Good work: Learning about ministry from Wendell Berry

by Kyle Childress in the March 8, 2005 issue

Recently I celebrated 15 years as pastor of a congregation in East Texas of under 200 members with about half of them present for Sunday worship. At denominational meetings and around town I'm asked, "When are you going to a bigger church? Why do you stay?" Sometimes I give a long, rambling explanation, but often I respond with, "Because I read too much Wendell Berry."

I've been reading Berry since '80 or '81. I discovered his essays while serving a rural congregation. I was looking for any insight I could get into the life of my congregants. At the same time, I was beginning to explore the issues of hunger, poverty, agriculture and economics. Somewhere I found a footnote mentioning Wendell Berry. One book led me to another; it wasn't long before I was reading everything I could find of Berry's.

I was in good company. As veteran pastor Eugene Peterson writes, "Wendell Berry is a writer from whom I have learned much of my pastoral theology. Berry is a farmer in Kentucky. On this farm, besides plowing fields, planting crops, and working horses, he writes novels and poems and essays. The importance of place is a recurrent theme—place embraced and loved, understood and honored. Whenever Berry writes the word 'farm,' I substitute 'parish': the sentence works for me every time" (*Under the Unpredictable Plant*).

Yes, Berry is a farmer and not a pastor. How are we to read him as a pastoral theologian when he has an ambiguous connection with the church? Berry is technically a member of New Castle Baptist Church, where he was baptized; he attends worship with his wife, Tanya, at Port Royal Baptist Church. He remembers going to church as a boy with his grandfather, and now his own grandchildren attend with him. But while Tanya is a church deacon and a board member at the new Kentucky Baptist Seminary in Lexington, Berry's relationship to the church may be more like that of his fictional character Jayber Crow, who attends church but sits in

the back pew.

Berry's much beloved Sabbath poems were written about Sundays when he may be walking through his fields, pastures and woods instead of going to church. In his fiction, the church exists on the periphery of the community's fellowship, and exhibits what philosopher Norman Wirzba calls a "disincarnate form of Christianity," a kind of gnosticism, isolated and disconnected from where the people live their lives during the week. Many of us are recovering gnostics and have served in those "disincarnate" churches.

I engage Berry as a guide to good pastoral ministry by starting where he starts: with his place. "Place" is a beginning from which to counter the disincarnate forms of the faith that disturb Berry and go against the grain of biblical faith.

Berry's place is Port Royal, Henry County, Kentucky, where his family has lived and farmed since before the Civil War. He was a boy in the decade preceding World War II, and saw the end of farming that used horses and mules instead of tractors. After World War II, everything rapidly moved toward mechanization and an urban, industrial economy. Berry says, "I began my life as the old times and the last of the old-time people were dying out" (*Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition*, by Kimberly Smith). But his father and grandfather taught him how to farm with horses and mules, and he continues the practice to this day.

After receiving his bachelor's and master's degrees in English from the University of Kentucky, he married Tanya and studied creative writing at Stanford University with Wallace Stegner. An aspiring writer, he traveled for a year in Europe, after which he wrote and taught in New York. Then he decided to move back to Kentucky. Most of his friends and colleagues thought he was crazy. He bought a small, marginal farm and reclaimed it, took care of it, and farmed it using traditional methods.

In the more than 40 years since that move, Berry has written over 40 books of fiction, poetry, essays and biography. His first novel, *Nathan Coulter* (1960), was the beginning of a series set in and around his fictional Port William, Kentucky. The latest in the set is *Hannah Coulter*.

Berry's character Jayber Crow says, "To feel at home in a place, you have to have some prospect of staying there." Berry committed to staying on the farm. Somewhere along the way I decided that I needed to do the same—commit to a particular congregation of people over the long haul. I want to pastor like Berry

farms.

We live in what Berry calls the culture of “the one-night stand,” and clergy are often little different. I’m among the first to say that God sometimes calls us to move to another congregation and that sometimes, by circumstances beyond our control (economic pressures or denominational policies), we have to move. Many of us will admit that occasionally we move because we’re climbing the denominational success ladder. But faithful staying and committing in the world of “one-night stands” is a witness to the gospel of “the Word that was made flesh and dwelt among us.” Besides all that, good ministry takes awhile.

Years ago Berry wrote, “During the last 17 years . . . I have been working at the restoration of a once exhausted hillside. Its scars are now healed over, though still visible, and this year it has provided abundant pasture, more than in any year since we have owned it. But to make it as good as it is now has taken 17 years. If I had been a millionaire or if my family had been starving, it would still have taken 17 years. It can be better than it is now, but that will take longer. For it to live fully in its own responsibility, as it did before bad use ran it down, may take hundreds of years.”

We all have church members whose lives are deeply scarred by bitterness, anger, hurt, abuse, disease and death. Add to that the deep scarring caused by war, consumer capitalism, nationalism and racism. In short, scarred by sin. For the gospel of Jesus Christ to grow and heal such worn-out, eroded lives takes patient, long-suffering, detailed work. It takes time to cultivate the habits of peacemaking, forgiveness, reconciliation and love where previously violence, mistrust and fear were the norms. It takes time to grow Christians.

And we need more. We also need “correct discipline” along with “enough time” to properly farm and to properly pastor. “Propriety” is an important word to Berry. “Its value is in its reference to the fact that we are not alone. The idea of propriety makes an issue of the fittingness of our conduct to our place or circumstances, even to our hopes. . . . We are being measured, in other words, by a standard that we did not make and cannot destroy” (*Life is a Miracle*). Proper work is the practice of submitting our lives to this call and to these people in this place. It includes the pastoral practices of preaching and teaching and leading the liturgy, but also the detailed, painstaking, mundane care of nurturing the people and paying attention to God working in them. Proper work is work that fits with the purpose of God in this

particular place.

Every pastor-to-be should ponder this passage, in which Berry describes a farmer who is considering the purchase of a piece of land (he sounds like a pastor looking over a new church assignment or call):

> When one buys the farm and moves there to live, something different begins. Thoughts begin to be translated into acts. . . . It invariably turns out, I think, that one's first vision of one's place was to some extent an imposition on it. But if one's sight is clear and one stays on and works well, one's love gradually responds to the place as it really is, and one's visions gradually image possibilities that are really in it. . . . Two human possibilities of the highest order thus come within reach: what one wants can become the same as what one has, and one's knowledge can cause respect for what one knows.
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> . . . The good worker will not suppose that good work can be made properly answerable to haste, urgency, or even emergency. . . . Seen in this way, questions about farming become inseparable from questions about propriety of scale. A farm can be too big for a farmer to husband properly or pay proper attention to. Distraction is inimical to correct discipline, and enough time is beyond reach of anyone who has too much to do. But we must go farther and see that propriety of scale is invariably associated with propriety of another kind: an understanding and acceptance of the human place in the order of Creation—a proper humility. . . . It is the properly humbled mind in its proper place that sees truly, because—to give only one reason—it sees details. (*Standing by Words*)

Instead of designing a blueprint of how the farm ought to be and then reworking the farm to fit the design, Berry pays attention to the particularities of the land itself and listens to others who might have wisdom about what has worked well on this place and what has not. He works patiently and humbly and lovingly. There is a kind of "hermeneutics of farming" similar to John Howard Yoder's "hermeneutics of peoplehood" in which one patiently and humbly listens to the sense of the congregation and the Bible and the Spirit in a particular context. For Yoder, the Bible has no isolated meaning "apart from the people reading it and the questions that they need to answer."

To do proper work we must acknowledge that some of what we bring to a new ministry with a congregation is an imposition upon it. It can be a kind of violence. It might be the violence of forcing a particular biblical interpretation on a congregation, or a church marketing strategy that we picked up in seminary, or maybe an issue of social justice for which we are particularly impassioned. Sometimes we are reacting to our previous congregation as we serve our present one, or bring our “ideal” church vision and impose it on a new parish.

In my first congregation I decided within the first few weeks that I needed to confront racism. I went at it with a hard-charging “thus sayeth the Lord” intensity. But after lots of conflict and threats and near-brawls with a few people and good counsel from some wise ones, I began to pay attention to my congregation and to what God was saying *through* them as well as to them.

I started learning how to do a hermeneutics of peoplehood, sitting on front porches and working gardens with the people and drinking iced tea afterwards while listening to their stories, including their stories of race and fear. As a result, my preaching and teaching changed. I still talked about race, but how I talked about it was different. My sermons began to grow out of the conversation between the people and the Bible and the place where they lived. I learned to listen throughout the week in order to speak for 20 minutes on Sunday morning.

The Baptist prophet Carlyle Marney said that one time he had a couple of preacher-boys in his study telling him all of the plans they had for ministry in their first congregations. “These fellows were going to bring in the kingdom with bulldozers,” Marney said.

The kingdom of God is not brought in with bulldozers. It cannot be imposed and still be the kingdom of God. The means God uses to bring about his reign must fit with the purpose of God’s reign of justice, peace, harmony and reconciled relationship with God, with humanity and with all of creation. It cannot be coerced with bulldozers, tanks or guns or with prayers ordered by the state, laws passed by Congress or manipulations engineered by Madison Avenue. God calls us to do the work of ministry that fits with the Prince of Peace, the Suffering Servant, Jesus.

Unlike the work of bulldozers, which Berry calls “a powerful generalizer” that works against the impulse “to take care of things, to pay attention to the details,” “good work is always modestly scaled, for it cannot ignore either the nature of individual

places or the differences between places, and it always involves a sort of religious humility, for not everything is known. Good work can only be defined in particularity, for it must be defined a little differently for every one of the places on earth."

Berry's essays are peppered with biblical references and quotes, and his stories are drenched in the Bible. His knowledge of scripture, along with the tradition of Christian faith through literature, makes his work an invaluable preaching resource. "Making It Home" is a short story about a "lost" son who has been away at war and journeys home to his family and farm. His father meets him out in the middle of a plowed field and turns to the little brother. "Honey, run yonder to the house. Tell your granny to set on another plate. For we have our own that was gone and has come again."

"Watch with Me" is an extended meditation on a community watching out for a "lost" member who has had a "spell" come over him. They watch him and try to keep him safe until he is himself again. "Thicker Than Liquor" is about a nephew seeking the one lost, drunk uncle and bringing him home. In "Are You All Right?" neighbors check on a household that is cut off from everyone else due to rising flood waters. And the short novel *Remembering*, with allusions to Milton and Dante, tells of a young farmer who has been "dismembered" by a farm machinery accident and a loss of a sense of self, only to be "re-membered" back into family and farm and community. For Berry, the good shepherd pays attention to the details of even one lost sheep and goes looking for it until he finds it.

A veteran pastor told me "that there never has been a pastor fired for visiting too much." I spend an enormous amount of time paying attention to the details of members' lives. In the afternoons I am usually out visiting with folks, for I have found that most of the good, deep-down work of cultivating disciples happens where they live and work and spend their time, and much less often in my study and in the crisis times. It is during the crisis times that people reap from what was planted and nurtured during their day-to-day living.

It is a rare day that only one sheep is missing or in trouble. Most of the time there are eight or ten sheep missing or sick, on top of the others I'm trying to nourish and teach and encourage. Some sheep find ways to get lost over and over again. All of us who are decent shepherds know that not only do we need some help but good New Testament ecclesiology says that it is the whole flock that takes care of one another.

In Berry's stories it is the community—those who live and work and share lives—that looks out one for one another. How did they get like that? From whom did they learn to share a common life, including taking care of one another in crisis? Berry says they learned it from a community-across-time tradition. Extended families passed it along to mothers and fathers who passed it along to their children. "Human continuity is virtually synonymous with good farming and good farming must outlast the life of any good farmer. For it to do this . . . we must have community" (*Standing by Words*).

But communities of people who share life in this way are rare, and the sense of tradition is practically extinct. Here is where we have to move beyond Berry. In his stories the church exists on the edge of the common life of the people as only a fading, pale reflection of the larger community. We need churches that are instead the very ground of community, that define and build and embody a kind of common life that can move beyond the walls of the church and demonstrate common living in the wider society. In other words, we are to do the proper work of helping congregations know that we are the body of Christ. In Christ, we are re-membered every Sunday in worship as the body and our liturgy, our work, extends beyond Sunday through the rest of the week. At the same time, our common life during the week helps keep our Sunday work from becoming gnostic.

Berry provides images and stories for congregations that have no concept of what this common life looks like. For example, his characters work together and eat together. How can we encourage this in our people? I want my parishioners to eat together as often as possible. On most any weeknight, adults and families are on their way home from work, going by the grocery store to pick up something quick for supper or stopping at a drive-through for the evening meal. Each and every one of them goes to their individual home for supper even though many drive by the church on their way.

Our congregation decided to encourage these people to come to the church to share their mealtime. Our church kitchen is available, and all they have to do is coordinate with one another about what time they'll gather. Then they eat together for about an hour, clean up and head out the door.

I'm also on the lookout for ways that the people of the congregation can share work, beyond the good work of projects like Habitat for Humanity. Most of them do yard and garden work, so we've decided that those who own lawnmowers and garden

tillers will share them with those who need them. We also share kids' clothes and child care. If someone is visiting a shut-in, he or she encourages others to go along, including young people who can learn how to visit and how to pray with others. We urge veteran Christians to link up with young people and children. Even a church finance committee meeting is a place for youth to learn—not only about money matters, but also about how mature Christian people deal with such matters.

My work as pastor is to nourish and encourage the common life in my congregation. It's hard, sometimes tedious work, and often overlooked by others. Yet it is also good and satisfying work; there can be pleasure in it. I work hard but am learning to recognize my limits and trust God for the rest. I spend more time working in the yard, more time with my daughters and my wife, and more time on my front porch. Berry concludes "The Amish Economy" with: "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." That is the kind of pastor I want to be.

Berry tells of a cold December day when his five-year-old granddaughter, Katie, spent the day with him while he hauled a wagon load of dirt for the barn floor, unloaded it, smoothed it over and wetted it down. For the first time, Katie drove the team and was proud of herself, and Berry says that he was proud of her and told her so. "By the time we started back up the creek road the sun had gone over the hill and the air had turned bitter. Katie sat close to me in the wagon, and we did not say anything for a long time. I did not say anything because I was afraid that Katie was not saying anything because she was cold and tired and miserable and perhaps homesick; it was impossible to hurry much, and I was unsure how I would comfort her.

"But then, after a while, she said, 'Wendell, isn't it fun?'" May our work, at least from time to time, be full of such satisfaction.