

The First Sunday of Advent
December 3, 2017
1 Cor. 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

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Story Telling and Story Dwelling The Gift of Strawberries (Gift vs. Commodity)

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth who await the advent of Jesus that the Lord has already enriched them through spiritual gifts and will continue to strengthen them until the coming day of the Lord.

We are gifted, Paul reminds us as we enter into a new liturgical year and into a new season of Advent. The advent of our God. The coming of the Lord. The second coming of Christ. These are the themes that confront us as we await a savior. And in the anxieties and the uncertainties of these times, Paul offers encouragement:

...in every way you have been enriched in (Jesus Christ), in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1:5-7)

In reflecting upon the themes of Advent, it struck me as an opportunity to share in a more focused way some intriguing and enlightening stories and insights from my time away for renewal this summer. In Advent, God is doing something new. God is creating anew. God is continuing the work of reformation and restoration for God's people. And these are all themes that speak loudly and richly to what I have learned and experienced.

One of the authors Marie and I especially appreciated during our travels is Gary Paul Nabhan. He has written a most excellent book, filled with stories and ideas and things we can do related to creation care. It's called "Growing Food in a Hotter, Drier, Land." In it, he follows the wisdom of a phrase he uses. He says that restoration includes "re-story-ation." That is, he believes that an essential part of our restoration—spiritually, physically, and for the sake of creation—involves telling new stories. Humans have always been story tellers. We are also, more to the point, "story dwellers." I want us to tell new and better stories that invite our dwelling, with the hope of shaping us more fully in God's image and helping us to prepare the paths of our Lord towards human, creature, and climate justice.

The stories we have told are inadequate. Some of them are downright counter-productive—like the one about how God gave us everything to use as we wish. It's a

story that we act upon without realizing that its presumed roots in scripture are false. God didn't give us everything to use as we wish; God created everything with a purpose, and we are called to be caretakers alongside God in serving and preserving all that is.

Re-story-ation is essential to restoration. So, I retell for you a story about the gift of strawberries. Think of this unseasonal story as one of hope for spring and for the surprising event that Advent anticipates. It comes from another amazing book we read called "Braiding Sweetgrass" by Robin Wall Kimmerer (pp. 22ff.).

"In a way," Kimmerer writes, "I was raised by strawberries, fields of them...It was the wild strawberries, beneath dewy leaves on an almost-summer morning, who gave me my sense of the world, my place in it. [Yes, *she writes "who" for the berries! I love it.*]

"White petals with a yellow center—like a little wild rose—they dotted the acres of curl grass in May during the Flower Moon...We kept good track of them, peeking under the trifoliate leaves to check their progress as we ran through on our way to catch frogs. After the flower finally dropped its petals, a tiny green nub appeared in its place, and as the days got longer and warmer it swelled to a small white berry. These were sour but we ate them anyway, impatient for the real thing.

"You could smell ripe strawberries before you saw them, the fragrance mingling with the smell of sun on damp ground...I'd lie on my stomach in my favorite patches, watching the berries grow sweeter and bigger under the leaves.

"Even now, after more than fifty Strawberry Moons, finding a patch of wild strawberries still touches me with a sensation of surprise, a feeling of unworthiness and gratitude for the generosity and kindness that comes with an unexpected gift all wrapped in red and green. 'Really? For me? Oh, you shouldn't have.' After fifty years they still raise the question of how to respond to their generosity. Sometimes it feels like a silly question with a very simple answer: eat them.

"But I know that someone else has wondered these same things. In our Creation stories the origin of strawberries is important. Skywoman's beautiful daughter, whom she carried in her womb from Skyworld, grew on the good green earth, loving and loved by all the other beings. But tragedy befell her when she died giving birth to her twins, Flint and Sapling. Heartbroken, Skywoman buried her beloved daughter in the earth. Her final gifts, our most revered plants, grew from her body. The strawberry arose from her heart. In Potawatomi, the strawberry is *ode min*, the heart berry. We recognize them as the leaders of the berries, the first to bear fruit.

"Strawberries first shaped my view of a world full of gifts simply scattered at your feet. A gift comes to you through no action of your own, free, having moved toward you without your beckoning. It is not a reward; you cannot earn it, or call it to you, or even

deserve it. And yet it appears. Your only role is to be open-eyed and present. Gifts exist in a realm of humility and mystery—as with random acts of kindness, we do not know their source.”

Kimmerer does a very good job here of allying the gift of strawberries to the gift of grace, don't you think? She continues:

“Those fields of my childhood showered us with strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, hickory nuts in the fall, bouquets of wildflowers brought to my mom, and family walks on Sunday afternoon. They were our playground, retreat, wildlife sanctuary, ecology classroom, and the place where we learned to shoot tin cans off the stone wall. All for free. Or so I thought.

“I experienced the world in that time as a gift economy, ‘goods and services’ not purchased but received as gifts from the earth. Of course I was blissfully unaware of how my parents must have struggled to make ends meet in the wage economy raging far from this field...

“Gifts from the earth or from each other establish a particular relationship, an obligation of sorts to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. The field gave to us,...and we tried to give back to the strawberries. When the berry season was done, the plants would send out slender red runners to make new plants. Because I was fascinated by the way they would travel over the ground looking for good places to take root, I would weed out little patches of bare ground where the runners touched down. Sure enough, tiny little roots would emerge from the runner and by the end of the season there were even more plants, ready to bloom under the next Strawberry Moon. No person taught us this—the strawberries showed us. Because they had given us a gift, an ongoing relationship opened between us...

“The fields made a gift of berries to us, and we made a gift to them to our father. *The more something is shared, the greater its value becomes.* [repeat] This is hard to grasp for societies steeped in notions of private property, where others are, by definition, excluded from sharing. Practices such as posting land against trespass, for example, are expected and accepted in a property economy but are unacceptable in an economy where land is seen as a gift to all.

“Lewis Hyde wonderfully illustrates this dissonance in his exploration of the “Indian giver.” This expression, used negatively today as a pejorative for someone who gives something and then wants to have it back, actually derives from a fascinating cross-cultural misinterpretation between an indigenous culture operating in a gift economy and a colonial culture predicated on the concept of private property. When gifts were given to the settlers by the native inhabitants, the recipients understood that they were valuable and were intended to be retained. Giving them away would have been an affront. But the indigenous people understood the value of the gift to be based

in reciprocity and would be affronted if the gifts did not circulate back to them. Many of our ancient teachings counsel that whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again.

“From the viewpoint of a private property economy, the ‘gift’ is deemed to be ‘free’ because we obtain it free of charge, at no cost. But in the gift economy, gifts are not free. The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity. In Western thinking, private land is understood to be a ‘bundle of rights,’ (I’ll add here examples, including possession, control, exclusion, enjoyment, and disposition)...in a gift economy property has a ‘bundle of responsibilities’ attached.”

This is a profound and telling difference here, and I consider the indigenous perspective far more in line with scripture. I think it manifestly worthwhile for us to contemplate this distinction between gift and commodity or property, both as a useful practice during Advent and as a way to live into a better story that more aptly informs our behavior towards God’s good creation.

Can this story restore us? Re-story us? And become part of our “story dwelling?” Can this re-story-ation help us to see how we have so lived into wrong stories that we have turned the gracious gifts of God into commodities to be bought and sold? Can we see that we have misunderstood and misused creation so profoundly that we have turned all of the Earth into a temple of money-changers and thieves—a temple that must be overturned and restored to its intended purposes and served by those who hold righteous the glory of God.

In Advent, God is pregnant with a new idea, a blessed event that will break into our lives and change everything. And we are preparing our hearts and our lives to respond appropriately, with joy and enthusiasm, commitment and devotion. What we anticipate is a gift—THE GIFT. May the story of the gift of strawberries help us to grasp new dimensions of the coming of Christ and help us to live both gratefully and carefully.

On Wednesday, at both the noon and 7 p.m. vespers services, we will continue this theme with further reflection and conversation. I hope to see you then. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.