

“The beautiful shore”

Isaiah 63:7-9

Wayne Eberly

January 1, 2017

I thought on this first Sunday of the New Year, with an opportunity to both look back at the year behind us even as we look forward to the year before us, I thought 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. Maybe we enjoy those jokes even more than the next person. 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 about weathering the worst sermons pretty well 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 found 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 ready for worship. He worked so hard getting the church ready, he made a point of attending worship every Sunday, mostly to see if anyone complimented him on his work. And apparently as he sat in the pew every Sunday Jayber heard his share of bad sermons. He must have got pretty used to bad sermons. So much so that he said, “I weathered even the worst sermons pretty well.” How did he weather these worst sermons? He said he let his mind wander.

Julie’s dad used to love to needle me about preaching. Whenever he heard a new joke about preachers, he delivered it to me as quickly as he could. He loved to tell of one long worship service when the preacher

¹ Wendell Berry, Jayber Crow, p. 162.

was droning on and on. In this church, the choir was seated behind the preacher. After putting up with the preacher's sermon for a long time, one choir member finally had enough. The choir member pulled out a hymnal and fired it at the preacher's head. But this preacher was good. He ducked down. The hymnal flew over his head...and the preacher 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.

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.

It turns out 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. 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...and...and...well, a wandering mind is not a bad thing)

The hymns held a special place for Jayber because he believed the worst sermons were the ones that proclaimed 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. The faith they proclaimed was not about denial and deprivation. The hymns they were singing were hymns celebrating life and finding good in life, 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.”

When Jayber was telling his story about hymns and about the beautiful shore and not being able to raise his head, would it surprise you 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 and prayed and practiced and even preached to me in ways that brought the Christian faith alive. As I saw my folks, my people, 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.”

In the year 2022, Joyce Dionne crossed over to that beautiful shore. What a blessing Joyce was for this church family. The first Christmas we celebrated with Dunn’s Corners Church, Andy Wallace organized a night for singing carols. It was December of 2015. We sang at the Clipper. We sang at the Royal. Then we drove up Woody Hill Road to the home of Ellen Madison, whose mother Florence was living with her at the time. As Florence rested in a comfortable chair, we sang our songs. Florence took it all in, a sweet look on her face. Maybe she

² Berry, *ibid.*, p. 163.

was remembering how in 1950 just a handful of people started what we now know as the Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian. Joyce Dionne was with us that night. As we sang, Joyce moved from the outer part of the circle and made her way quietly right up to where Florence was seated. Then Joyce knelt down and sat at the feet of Florence Madison. After one song, Joyce gave a speech that made us laugh and a speech that made us cry. Joyce told how when she was just a young girl, Florence had been her choir director and youth group leader and how as she grew Florence had been a mentor and a friend. Watching two women who had shared nearly seventy years of life together was such a sweet blessing. Knowing these two women were part of the fabric of a family of faith that had reached out and included so many over the years, it was like I was hearing the Christmas angels sing in a whole new way.

To have a memory of Joyce singing fits so perfectly with her life. After learning about the special relationship shared between Joyce and Florence, I would treasure my visits with Florence, who was approaching 100 years of age. Florence would inevitably tell me about having the young people of the church come to her house. They would all go upstairs, where there was a small organ, and Florence would lead those young people in singing the songs of faith. It was in that upstairs room singing songs of faith that the relationship between Florence and Joyce grew so strong. Many years passed, years of Florence and Joyce living joyfully and serving faithfully, Florence starting the Adult Day Care Center and Joyce singing week by week with our choir. The time came when the choir wanted to recognize the contribution Joyce had made over the years. An anthem was commissioned in her honor. With these words the anthem begins

Make my life a sacrifice, a sacrifice of praise.

Make my life a sacrifice to magnify your name.

A living alleluia , a testament of grace,

A song of peace, a hymn of hope, a song of praise.

Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee.

Take my voice and let me sing, always, only for my King.

In 2019 Florence Madison crossed over to the beautiful shore. In 2022 Joyce Dionne crossed over to the beautiful shore. Jayber Crow said, "When they come to the chorus, 'We shall meet on that beautiful shore', I could not raise my head." Thinking of Florence sitting in her chair and Joyce kneeling at her feet, not for an evening now, but for all eternity, sitting together on that beautiful shore, I know what Jayber means when he says, "I could not raise my head."

In 2022 we said goodbye to Sticker Caramiciu. Sticker died on New Year's Eve of 2021. We had his memorial service on February 4, 2022. Sticker was an amazing man. Every Sunday he was here as head usher at the 8 am service. Sticker was a contractor and a craftsman. In retirement he put a tremendous amount of work into the meeting house. His handiwork is all over this church, and in many of our homes. Sticker left a mark.

Sticker also enjoyed a good laugh. The duties of the head usher at the 8 am service change drastically in the summer at Dunn's Corners. Instead of preparing this sanctuary for worship, the head usher at 8 am sets up the Chapel in the Pines. One good thing for a preacher is that you know people will not be able to sleep through the whole sermon when you are preaching at that beautiful outdoor chapel. No matter how bad the sermon, at least for about sixty seconds every single person will be wide awake. Like clockwork, at about 8:45 am, the plane to Block Island flies over the chapel. Loud is an understatement. The preacher just has to bite his tongue and be quiet until the plane passes. And by the time the noise subsides, everyone is wide awake. During those sixty seconds or so, I would inevitably glance over at Sticker. With a big smile on his face, I could tell he was thoroughly enjoying every single moment of that loud disruption.

Funny thing happened at the Chapel a few years ago. All spring the church had been under siege. The wild turkeys that are so prominent in Westerly, seemed to have come to roost on our church grounds. Matthew Dickerman, one of the bright and beautiful young people who bring so much joy and vitality to our church, was a senior in high school that year. Matthew developed a project called "Helpademic" that was a creative way for people who had needs to be connected with people who

wanted to help. Word spread. The Westerly Sun got wind of the project and set up an interview with Matthew. It was a special day when Nancy Burns Fusaro was interviewing Matthew in the sanctuary of our church, learning from a young man about his vision for creating a network where people helped each other. As Matthew told of his idea of bringing help, his desire was bringing hope to my heart.

But while inside the sanctuary we were having a moment that was deep and meaningful, outside of church was a scene of complete chaos. The wild turkeys had come up the side of the church yard by our Memorial Garden. While the interview was taking place, I kept being distracted by those wild turkeys. I was not alone in being distracted. The photographer saw the turkeys and he was fascinated. As soon as he took his final photos of Matthew, he raced outside, thinking what a great opportunity to get the turkeys in action. The interview continued for another fifteen minutes. We said goodbye to Nancy Burns Fusaro and made our way to the parking lot. What a surprise awaited us. It turns out the photographer had no luck photographing the turkeys. These were truly wild turkeys. Those turkeys chased him. He fled to his car for safety. We found him in the parking lot not quite shaking with fear, but certainly unsettled and with a new respect for the havoc those turkeys could create.

That whole spring and early summer the turkeys were on the warpath. So there I was one summer Sunday morning, getting ready to lead worship at the Chapel in the Pines. Three turkeys entered the parking lot. My mind went to the worst-case scenario. "Uh oh! This is not good. This is not going to end well. I sure hope they turn away." The turkeys did not turn away. The turkeys walked right toward me. The turkeys walked right toward our Chapel in the Pines. I stiffened up, preparing to meet the challenge. I stood between the turkeys and the walkway leading to the chapel. As they drew closer, as my pulse quickened, as my heart fluttered, the turkeys veered slightly to the right and walked around me. Then they proceeded to make their way to the Chapel. They stayed a few minutes and then quietly moved on. On that sunny summer Sunday morning, with those turkeys turning over a new leaf, taking a quiet and peaceful march through our Chapel in the Pines,

the image from Isaiah of the wolf living with the lamb took on new meaning. Sticker was watching all of us this. When the final peaceful resolution had been achieved, I turned to him, and we both just shook our heads. With God, all things are possible. Now, when I think of Sticker, over there on the beautiful shore, maybe ushering some peaceful turkeys to their seat in God's great sanctuary, I know what Jayber means when he says, "I could not raise my head."

In 2022 we started to have Tuesday night dinners. Some nights Julie and I would make the meal, but many other nights members would step up and offer their culinary creations. Mimi Yu made us several delicious meals. Paul Panciera served up meatballs and sausage. Tony and Cheryl Spino made a stuffed pork roast that was to die for. In October, Alex Houston treated us to a Chowder Fest. There was Rhode Island Clam Chowder, New England Clam Chowder, and even Corn Chowder. Back in the early days of COVID, Alex had sent me a note about a friend who was really hurting during COVID. To help the friend Alex made up some Corn Chowder. When Alex pulled out his recipe book for the Corn Chowder, it was the church cookbook published way back in the day. Looking at the book, Alex realized the recipe had been submitted by Betsy Jewell.

We had corn chowder on a Tuesday night in October, a recipe that connected us to a dear saint named Betsy. Betsy has been living at the Royal for many years. Her strength and energy are failing. We have not seen Betsy here at the church for many years. Then on November 19th, the day of our Christmas Bazaar, someone rushed into the sanctuary where I was checking out the raffle and the baskets and they said in an excited voice, "Betsy Jewell is here." I stopped what I was doing and hurried into Fellowship Hall. There was Betsy. If you know Betsy, you know she has the most beautiful smile. Just seeing her, back at her church, smiling her smile, that was one of the moments in life you treasure and hold close to your heart. Betsy enjoyed the luncheon, and then a great idea was proposed. "Let's get a picture of Betsy in front of the Meeting House."

The Meeting House is dedicated in honor of Betsy's late husband Allan. That is the same Meeting House Sticker spent so many hours

working on. Someday Betsy will be on the beautiful shore. Sticker might be there to usher her to her seat. When they get to that seat, Allan will be waiting for her with open arms. When the choir sings Joyce Dionne will be up there offering her sacrifice of praise. And who knows, maybe Florence Madison will be at the organ, leading everyone in a rousing chorus of the “The Sweet By and By.” All I know is, when they come to that part about the beautiful shore, just like old Jayber Crown, it will all be too much for me. I know, I just know, I won’t be able to raise my head.

2022 was a year full of wonderful blessings. 2023 will bring some changes. For our family it will be a major change as we move back to Houston. For the church, there will be big changes as a search begins for your next pastor. Day by day we might feel the stress and strain of change. But let us never forget, there will be a day when we are all together again. It probably won’t be here on this shore. Thankfully, this is not the only shore. There is a beautiful shore. Someday we will all meet on that beautiful shore. Someday we will all be together. Sticker, Joyce, Florence, Allan and Betsy. Oops. I think it just happened again. When I started mentioning those names, did your mind wander? Did you stop listening to what I was saying and let your mind wander to that beautiful shore? Did you see some faces on that shore that you haven’t seen for a long time? Did some joy rise up in your heart. Was there a longing, a desire to be with those loved ones in what we call, “The Sweet By and By?” It’s okay. Let your mind wander. The beautiful shore is a beautiful place. When I think of where we have been, and where this year will take us, and where we will all be one glorious day, in the sweet by and by, on that beautiful shore, well, sometimes I just can’t raise my head. It’s all too good. It’s all too sweet. It’s all too beautiful.