A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*“Seeking the Real”*

John 14:27

May 26, 2019

*“The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring you to remembrance of all I have said to you. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, nor let them be afraid.”*

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As we prepare to celebrate baptism this morning, I would like us to reflect on Jesus’ promise to give us peace, “not as the world gives, my peace I give to you.” Considering all the ways the world promotes all manner of things—like peace, happiness, security, wisdom--that aren’t really what they say they are, aren’t all they’re cracked up to be, this is quite a good gift. It’s also a really poignant reminder to seek what’s real and learn how to tell the difference.

I spent this past week in south Texas with a group of seminary students. We were at Robert and Melinda Creech’s farm about half an hour outside of San Antonio. Someone this weekend welcomed me back to the “real world”. I chuckled. Having a week with friends, great conversations about things that matter, even better food grown on the land, honest work, and time for prayer in the beauty of nature isn’t the real world? What is?

Some of you know the Creech’s and so you can readily imagine what a treat it is to be with them no matter the location. Consider being with them in a beautiful place that they love and the way they love their place is to fling wide its doors and their hearts to receive you in.

Their farm is unlike any farm I’ve known before. They have taken 80% of it out of production and seeded natural Texas prairie grasses: big blue stem, Indian grass, switchgrass, and little bluestem. This is just the first year when those little seeds begin to put out roots down. Next year they will begin to spread out. It’s the third year when they begin to grow up. It’s a long way to see grass. Where they could be planting corn or soybeans to sell, or grazing cattle, instead they turned the land into empty space, at least if you look at everything from an economic perspective. From an economic perspective the land has no value now. It’s worthless. It’s useless. And those who don’t monetize what they have are called fools.

I feel like most people probably would call them foolish. As a people we don’t put much value on prairie grassland. Prairies are kind of boring if you don’t know what you’re looking at, and the soil can be used to grow what you want instead if you just plow up what’s already there. Almost two million acres of prairie land from Chicago to Texas is gone because it was plowed under and replaced with rows of corn, cotton, soybeans, or paved over to make roads and cities. Only 1% of natural prairie land exists as prairie in the US. We aren’t gonna let that grass just sit there when we could instead do something with it. Plant corn, for example, which we will then harvest, and then store in silos because we produce too much of it to sell, so we’ll use tax dollars to supplement long-suffering family farmers so they don’t totally go bankrupt and funnel a lot more tax dollars to industrial agribusiness so they support our politicians. Say what you will about us, but we are utterly confused as a people what it means to live with the land, and have little idea what it might mean to restore peace to the land.

Some would say though that Robert and Melinda are the ones who are confused. To take land out of productive, financially beneficial use. Wallace Stegner wrote that to preserve some land, trees, rivers, open spaces for something other than making comic books and cigarette packages will seem mystical to some people, but then again, Stegner said, anything that can’t be moved by a bulldozer seems mystical to them.

A prairie for sure is a so-called waste of space, but it’s usually the empty spaces without concrete and steel, the so-called wasted time on a front porch swing watching your grandchildren play, the wasted money on a party or a gift—that’s the best stuff, the real world made strange only to us by the ways we’ve been sold and have bought the illusions.

Designate wilderness areas instead of mining them; let a river run instead of damming it up; give away money to someone who may likely just waste it; call a day sabbath and just rest like the world will spin without you; draw water for a baptism and go down to the river to pray. Sing. Royally waste time, money, space, love—be prodigal with one another, and you may just see how God is excess. Love, Grace, Peace. Jesus promises, “My peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you.”

Jesus, we need you to give it to us because we’ve lost the way. You’re gonna need to just give it to us straight, just give it to us like we’re children. We’ve forgotten so much of even what it means to seek peace. We’re not even sure we would know what it is like if it were to arrive.

How could we? In our 243 years as a country, we have been at war with someone for 226 of those years. We didn’t ask for all those conflicts and tried hard to avoid some of them, but it’s hard to claim we know what peace is when we don’t even know what the absence of war is. If you’re forged in the fires of conflict long enough, you stay coiled. It’s hard to think of all the lives that have been lost in war. Our violence witnesses against us, but our problems hardly stop there.

We are not at peace with prairie grasses blowing in the wind, so we plow up their 15-foot deep roots and make the perfect conditions for the dust bowl. The land witnesses against us.

We don’t even know how to eat, and our bodies and the land witness against us. Michael Pollen observes the paradox: “we are a notably unhealthy people obsessed by the idea of eating healthy.” But “degraded land, sick bodies, mass confusion indicate that we are ill at ease in the worlds of food.” (Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 74) But really, can you blame us? We are stimulated with messages all the time every day telling us to go ahead, eat more, please eat more. Look how cheap food is at the American all you can eat buffet. We are inundated with these messages all day long, but just as ubiquitous are all the messages telling us we must be thin to be beautiful and here’s the next product you can buy to be thin. The cycle has turned from soil-food-delight-compost-humus-soil to chemicals-processed food products-shame-fad diet-chemicals. We think organic food, naturally grown is weird and privileged, but we think food products manufactured in a chemical plant, packaged in plastic, trucked across the country, and stamped by a cartoon leprechaun is normal.

We are a strange people, I think. We are a little bit like as if someone had a lush garden with everything they could ever want and meaningful work in lifegiving rhythm with creation, but they wanted only to eat what was beyond the limits of their creation. We’re a people who don’t know where peace is, and where we find it, we plow it up, overstuff it, kill it, and push past the limits that make the peace possible. We’re not just a strange people. We’re a sinful people, and that sinfulness is killing us from the inside out.

The prophets of this way of life keep singing jingles of peace, peace, and more peace. But we’re learning to turn the channel. In the life they’re promising, there is little peace.

What to do? Wendell Berry seeks peace in the rhythms of the land he knows as the home he shares with the wild things:

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

The peace . . . of wild things?

The grace . . . of the world?

There are canyons all around cut deep where God’s fountain flowing grace has cut a channel of hope in the rock of our foolishness.

As long as there are fields of wildflowers in the spring and watermelons bursting red on a summer’s evening…

As long as there are children playing and babies giggling…

As long as someone somewhere does the right thing instead of the easy thing; as long as we don’t listen to false prophets hawking the world’s versions of peace, peace where there is no peace…

These places, these moments are to be cherished. Every one of them.

Peace can still be found in the wild places right at home and right in your heart where they haven’t been paved over or commodified:

Where there is laughter, and someone is rubbing a little tummy.

Where there is a garden, and someone has her hands in the dirt.

Where there is a tree that hasn’t been targeted for pulp wood.

Where there is a river that runs its course day and night.

Where there is grief and honest tears flow freely.

Where someone who tells the truth even if it gets them in trouble.

Where someone pleads guilty to what they did. And where someone else says, “I forgive you.”

Where someone builds furniture, repairs a garden hose, rebuilds an old house falling down.

Where someone welcomes a refugee, a stranger.

Where someone breaks bread and pours the wine

Where someone is baptized in water, and the saints go down to the river to pray.

Where a mother gives birth to a baby.

Where a child visits her mother’s grave and imagines heaven.

Where graduates walk proud across the stage and through a door into the next chapter in their lives.

Where the people still confess in the face of all the false promises: I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

There is peace, not as the world systems and empty promises give, but as Christ gives.

You who were made in the image of God, may you have more of these moments of true peace; may your hearts not be troubled, may you not be afraid, but may you know the difference between the illusions and the truth, the illusions and the real world. And may you find the graced freedom of resting in the peace of Christ.

May Christ’s peace be with you this day and forevermore. And through you, peacemakers, may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord lift his countenance upon you and through you give the world peace. For the world is too big for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.

In His Name. Amen.

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