopal Church in Deer Isle, Maine 04627...

Dispelling any notion anyone ever might have that Bible study is boring, as the pairing of this Wendell Berry poem with our Gospel text for this morning suggested to us that if we saw Jesus as John the Gospel writer intended us to see Jesus, we would see that he was not unlike that barn door... (*"a latch thrown open countless times before"*)...in our own time opening for us a glimpse of the other world that is this one, here... right in front of us as we have never seen it before... our place Holy, though we knew it not...

I have to tell you, along with the rest of the people in the story about the man to whom Jesus gave the gift of sight, I had never seen Jesus in this way... Never imagined Jesus to be the open door... the latch... the portal...

- I had seen him as a prophet, calling God's people to justice and righteousness...
- I had seen him as a teacher, using parables and stories and evocative images to help people learn what it means to live in relationship with God...
- I had seen him as a trouble-maker, challenging the violent, oppressive methods of Rome and the restrictive legalism of the Temple elites...
- I had seen him even as the incarnate presence of the creator, liberator, lover God, revealing for the world the power of a love

that is willing to accompany the beloved through suffering, through God-forsakenness and death...

But I had never seen Jesus as the opening through which we might, despite everything, see the other world that is this world... Holy, though we knew it not...

(Although it suddenly occurred to me a day or so ago that this is what the Gospel writers might have been trying to say when they talked about Jesus being the way to “eternal life” ... That language over the centuries being so bound by the conditional demands to “be good” and “to believe,” it has lost all sense of mystery... all sense of what might happen... what we might **see** if we saw Jesus as an opening into every ordinary time and place, not unlike the door to Wendell Berry’s barn, giving us eyes to see in the ordinary the holy, because in the deepest expression of love ever made real, it happened once that God became ordinary, and lived and died in the same world in which live and die...)

After seventy-five years in the Christian tradition, this way of **seeing** Jesus is new to me... (Just as it was to the man born blind)... And it will take some time for me to see what John the Gospel writer is asking me to see... But I took John’s invitation with me to a memorial service I did for my friend George Emlen this past Friday, and I’d like to tell you what I saw...

I saw about ten family members gathered in a living room, which was open to the dining room, which opened to a large field with a view of Blue Hill Mountain... I saw vases of tulips, red and yellow and pink on the window sills... I saw the wood in the wood stove burning in the corner of the living room, as would be expected on a cold day in

March... I saw a grand piano taking up about 1/3 of the living room, because George was a musician by trade, by heart, in every fiber of his being... (Over the years you may have sung hymns with him at the Rock-bound Chapel in Brooklin or at the Blue Hill Congregational Church in Blue Hill... You may have sung the "Messiah" with George conducting, even as recently as this past December... You may have heard his beautiful piano playing at my husband Michael's memorial service last September)...

At the gathering on Friday I saw (and heard) George's daughter Hannah play a Chopin prelude in C Minor at the beginning of our service... And I saw the eleven of us in a circle, listening to the silence into which I first invited us, followed by words from the Book of Common Prayer, followed by poetry and memories shared by those gathered...

I saw us all get on our boots and coats and hats, and trudge through the mud and the snow down to the far end of the field where Mike Astbury had dug a big hole in which to lay George at rest... not in a coffin or a casket provided by a funeral home, but in a plain wooden box made by George's son Sasho and family friend Matthew... made from boards they had found in the barn... "plain-sawn boards," Matthew told us as we all stood at the grave... "not cut with a circular saw..."

I saw pictures George's children and grandchildren had painted on the box, including the waves and winds of the ocean, which George had deeply loved...

I saw us all gathered around the grave, listening to the words of commendation and committal from the Book of Common Prayer, *"Into*

*your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant George. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive him into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light."*

I saw us all throw rose petals on the box and then shovelfuls of dirt, everyone taking a turn... And then I saw all of us listen to Matthew, the one who had helped make the box in which George lay, sing an Irish song called "Raising the Glass," and then George's two children sing, in harmony, the song they had sung with their father and mother so many times before... another Irish tune, "Calonlan" ...

And really, it felt like we had our hand on a door not unlike the one that opened into Wendell Berry's barn... a door that opened, granting us a glimpse of the world that is this one, but holy, all because it had happened once in the very world in which we live that God had lived here too... not separate from mud and snow and cold and grief and suffering and loss and pain and death... not separate from a son who makes a box from boards in the barn in which to lay his father, or from the daughter who sits at the piano her father played every day of his life, and plays Chopin... Not separate from any of it...

And because it happened once... (as both John the Gospel writer and Wendell Berry would have us know)... and because the love that made it all tangible and visceral and real in the person of Jesus is still moving among us now, in the world in which we find ourselves, no matter the zip code, no matter how fraught the time and place is with death and despair and grief and fear...

Because that love is still moving among us now, *"We can stand with one hand on the door,"* trusting that if we open the eyes of our hearts to see, we will see *another world that is this world...* lit as if in April morning's light, *"the air around us joyful as a choir"...* And we know that we are here/ As we have never been before,/ Sighted as not before, our place/ Holy, though we knew it not."