

The Beautiful Shore

Isaiah 63:7-9

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I thought on this first Sunday of the New Year, with an opportunity to both look back at the previous 366 days (it was a Leap Year) and to look forward to the 365 days that will make up 2017, that I might begin with a testimony from a man who started going to church every Sunday and heard many sermons in the process. His testimony is, "I weathered even the worst sermons pretty well."¹ You have to know we preachers enjoy a good joke about preaching as much as the next person, and maybe more. So when someone boasts about weathering even the worst sermons pretty well of course I wanted to know how he weathered the worst sermons pretty well.

The man who wrote that is named Jayber Crow. Jayber was the barber in a town called Port William, Kentucky, way back seventy or eighty years ago. Both Jayber and the town are fictional, but the author, who is one of my favorites, Wendell Berry, draws on his own rich experiences to write his novels about Port William. Jayber makes enough to get by as the town barber, but he finds that by taking on the duties of town undertaker and church custodian he could make a little extra to give him some margin in tough times. As the church custodian he worked hard to get the church cleaned up and so he figured he would sit in the pew on a Sunday morning and listen to see if anyone complimented him on his work. And apparently as he sat in the pew on a Sunday he heard his share of bad sermons, the worst of which he boasted he weathered pretty well. How did he weather these worst sermons? He said he let his mind wander.

Julie's dad used to love to give me the needle about preaching, and whenever he heard a new joke about preachers he delivered it to me as quick as he could. He loved to tell of a long worship service when the preacher was droning on and on. In this church, the choir was seated behind the preacher. A choir member had enough, pulled out a hymnal, and fired it at the preacher's head. But this preacher was good. He ducked down as the hymnal zoomed past, and kept right on preaching. Unfortunately, the hymnal proceeded to strike a woman in the front row. She crumpled to the ground. Her worried husband shook her and asked frantically if she was alright. She opened an eye and said, "No, I can still hear him preaching." Now if you asked me whether I would rather have choir members throwing hymnals at me or people sitting in the pews letting their minds wander, I think you can imagine the alternative I prefer.

¹ Wendell Berry, Jayber Crow, p. 162.

I actually believe letting our minds wander can be an effective tool not only during the worst sermons, but even during the best sermons. In fact, letting our minds wander might be the very sign of an effective sermon. When you let your mind wander you move from the words the preacher is saying to the thoughts and words and memories and images that are welling up within your very heart, and mind, and soul.

So it is in the story about Jayber Crow that when his mind was wandering in church it wasn't just during the sermon. His mind wandered during the prayers. And his mind wandered during the hymns. It turns out the hymns were just about his favorite time for his mind to wander, especially when they would sing some of his favorites. Jayber loved a few hymns in particular, like "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," "Rock of Ages," "Amazing Grace," and "O God, Our Help in Ages Past." (I wonder if your mind didn't wander just a bit right then, as I started naming Jayber's favorite hymns. I hope it did. I hope you started thinking of your favorite hymns, and as you thought of your favorite hymns maybe you thought of who taught them to you and what it is about the hymns you loved and...a wandering mind is not a bad thing)

The hymns held a special place for Jayber because he believed some of the worst sermons proclaimed that life was something to be endured and joy was something to be denied and that we ought to hate the world. Ah, but when the people started singing it was like they were proclaiming their own faith, and it was not about denial and deprivation it was celebrating life and finding good in life and even finding good during the hard times. These people knew "that the world would end sooner or later and deprive them of all it had given them, but still they liked it. What they came together for was to acknowledge, just by coming, their losses and failures and sorrows, their need for comfort, their faith always needing to be greater, their wish (in spite of all words and acts to the contrary) to love one another and to forgive and be forgiven, their need for one another's help and company and divine gifts, their hope (and experience) of love surpassing death, their gratitude." So Jayber says, "I loved to hear them sing, 'The Unclouded Day' and 'Sweet By and By.'"² When Jayber remembers them singing in the sweet by and by and they come to the chorus, "We shall meet on that beautiful shore..." he said, "I could not raise my head."

Would it surprise you when Jayber was telling his story about hymns and about the beautiful shore and not being able to raise his head that somewhere in the middle of that story my mind had wandered to the beautiful shore...and I was no longer thinking of Jayber and his fictional folks from Port William, Kentucky? My mind had wandered to the beautiful shore and my people, the ones who had sung

² Berry, *ibid.*, p. 163.

and prayed and practiced and even preached to me in ways that brought the Christian faith alive. As I saw my folks, my family of faith on the beautiful shore, in the sweet by and by, I knew exactly what Jayber meant when he said, “I could not raise my head.”

When I look back on 2016, there are numerous national and international events that made headlines and impacted our world in significant ways, some for better and some for worse. There were moments of great joy like when the city of Chicago celebrated a World Series win for the Cubs and there were moments of devastation where disasters struck and life was decimated. Along with these major media events, God was at work in our small neck of the woods known as Dunn’s Corners.

Back in February Lorraine Beattie passed away. Lorraine was with our church from the earliest days, and she loved to tell about days when the men would be working on the building and the women preparing a meal and how right over on Simms Street they had big neighborhood potlucks where everybody came together and shared the little they had. This church touched her life in ways she never forgot. When Lorraine died one of the kids who grew up in her neighborhood and who grew up in this church came back to this church for the memorial service. Something connected and he and his wife soon came and told me they wanted to join the church. The Sunday Alex and Kathy Houston stood up front and confessed their faith in Jesus Christ, my mind wandered a bit and I thought of Lorraine and so many others watching us from that beautiful shore in the sweet by and by, waving at us and encouraging us to keep being the church, to keep sharing God’s love, and to keep welcoming people to be part of our family of faith. As my mind wandered I could not raise my head.

In November we had a memorial service at church. A young man living in Florida had died tragically of a drug overdose. Because of family connections the parents wanted to have the memorial service in Westerly and to have the son buried at River Bend Cemetery. They were not members and really had no connection to our church, but that doesn’t matter. Families need places to mark life’s significant events and we were glad to host that service. I will also tell you it was one of the most heartbreaking experiences of my life as the young man’s mom sat in the front row and cried and cried at the death of her beloved son. When the special music began and the vocalists sang “Amazing Grace,” my mind had wandered into the deep and dark valley that parents walk when a child dies. As the words, “When we’ve been there ten thousand years...” fell on my ears I could not raise my head.

Somewhere in the middle of December a letter arrived at church. It was from the young man's mother. The letter is addressed to the whole church, as it should be. She began, "In early November, my husband and I went through the heartache of having to bury our only child. He was only 28 years old. After years of struggle, he was finally taken from us by the insidious disease of addiction. He tried so hard, over and over, for many years, to overcome this malady of the body, mind and spirit. The morning of his death, his phone records show he was trying to contact a treatment center. The center he was calling did not do intakes on weekends. Within hours of those calls, he made his last, fatal mistake. The reason we wanted to write you this letter is to provide an expression of gratitude that our shock and grief prohibited us from doing around the time of his funeral service in your beautiful church...When our son died we were forced to make decisions we didn't dare allow ourselves to even think about prior to that day. We needed to decide how and where to put our son to rest. Here we were, sitting in a Florida hospital, far away from our home in New York. It occurred to me instantly that we would bring him home to Rhode Island, to Westerly, where my husband and I grew up, met each other, and got married. It was very clear to us that Westerly would always be our 'Home.' Our son loved visiting there. It meant visiting family and being surrounded by love...On the day of the service, you helped us through each step. As I met friends and family upon arrival, I will never forget seeing two women I didn't recognize personally. They approached me and told me they were church members and that the community had been praying for us. I was so moved and grateful for their loving gesture of attendance. It personified the feeling inside the walls of your church and will forever be a comfort to us." She ends with some beautiful words of thanks and the assurance that we will be in their heart and prayers forever. My mind wandered when I read that letter. And my mind wandered again when on Christmas Eve the aunt and uncle of the young man who died walked quietly through the doors of our church, signed their names in our guestbook, and said, "It felt right to come and worship here tonight." Because of that and so much more when we sang "Silent Night" and raised our candles high, there was a moment when I could not raise my head.

My dad was a high school math teacher. I am one of five children and almost every one of us had my dad in class. It is kind of fun to be in class. Everyone else called him Mr. Eberly. I called him dad. We all got a kick out of that. But it was as Mr. Eberly that he was honored after some 30 years of teaching by being named teacher of the year. He began teaching in the 1950s and retired in 1989. As he retired the high school we all grew up in and where he taught obviously had an opening for a math teacher. By that time my older brother Danny was a high school math teacher and it worked out that my brother took over for my dad. Our little town newspaper had fun with that. A huge picture and article appeared announcing that Mr. Eberly was replacing Mr. Eberly and they played up the father and son connection.

Well, last spring, in 2016, Mr. Eberly retired. My brother Danny came to the end of his career and we loved seeing the honors and tributes he received for his many years of faithful service. Now for the first time since the 1950s there was no Mr. Eberly teaching high school math. Which made it especially sweet when our son, Alex, completed his studies and graduated with a college degree and certification to teach. Then about three weeks ago he was offered a job teaching high school math in Austin, Texas. I don't understand all the higher math, but I do know arithmetic. I figure if the newest Mr. Eberly teaches high school math for about 35 years he will retire sometime in the 2050s. My dad has died and so he is not with us to celebrate this continuity of the generations. That didn't stop me from thinking of the beautiful shore, where one day we will all meet in the sweet by and by. Can you imagine when Mr. Eberly (my dad) holds hands with Mr. Eberly (my brother) and they congratulate Mr. Eberly (my son). I can imagine that. In fact that is where my wandered when the little child we welcomed into the world 23 years ago walked across the stage at his graduation and received his diploma. Welcome to the world of high school mathematics, Mr. Eberly. There was a lot of hootin' and hollerin' for our son Alex, but there was also a moment when I could not raise my head.

So as we prepare to gather for worship throughout the year of 2017, you have permission to let your mind wander. I am not saying you have permission to throw a hymnal at me if I preach too long. But you do have permission for your mind to wander, in the preaching, in the praying, and in the singing as we lift hymns of praise to our living God. As your mind wanders, who knows where it will wander. But my guess is that there will be times it will wander to the beautiful shore, and images of mercy and grace will fill your heart, your mind, and your soul. If your head is bowed during worship, I'll understand. There are just some moments when you cannot raise your head.