

The Recovery of Wonder
Matthew 19: 13-15 Psalm 8

Psalm 8

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark
because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon
and the stars that you have established;

what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that
you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them
with glory and honor.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you
have put all things under their feet,

all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along
the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

This is the word of the Lord!

I'm going to say the first half of a quote, and leave some space for you to wonder what the second half of the quote might be. The quote is from Thomas Berry, one of the great thinkers of the 20th century (passed away in 2009). Not Wendell Berry, the poet. *Thomas Berry* was a man of deep faith, hope and love,

who was a cultural historian, a scholar of the world's religions, and studied earth's history, geology and evolution. He dabbled in some light subjects! Although he was an astute theologian, he refused to be called a theologian. He called himself a "geologist." I love that. He contributed significantly to our understanding of ecological and environmental issues, especially from a Christian worldview. So he earned the title of geologist!

So here is his quote—the first half, that is: "The one thing wrong with the human species today is..." Well, that's a daunting start! And daunting to think of how to complete that sentence. If each of us had a piece of paper and 1-2 minutes to write on it, I'm sure we could each come up with a *list* of things we think are wrong with the human species today, let alone one thing. But, what the heck, let's give it a try! "The one thing wrong with the human species today is..."

Berry: "*...we have forgotten the sense of the sacred.*"

He goes on to explain: "An absence of the sense of the sacred is a basic flaw in many of our efforts at adjusting our human presence to the natural world. We will not save what we do not love. And we will neither love nor save what we do not experience as sacred. Eventually, only our sense of the sacred will save us." Wow. "*We will not save what we do not love, and we will neither love nor save what we do not experience as sacred.*" That's worth pondering.

One last sentence: “And for us to experience our natural world, and one another, as sacred, we must recover our sense of wonder and awe, because that is the experiential dimension of the sacred.”

So I’d like to reflect on sacredness and wonder this morning. And by wonder, I mean both curiosity (“I wonder...”) and a sense of awe—but mostly awe. And by sacred, I mean anything and everything. Something is sacred, not by virtue of what it is, or where it is, but because of how we see it and treat it—as something that is made by God, and reflects God in some way. You know, not just stuff in church but everywhere.

Therefore, an important key to unlocking wonder and a sense of the sacred is an awareness of God in all things, including people. This isn’t pantheism (everything *is* God). More like panentheism—God *in* all things. God the Creator’s presence being manifest in and through all things. Through our awareness and attentiveness.

So, a squirrel can be experienced as sacred, and with wonder. Or a pinecone. And your next-door neighbor. That which is sacred isn’t just in a church or on some holy site, but in *all* of the parts and pieces of God’s creation. If we’re looking with a sense of wonder.

Before getting further into this, I'd like to reframe the Thomas Berry quote. Because I don't want to begin with a negative ("*What's wrong with people?!?!?*"), because then that frames the conversation in a negative way. So instead of saying that the one thing wrong with the human species today is that we have forgotten a sense of the sacred, let's put it this way: the greatest potential for the human species today is... the recovery of the sense of the sacred, and the recovery of wonder as the experiential dimension of the sacred. So that we can learn again to love the world, so that the world, then, may thrive.

We don't have to go far to recover a sense of wonder, and the sacred. And we don't have to wait for something to happen to us. There are things right under our noses (as it says in our prayer) that we often pass by without paying attention, or that we have taken for granted. Some of them are things we have bought or collected that we once were amazed by but now we perhaps don't see any more. Some of them are things that are being created or are growing outdoors, right around us. People travel to the "Holy Land," which is a real learning experience, but it isn't any holier than the land under your feet in your living room, or the classroom, or Edmonds Food Bank. It's all holy land! Because God is there. And because you are there!

Years ago I had a spiritual mentor who had me take simple objects from my home and just stare at them for a while, every day. Simply to cultivate the practice of paying attention, of noticing and appreciating and being in wonder. So I wouldn't be waiting only for the big and extraordinary experiences to come my way. Something as simple as a lamp, or bowl in the kitchen, or a photograph on the wall. One of the objects I chose to stare at for a while is this decorative bird house that someone made in his woodworking shop and gave to me, because he knew I like birds. I took it off the shelf recently and while looking at it noticed again the texture of the wood, the beauty of the shape and all the parts, how he carefully and creatively cut and shaped and stained the wood and assembled it. I was imagining birds feeding and nesting, and then remembered Jesus' admonition to consider the birds of the air and how God takes care of them, and how God similarly cares for me and for you. It's been sitting on our window ledge for years and I almost stopped seeing it! But here is the other cool thing that came about after staring at this: it told me something about the person who made it, and reminded me of him, and I could offer thanks for him and pray for him and his family. And a connection was made—at least in my heart and mind.

So it can be, and often is, an everyday object that can help us recover a sense of wonder, and the sacred. I have a friend who said he got lost in wonder

at a grocery store staring at the produce section. He just got absorbed in corn and carrots and lettuce and he said it made him laugh out loud at how amazing and abundant our world is, and how it keeps giving back to us, in spite of how badly we humans treat it sometimes.

Everyday things can grab our attention, if we're open to paying attention.

We can also recover a sense of the sacred and wonder through art and poetry and music. Because artists, poets and musicians are often people who see with the eyes and a heart of wonder. Edmonds is a great place to look at art! And poetry is always available to us. And good music, which really opens us to wonder and the sacred because it touches us so deeply, and emotionally.

Thinking about poetry, I remember a great quote from Robert Frost: "A poem begins with a lump in the throat." I would guess that it's true of a piece of music, too, and a work of art. We could extrapolate to spirituality and theology. Spirituality/theology begins with a lump in the throat too!

Robert Frost's words reminded me of another poet, William Stafford, who was once asked in an interview, "When did you decide to become a poet?" He responded that the question was put wrongly: "Everyone is born a poet—a person discovering the way words sound and work, caring and delighting in

words. I just kept doing,” he said, “what everyone starts out doing. The real question is, why did other people stop?”

So, there you go: you are all poets! And artists, and creators. We can all recapture our sense of wonder. And fall in love with the world again, and care for it, as God intended.

Sometimes awe and wonder is the beginning of the spiritual journey for people. Like Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor, who, like me, was not born and raised in the church but came to faith as a young adult. She said in one of her books, “The parts of the Christian story that drew me into the community of faith were not the *believing* parts, but the *beholding* parts: “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy.” “Behold, the lamb of God.” “Behold, I stand at the door and knock.”

This is the psalmist, in Psalm 8 and in other Psalms, who beheld a night sky and was got by what he saw. He was amazed by children and infants and what would come forth from them. He was also amazed that God was mindful of us humans. Pause for a moment and take that in: God is mindful of us! Mindful! Mindfulness has been an enormous emphasis and practice the last few years, especially during covid. And here we are told that God is also mindful. Of us!

So, we can recover a sense of wonder and the sacred through everyday objects, through art and poetry and music, through creation, and through remembering how God pays attention to us. And, we can recover a sense of wonder through children—maybe our own children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren—not only because *they* are a wonder, but if you just watch them do what they do, they show us how to *have* wonder about anything and everything. That’s why I love this image on the bulletin cover at a kid staring at a snail crawling on a tree. (show image)

This must be part of why Jesus welcomed children, blessed them and told the adults that unless they change and become like children, they’ll miss the Kingdom of heaven. Not because becoming a child is one of the many checklist requirements for getting into heaven from our taskmaster God, but because they just won’t see it, without the eyes and wonder of a child. In much the same way that I stopped seeing the bird house that was right in front of my nose. It took someone to remind me to slow down, take time, and notice what was *already there*. Like a child would do.

Wonder is the natural companion of children. For most of us it was, therefore, our way of experiencing the world when *we* were kids—when we still knew how to do just one thing at a time and how to allow that one thing to

absorb us. That kind of attention and absorption led us to places of enchantment with small and seemingly insignificant things. It allowed us to make fascinating discoveries about the world that we never could have made without wonder.

This is the gift of children to us, to remind us to be fascinated and absorbed and have wonder.

One time when our kids were little, and we had been on a camping trip and we needed to pack up and head home, I was trying to talk with one of our kids who was staring at a bug crawling across the ground. And here I was trying to organize our packing up and heading home and I could tell that my words were not getting through. And I said to her, "You're not paying attention." She said, "Yes I am. I'm paying attention to this bug right now."

Isn't that the truth! Children are actually great at paying attention; just not always to what we want them to pay attention to. Sometimes I wonder if we're doing harm by encouraging them to multitask and do more than one thing at a time, or rush from one thing to another.

Children can be our teachers. Or more accurately, our reminders.

And we need to be reminded about wonder, and the sacredness of things. The age of reason/enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries brought amazing advances in science and technology and the like, but tended to explain away

things that people used to wonder about, including God. Tomes of theology were written during the 18th-20th centuries that seemed to solve any mysteries about God and God's ways. Now, thankfully, we are seeing a turning of the tide back to mystery and wonder, not just in spirituality and theology, but even as scientists are making new and amazing discoveries—at the sub-atomic level, and at the level of the universe. Many scientists are saying, "Wow!" and are in awe of their discoveries. Because they realize that we will never know everything. There will always be more.

And it needs to be mentioned that wonder and reason/intellect are not mutually exclusive—they are just distinct. We can quite easily use both faculties to encounter the world. We just need to have awareness—especially self-awareness—to be able to open ourselves to different ways of experiencing and knowing the world, and other people. We use reason to say, "I get this." We are in wonder when we say, "This got me!" Wonder is the capacity to be open to being "got." When we can think with our hearts and souls, and not exclusively our brains. Both can happen at the same time.

Analytical knowing and reason can provide mastery, and control (or the illusion of it), but wonder offers hospitality. A sense of the sacred provides

welcome to the experience of something, or someone, which then has the potential for a transformative encounter.

Whether it's an ordinary object, or an extraordinary sunset. Whether it's someone we have known or lived with for years who we can see with new eyes of appreciation and wonder, or someone we encounter in desperate need, homeless or helpless, who also bears the image of God. And seeing with the eyes of wonder, there is a sacredness to that encounter, as we experience the other as part of us.

“We will not save what we do not love; and we will neither love nor save what we do not experience as sacred.”

Ojibway native author and storyteller Richard Wagamese offers a whimsical encouragement: “I have been referred to as odd before. Nowadays I prefer to refer to myself as “awed” ... Rendered speechless by wonder, I await the next unfolding. Peace, friends. Be awed today.”

How Great Thou Art