

Grace Just Beneath the Surface

Holy God, teach us to hear Your voice, and draw us to You in love. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The warm, breezy days of summer are here! Many of us relish spending time outdoors swimming, hiking, or gardening. Trees and plants leaf out in deep shades of green, nectarines and tomatoes ripen, and the fragrance of honeysuckle and lilac hangs in the air. I love summer mornings! Every day at 6:30 a.m., I sit on our porch with a mug of strong black coffee and listen for birdsong. I'm captivated by an app called Merlin—do you know it? It's from the Cornell Ornithology Lab, and it helps you identify birds by analyzing their songs. I love recording birds in the marshes of Old Saybrook, where we live. Cedar waxwings, green herons, Carolina wrens, barn swallows, and belted kingfishers—I find it thrilling to identify these tiny feathered beings that swoop and soar and sing so lyrically. The Merlin app: I commend it to you.

Maybe you also love to learn about animals, birds, trees, and plants. Perhaps you raise chickens—anyone? I know three people who do—or you grow vegetables, or you've read the gorgeous book by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. It's fascinating to glimpse the intricate beauty and giftedness of the living beings all around us. Sages in antiquity cherished nature wisdom too. Psalm 104 praises God for the towering cedars of

Lebanon, the wild goats leaping on rocky cliffs, and the creatures that swim in the ocean depths. You might recall that King Solomon, celebrated for his “breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore,” would speak brilliantly of trees, animals, birds, reptiles, and fish; people would come from all over the world to hear him.¹ *Kgs* 4:29–34 The allure of wisdom is not just mastery of a bunch of facts, but insight into the deep core of things, the unity and preciousness of the web of life.

A sage who lived two hundred years before Jesus, Yeshua Ben Sira, or simply “Sirach,” says wisdom is like a mighty tree with glorious and graceful branches, aromatic blossoms, and delicious fruit sweeter than the finest honey. *Sir* 24:16–20 Those seeking wisdom will find it, Sirach says, in the “book of the covenant of the Most High God.” In the Torah! In Scripture, we dive into Wisdom’s vast, shimmering depths as into the luminous waters of the sea *Sir* 24:23–29 on a warm summer day. Sirach urges believers to put their necks joyfully under the yoke of wisdom, *Sir* 51:26 to study the truth of God. And *that’s* the wisdom to which Jesus calls us.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you”—the “yoke” is wisdom, an image drawn from Sirach *Sir* 51:23–26—“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,” Jesus says, “for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Gentle wisdom: not a burden, not tedious spiritual “homework,” but something marvelous that will refresh the heart, mind, and soul. “Come to me,” Jesus calls, speaking in the voice of divine Wisdom.¹ This is astonishing! Only in the Gospel of Matthew do we see Jesus inviting believers to learn wisdom and rest in him. You know what else is only in Matthew? Jesus says, “Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I’ve come not to abolish but to fulfill.”^{Matt 5:17} For Matthew, Jesus is the fulfillment of the Torah and the Prophets² and the embodiment of divine Wisdom!

Friends, this is such good news! Especially for those of us who might be tired.

Are you exhausted by the heavy load you’ve been carrying? Are you worn out by grief, or worn down from dealing with challenges at work or at home? **Come to Jesus, and learn to rest in him.** Are you anxious about our fragile world in this era of climate change? Are you losing sleep over the global refugee catastrophe, or lying awake afraid that we won’t be able to save our planet from environmental annihilation? **Come to Jesus, and learn courage, resilience, and creativity** for the work that lies ahead.

- Learn from Jesus how to reconfigure venerable traditions and policies that have become calcified and maladaptive. (I want to be clear: I’m not talking about Judaism now. I’m talking about our beloved Anglicanism, which has such breathtaking treasures but which also needs to change.)

- Learn from Jesus how to dissent from death-dealing systems that marginalize people and exploit other living creatures.

- Learn from Jesus how to build community lovingly, one disciple at a time, for the flourishing of God’s kin-dom.

Come to Jesus. Rest in him and learn to live in harmony with the ways of God!

So when I’m not listening to birdsong, I read nature books. I’m eager to learn what this gorgeous, wild Earth has to teach us about resilience and being in right relationship with other creatures.³ Right now I’m reading a book called *Entangled Life*. It’s about fungi. You’re thinking, “mushrooms?” Sure. Yes. But mushrooms are just the tip of the iceberg, if you will. There’s so much more to know! Here are three things I’m learning about fungi.

- FIRST: just beneath the surface of the ground, fungi are growing in vast mycorrhizal networks of tiny filaments that reach out eagerly toward the roots of trees and plants. These filaments connect countless living organisms symbiotically in the web of life across the globe.

- SECOND: with what scientists describe as “metabolic ingenuity,” fungi feed other living things. Fungi nurture other creatures. They feed terrestrial plants and marine organisms that draw essential minerals from fungal

networks, and they feed you and me, whenever we eat bread or enjoy fermented beverages made with yeasts.⁴

- THIRD, fungi help produce medicines. We have fungi to thank for statins, for antivirals and antibacterials—the most famous being penicillin—and for many other compounds, including psychoactive substances, that **heal** humans and other living things.

Fungi **connect**, **nurture**, and **heal** innumerable life forms across this planet. Humble, unseen, at work beneath the surface of things, fungi have an essential role in making the *whole world* survive and thrive!⁵

Fungi can help us imagine the POWER of our Savior Jesus Christ. Now, I know someone is going to leave this sanctuary after the service and all they'll remember is, "Preacher said Jesus is like a fungus." Hang on—let me nuance that for you a little. Picture, if you will, the invincible power of Jesus as holy Wisdom hidden just beneath the surface of what we see! Jesus **connects** us in beloved communities, Jesus **nurtures** us, and Jesus **heals** us. Like an unseen mycorrhizal **network of grace**, Jesus' power is at work through countless filaments of love that reach out and transform everything with which they become intertwined.

"Take my yoke upon you." Jesus calls us to trust his deeds of power and learn the ways of God—to become enmeshed in healing ways that secure the flourishing of the vulnerable.⁶ The mighty grace of God in Jesus Christ is hidden just beneath the

surface of our living—just beneath the surface of your life and the life of St. Thomas’s as you move toward the future God has prepared for you.

“Learn from me,” Jesus says. Learn from the One who fulfils the Torah and the Prophets! From an intricate (if I may: mycorrhizal) web of delightful Scripture possibilities, I wish to highlight just three filaments that can **connect** you to one another, **nurture** your growth, and **heal** what needs to be healed, so you and St. Thomas’s can remain the beloved community that you are and become even more abundantly fruitful!

1st filament: The Torah gives us the God of Exodus, who delivers Israel from oppression in Egypt—a mighty Redeemer who hears the cries of all who suffer! When you are weary or burdened: trust God as your Redeemer.

2nd filament: The Torah teaches us compassion,⁷ urging us to love our neighbor (that’s Leviticus) ^{Lev 19:18} and to open our hand to those in need (that’s Deuteronomy). ^{Deut 15:11} Do those things, and you will become more deeply entwined in the life of this world God so loves.

3rd filament: in the Prophets, Amos exhorts us to seek God and live. ^{Amos 5:4, 6} Seek God in 10 minutes of quiet prayer daily, or read the magnificent Gospel of Matthew slowly and prayerfully. Learn from Jesus to become enmeshed in the life of God.

Trust God as your Redeemer. Love your neighbor. Seek God and live!

These might seem like small things. But just beneath the surface of your life, through these 3 filaments of grace, Jesus will be **forging connections, nurturing growth, and healing** you and others.⁸ As the future unfolds in your life and the life of this congregation, explore the wisdom of connectedness, nurture, and healing together, and the mighty power of Jesus will be at work!

In the Name of the One who is “the power of God and the wisdom of God”¹ 1 Cor 1:24.
Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

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Proper 9A

Song of Songs 2:8–13; Psalm 145:8–15; Romans 7:15–25a;

Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30

Preached at St. Thomas’s Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

¹ For debates through the history of Christian interpretation and in recent New Testament scholarship concerning what the “yoke” might signify in Matt 11:29, see Matthew W. Mitchell, “The Yoke Is Easy, but What of Its Meaning? A Methodological Reflection Masquerading as a Philological Discussion of Matthew 11:30,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 135 (2016): 321–340; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, Hermeneia (translated by James E. Crouch; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 174–176. Not every proposal has equal merit. One dominant interpretation in the early Church denigrates the Jewish observance of halakhic statutes as burdensome, contrasting the grace on offer for followers of Jesus; the prevalence of this polemical and supersessionist interpretation does not make it sound. Mitchell tracks an interpretive move, perhaps beginning with Erasmus, to understand Jesus as calling all people burdened by the conflicts and harms of daily living more generally, and that is the approach, sketched in broad terms here for concision, that I find most persuasive.

It is essential to take seriously the fuller literary context of Matthew 11, in which the initial Q statement (material shared by Matthew and Luke from a common

Quelle or source) has John hearing about the deeds (τὰ ἔργα) of the Messiah (11:2; this noun is not in the Lukan parallel), then Jesus claiming his own mighty works of healing power, insisting that John is a prophet pointing to Jesus (11:7–10), and arguing that wisdom is vindicated by her deeds (τῶν ἔργων αὐτῆς, 11:19). Following is polemic against cities that did not repent after witnessing Jesus’ deeds of power, and the observation that God has hidden these mysteries from the wise; only the Son can choose to reveal the truth of God (11:25–27). This chapter culminates, then, in the Special Matthew saying about Jesus’ yoke, reconfiguring the trope in Sirach 51 about wisdom, but certainly not in a way that denigrates the very Torah that Jesus had come to fulfill. Believers in Jesus as the Messiah are to delight in him as holy Wisdom and to find profound spiritual refreshment in following him.

² This is evident in the logic of Matt 11:13 as well: “all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came,” and the moment that John the Baptist begins pointing to Jesus—the fulfillment of “the Law and the Prophets”—there is no more need for that earlier prophesying.

³ I know also, from pastoral care chaplaincy and from experiencing loss, that it is vital to cherish what is dying. The ecological crisis is far worse than the average person might realize who has not studied climate science. I want to know all I can about the living things around me that may not survive the Anthropocene age.

⁴ Sheldrake on terrestrial plant life: “Almost all plants sustain themselves by drawing minerals from mycorrhizal fungal networks in the soil” (*Entangled Life*, 21). On fungi in the oceans, see the 2019 article by Anthony Amend, Gaetan Burgaud, Michael Cunliffe, Virginia P. Edgcomb, et al., “Fungi in the Marine Environment: Open Questions and Unsolved Problems,” which can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1128/mbio.01189-18>. As of July 2022, one scientific resource says that over 1,800 species of marine fungi had been identified. Mycologists estimate that only a fraction of existing fungi have been identified and studied; the range often given for identified fungi is 10 to 15%.

⁵ Sheldrake characterizes fungi as “regenerators, recyclers, and networkers that stitch worlds together” (*Entangled Life*, 19).

⁶ Matt 11:20–24; 25:31–46.

⁷ Walter T. Wilson underscores something key to the Special Matthew material here: “An important difference between Sirach and Matthew is that the fictive household group forming around Jesus establishes relationships through which its members not only receive instruction but also experience compassion, the expression ‘meek and humble in heart’ having no counterpart in Sir 51:13–30.” See Wilson, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1: Matthew 1–13*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), 406–407.

⁸ In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul reminds us that our body has many members—the foot, the hand, the ear, the eye—using biological interconnection as a metaphor for the Body of Christ. The church, as the Body of Christ, has many members and organic systems, each with its own capacities and wisdom; all should work together for the thriving of the whole. In our own age of ecological wisdom, we are discovering new ways to think about community and relational intelligence. After centuries of callous exploitation of the natural world, we are realizing that the “body” of which humans are a part is an infinitely vast and complex web of living creatures and biomes, each with their own capacities and wisdoms. Anthropocentrism—the ideology that human beings are at the center of everything that matters and rightly enjoy a privileged position at the top of a hierarchy of values—has done incalculable harm to the living communities of Earth, due to the foolish, arrogant, and heartless ways in which human organizations and technologies have exploited and devastated biomes and other creatures for our short-term gain. In this sermon, I am working with a more expansive idea of the Body of Christ. My movement toward this theological idea has been guided by naturalist writing, but there are rich resources available in theology and ethics, not least from scholars who think about the venerable theological, liturgical, and artistic traditions of the Cosmic Christ.

Relevant to this revisional Body of Christ is what Merlin Sheldrake writes about microbiomes within human bodies at the microscopic level: “For your community of microbes—your ‘microbiome’—your body is a planet.... We are ecosystems, composed of—and decomposed by—an ecology of microbes.... It made my head spin to think of how many ideas had to be revisited, not least our culturally treasured notions of identity, autonomy, and independence.... ‘We’ are ecosystems that span boundaries and transgress categories. Our selves emerge from a complex tangle of relationships only now becoming known” (*Entangled Life*, 16–18).