

August 25, 2019
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 16
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71:1-6
Hebrews 12: 18-29
Luke 13:10-17

I'm back this week from vacation. One of the things I did on vacation was read the novel *The Overstory*. I had high hopes, because its admirers include Barbara Kingsolver and Bill McKibben, and its accolades include the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. It's a book about trees—and about so much more. The cover blurb describes the book as:

... a sweeping, impassioned work of activism and resistance that is also a stunning evocation of—and paeon to—the natural world. From the roots to the crown and back to the seeds, Richard Powers's twelfth novel unfolds in concentric rings of interlocking fables that range from antebellum New York to the late twentieth-century Timber Wars of the Pacific Northwest and beyond. There is a world alongside ours—vast, slow, interconnected, resourceful, magnificently inventive, and almost invisible to us. This is the story of a handful of people who learn how to see that world and who are drawn up into its unfolding catastrophe.¹

The book contains achingly beautiful prose that is punctuated with fascinating facts about trees. It's both up-lifting and down-casting. It made me feel both captivated and convicted.

My own intimate relationship with trees developed during elementary school. My parents' yard contained many trees fit for climbing, and I particularly loved our mimosa tree. I spent many hours in that tree, reclined along its graceful branches, immersed in a fragrant green haze. Better known here as silk trees, mimosas are magical beings that wear pink blossoms and brown seed pods and leaves that go to sleep at night. Here in New Haven, the mimosas are blooming right now.

There have been other trees since, and *The Overstory* brought them back. I remembered most keenly the serenity of walking among ancient trees in California and Washington, and the sickness of driving through old-growth clear-cuts on the Olympic Peninsula. Yes, *driving*; and so, yes, *convicted*. In ways understood and unimagined, my own life causes the death of trees and birds and every other sort of living thing.

The Overstory is broadly about environmental damage caused by human activity. The first such warning signals were sounded not by Rachel Carson with *Silent Spring* in 1962, but rather by early scientific explorer Alexander von Humboldt. As Humboldt biographer Andrea Wulf describes it:

After he saw the disastrous environmental effects of colonial plantations—cash crops, monoculture, irrigation, and deforestation—in Venezuela in 1800, Humboldt became the first scientist to talk about harmful human-induced climate change. Deforestation made the land barren, he said, and with the disappearance of brushwood, torrential rains washed away the soils, while water levels of lakes were falling. Humboldt was the first to explain the forest’s ability to enrich the atmosphere with moisture and its cooling effect, as well as its importance for water retention and protection against soil erosion.²

The forces of denial are powerful, so let’s say it clearly: human activity causes environmental degradation. If that’s not enough, let’s add this: environmental degradation eventually yields human degradation. Historically, this is related to the genocide of indigenous people and the enslavement of African people. Historically, through acts of commission and omission, Christianity has not often done the right thing.

I’m pretty sure that Jesus would not approve. Understanding Jesus requires understanding his Jewishness, a glimpse of which we might take from the Book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is so complicated as to be dauntingly difficult to address in a sermon. But I will mention this: Jeremiah is said to be unlike other prophetic books, in that it is less about social justice and more about politics. At the same time, Jeremiah recognizes that social justice and politics are inseparable. Bad politics cause people to suffer, and suffering is God’s concern. More generally, the prophetic voice connects the dots between cause and effect; the prophetic gaze moves beyond the fleeting and toward the ultimate. Individuals and societies court denial at their own peril.

When it comes to climate change, it seems that the moment of peril has arrived. There is much speculation that we are near the point of no return on climate change. As Christians, we are called to cultivate hope. For me, when it comes to climate change, hope is feeling more and more elusive. I’m struggling, and maybe you are, too. Convicted though we might be, we simply cannot succumb to despair and its attendant paralysis.

This week I listened to an old episode of my favorite public radio show, *On Being*. It featured Joanna Macy, who was described as a “Buddhist philosopher of ecology.” Now age 90, Macy’s life work has been primarily about environmental activism. But she is also known for her translation of Rainer Maria Rilke’s *The Book of Hours*. That collection of poetry, originally published in 1905, is concerned with divine mystery. During the interview, Macy read several poems from that collection, including this one, in which the poet addresses God:

Dear darkening ground, / you’ve endured so patiently the walls we built, / please give the cities one more hour // and the churches and cloisters two. / And those that labor — let their toils / still hold them for another five hours, or seven, / before that hour of inconceivable terror / when you take back your name/ from all things. // Just give me a little more time! // I just need a little more time. / Because I am going to love the things / as no one has thought to love them, / until they’re real and worthy of you.³

Macy then added this:

... I feel like that. I'm ready to see. I'm not insisting that we be brimming with hope. It's OK not to be optimistic. Buddhist teachings say feeling that you have to maintain hope can wear you out. So just be present. The biggest gift you can give is to be absolutely present. And when you're worrying about whether you're hopeful or hopeless or pessimistic or optimistic, who cares? The main thing is that you're showing up, that you're here, and that you're finding ever more capacity to love this world because it will not be healed without that. That [is] what is going to unleash our intelligence and our ingenuity and our solidarity for the healing of our world.⁴

I think she's right. Even when hope is elusive, especially when hope is elusive, we have to keep showing up, bringing ever more of ourselves to the task of love, even though that requires us to keep risking heartbreak. The experience of love in creation lends us healing and makes us agents of healing.

Today's reading from Luke describes the second of three times that Jesus heals on the Sabbath. As an observant Jew, Jesus would have been serious about keeping the Sabbath. By releasing him from the routine cares of the day-to-day, observing the Sabbath might even help him observe the need for healing. And when Jesus sees the need for healing, he heals, even on the Sabbath. Healing brings restoration, and that's his priority. As always, ultimately, it's all about love.

Remember, the Sabbath is related to God's creative work. On the seventh day, the day following six days of creation, having proclaimed all of it good, God rested. Right now, the frailest body of all may very well be Mother Earth herself. Set aside some Sabbath time, on Sunday or any other day, just for her. Choose a tree, or a pond, or the moon, and lend it your full attention. Yes, it's all about love.

I am currently engaged in a love affair with the large tree behind the church, the one that shades much of the kindergarten playground. It's an American elm, a perfect example of why that species was prized for its elegance. It's one of the few old American elms left here in "The Elm City," so-named for the trees planted during the late 1700s on the New Haven Green and elsewhere. "Our" elm is probably approaching one hundred years old. So far, it has survived the Dutch elm disease, hurricanes, and ice storms that have moved like marauders among the other elms in town. Julie makes sure it gets an annual checkup. In its history of the city's elms, the Garden Club of New Haven writes that elms "have a strongly arched vase shape, creating an almost cathedral-like streetscape."⁵ And so you might say that our church has a cathedral in its backyard.

Love. Just love. Love this world and all its creatures. Love fiercely and courageously, from the center of your being. Love until your heart bursts with joy. Love until your heart breaks with grief. Burst or broken, your heart *will* keep beating, quite possibly even more strongly than before. You may find yourself feeling more alive than ever. Take a deep breath, and then love some more.

Notes

¹ Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), back cover.

² “Andrea Wulf, “The Forgotten Father of Environmentalism”, December 23, 2015, *The Atlantic*, available online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2015/12/the-forgotten-father-of-environmentalism/421434/> (accessed August 23, 2019).

³ Rainer Maria Rilke, “Dear darkening ground,” read by Joanna Macy in “A Wild Love for the World,” an interview with Krista Tippett for the radio program *On Being*, originally aired September 16, 2010, available online at <https://onbeing.org/programs/joanna-macy-a-wild-love-for-the-world/> (accessed August 23, 2019).

⁴ Joanna Macy in “A Wild Love for the World.”

⁵ “The New Haven Green, the City's Elms and the Garden Club of New Haven,” from the website of The Garden Club of New Haven, available at <http://www.gardenclubofnewhaven.org/new-havens-green-and-its-elms.html> (accessed August 23, 2019).