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Laity Notes

by
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UMW SUNDAY SCHOOL WITH JAMES

Today will be our third of four Sunday's in the Letter of James. The United Methodist Women of our church have turned out to be a faithful group, swelling our class size to twenty-five. We could find a place for a few more if anyone wanted to join us for the tail end of our study. All are welcome to our class.

James is one of seven "catholic" or general letters in the New Testament. Unlike the letters of Paul, this letter is addressed to no specific audience (as is also the case with 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John and Jude). If you are curious, have a look at the initial greetings in 1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon and Romans (the seven original letters of Paul) to see the different manner by which Paul addresses his different churches. This we did in our first class, and discovered that the letter to Philemon was addressed to Philemon and to two others and to "the church in your house." That is a vivid reminder not only of the humble beginnings of Christianity, but also of the religious significance of our homes today.

Also in contrast to Paul, James offers what might be termed a more practical look at things. He urges us to be quick to listen but slow to speak. He warns us about what we already know with respect to how quickly our tongue can turn sharp and land us in trouble. And he is obviously a man of deep faith who has no patience with those

who claim faith yet behave poorly. James might not be terribly eloquent, but much of what he says comes uncomfortably close to home. James is not fire and brimstone, but he does make us squirm, and reminds us that the Book lays claims upon our lives. If for some reason you have been unable to attend class, you might take some time next week and read the Letter of James for yourself. It is brief, rather to the point and has not a single "begat."

FOR THOSE WHO READ

For some weeks I have given thought to mentioning Wendell Berry in this column. I have hesitated for two reasons. I did not know where to begin and I doubted that I could do him justice. As I wander about a bookstore, I am in familiar territory in the history and religion sections. There I can quickly size up a book and know whether or not it is worth reading. But when I wander down the aisle to the fiction section, unfortunately I am in a strange land. There I am confined mostly to quotes on dust jackets to evaluate a book, and critical views seldom find their way to a dust jacket. By that route, all is good. So for good fiction I rely on others to guide me along the journey.

Some three years ago a friend recommended Wendell Berry to me, and today a dozen of his books rest on my shelf. Most are novels, a few are collections of essays, and one is an outright battle against current materialism (*Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*). Most are slender works, the sign of a man who knows what he wants to say. And Berry can write. How he can write! He is an absolute pleasure to read.

Berry was born in Kentucky in 1934 on a small family farm in Henry County. After college he went to Stanford to learn how to write and was out in the big world for a few years before returning in 1965 to teach at the University of Kentucky and to combine the academy with a life of farming on the family farm. Rural life is important to him and he bent his career to fit that passion. He is not a city boy playing a country game, he farms with a team of horses. That passion emerges in his work, most of which is centered in a small fictional community in rural Kentucky styled Port William. He weaves his novels around a set group of people living in Port William and with each novel a different character holds sway. He writes with love and

insight about a small rural community without being foolish or sentimental. For those of you hailing from a similar background, be prepared for a good read.

Berry's most recent book is *Jayber Crow*. It is told by the barber in Port William, who was born not far away, orphaned at age ten, made a shot at the ministry and wound up as barber in Port William. "In no more than two days the town and practically all the countryside knew that I had come and who I was and where I had got my start." And with this introduction, he began the rest of his life, looking out over Port William from behind the barber's chair.

Cautious at first, the folks in Port William slowly began to open to Jaber. One clear sign was an invitation by a handful of men to a late night drinking party. Matters were going smoother with each pull from the jug when their party was abruptly interrupted by the appearance of Celia Overlord, wife of one of the partying men. The men quickly retreated. "I heard her gathering up the scattered cards and throwing them onto what was left of the fire. She picked up a piece of a limb and knocked loose the hanging lantern and sent it flying. She battered all the tin plates. And then I heard her breaking the jugs and bottles that were lying around. She even broke the water jug. The fury of battle was on her." The party ended with men scurrying into nearby bushes.

To supplement his earnings, Jaber worked as the church janitor. On Sunday morning he could be found in church. "While the wickedness of the flesh was preached from the pulpit, the young husbands and wives and the courting couples sat thigh to thigh, full of yearning and joy, and the old people thought of the beauty of the children." In Port William the congregation provided its own entertainment. "And when the congregation would be singing 'We shall see the King some-day (some-day),' Sam May, who often protracted Saturday night a little too far into Sunday morning, would sing, 'I shall see the King some-day (Sam May).'"

Jayber was a bachelor. "It was longing for the society of women that sent me smoking down to Hargrave, where I would dance the awkward jig of ineligible and undyingly hopeful bachelorhood." He remained a bachelor, but fell deeply in love with a woman of Port William who never learned of his love for her. From that

silent love, his world was enlarged. She was married, and he was faithful. Yet he loved her deeply in his silence.

Port William did not lack its characters or its stories. Mat Feltner at times revisited his childhood. "When I was a boy, I had a stickhorse that gave me a lot of trouble. One day I was riding him down toward your shop there, and he threw me. Skinned both of my knees and one elbow, and I didn't like it at all. When I got on him again, I made him run all the way out to Uncle Dave Coulter's land. By the time we turned around and headed back, I had him well in hand, and he was satisfied to go at a walk."

I could go on and still not do Berry justice. I have quoted him extensively so that you might have your own taste. If you want a novel, you might try *Fidelity*, *The Memory of Old Jack*, *Nathan Coulter*, *A Place on Earth*, *Remembering*, *The Wild Birds* or *A World Lost*. If shorter essays are your flair, have a look at *The Hidden Wound*, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* or *What Are People For?* For those so inclined, Berry has produced a number of books of poetry. There isn't a bad place to begin when you pick up your first Wendell Berry book.

FALL FESTIVAL

November 1 seems far away in the heat of a San Antonio summer. But planning for that first November Saturday on which we will hold our Fall Festival is well under way. A helping hand from any quarter would be welcomed, and be sure to mark your calendar and think about bringing a friend or two. The Fall Festival offers a splendid opportunity for us to share casual time together and to show off our small church to friends and neighbors. The occasion also offers us a chance to buy something for ourselves and at the same time contribute to our church coffer. My own home today is blessed by the work of three of our local artists.

Our Fall Festival has turned into a major church event. Let your own talents be known this year in whatever fashion that strikes you. Our congregation has much talent; let it shine.

COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

Please email comments or suggestions to cjhall_45@yahoo.com or leave a telephone message at 404-1894.