

Rebecca Justice Schunior
The First Sunday of Advent
November 27, 2016
Matthew 24:36-44 & Excerpt from *Jayber Crow* by Wendell Berry

Worship Without Ceasing

This past week I started running again. Running is an activity I've love/hated since I was 18. I haven't been running since mid-May. Most of the summer I spent working on my golf game; I've learned just enough to be reasonably terrible. But all the hours at the range mean I didn't run. When the days got shorter and the work of this wonderful place got busier, I still didn't run. All these beautiful fall days we've had the past couple of months I've let slide by me.

It's hard to start running once you've stopped. The body surrenders to inertia. As it continued to get darker and I continued to get busier and the national political scene continued to get gloomier, my life shrunk; I spent more time in front of my computer, on my couch, in my bed.

But as the wind picked up this past week and we finally got a real taste of November, something in me changed. The election results have left me with a sense of expectation, like I need to be ready for something. Mindy Kaling, the writer and producer of the sitcom *The Mindy Project* talked about her first year running her own show. She knew she was going to be incredibly busy and stressed out. She's a young woman and a minority and the odds against her were enormous, so the pressure would be enormous. In response she prioritized getting her body strong and healthy.

The first time running isn't so bad. I think, "this isn't going to kill me!" The second time is worse. "I'm so sore; I think I'm injured and should go back home for a rest." The third time it's

starting to become habit. My body remembers what it feels like to push through boredom and tiredness. We're only talking 3 miles here, so this is no marathon, but for half an hour I put my body in a radically different place than the normal movement from comfortable house to comfortable office. I notice the sky and the air. I tolerate some discomfort. I feel strong. Moving the body changes the brain.

We are now in the season of Advent, the beginning of the church year, when we prepare for, hope for, and long for God to break through into our world. This Advent season we take our theme from a group of churches who chose to counter the secular rush to Christmas with what they call The Advent Conspiracy. They chose four themes that challenge us to move through this season differently, to move in different rhythms than the rest of world. It can be hard to move muscles in new ways.

The first theme is "worship fully". One might think, on first hearing, that this means that we should go to church more or pray more or raise our hands in the air in praise. Actually none of those are bad ideas, but I think worship has a larger meaning than what we typically ascribe to it and that "worship fully" might be inviting us into that more expansive definition.

Philosopher Jamie Smith writes in his book *Desiring the Kingdom* that we are, as a function of being human, worshiping beings¹. Worship comes to us from Old English, meaning to give worth to something. Worship, here at St. Mark's, is organized and developed by our Liturgy Planning Team, commissioned on this day. But Smith posits that we are constantly taking part in liturgies, both sacred and secular. There is the liturgy of holy communion and there is the liturgy of shopping at the mall or attending a Nationals game or of family dinner.

¹ Smith, James K. A. (2009). "Lovers in a Dangerous Time: Cultural Exegesis of Secular Liturgies" (89-109), *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group.

What we do with our bodies in these liturgies matters more than what is going on in our minds, claims Smith. In fact, our intellectual ideas about things don't matter much at all for shaping lives and forming habits. Smith came to this line of thinking when he found himself reading Wendell Berry, the environmentalist/poet/activist, while in the food court of a Costco. What a cognitive dissonance, thought Smith. While his mind was apprehending, and appreciating Wendell Berry's commitment to land, simplicity, and the lasting pleasures of connection with nature, Smith was engaging in a consumerist liturgy of mass consumption.

Wendell Berry writes about this kind of dissonance in his novel *Jayber Crow*². The title character notices the difference between the ascetic style of Christianity observed in the local church and the absolute joy and delight of both minister and congregation as they appreciate the simple gifts of life – wild raspberries, a drink of water. There is no question for Berry what the more appropriate liturgy is; it is the one that cultivates gratitude. We are worshipping creatures, all of us, in that we give worth to all kinds of things, despite what our opinions may be. To worship fully might be to direct our worshipping bodies to liturgies that strengthen us, enliven us, and give us joy.

² *"In Port William, more than anyplace else I had been, this religion that scorned the beauty and goodness of this world was a puzzle to me. To begin with, I don't think anybody believed it. I still don't think so. Those world-condemning sermons were preached to people who, on Sunday mornings, would be wearing their prettiest clothes. Even the old widows in their dark dresses would be pleasing to look at. By dressing up on the one day when most of them had leisure to do it, they had signified their wish to present themselves to one another and to Heaven looking their best. The people who heard those sermons loved good crops, good gardens, good livestock and work animals and dogs; they loved flowers and the shade of trees, and laughter and music; some of them could make you a fair speech on the pleasures of a good drink of water or a patch of wild raspberries. 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. And when church was over they would go home to Heavenly dinners of fried chicken, it might be, and creamed new potatoes and hot biscuits and butter and cherry pie and sweet milk and buttermilk. And the preacher and his family would always be invited to eat with somebody and they would always go, and the preacher, having just foresworn on behalf of everybody the joys of the flesh, would eat with unconsecrated relish."*

But of course, you wouldn't think that liturgies of joy were what Jesus had in mind for us after reading this week's gospel "...Two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left." This message can be alarming when we read it through the lens of the rapture or the *Left Behind* series (both unbiblical accounts of what happens at the end of time). We do not know what being taken or left behind means – the text leaves that open. The future is a mystery. Jesus tells us to be ready for anything.³

In the *New Yorker*, last week, some 16 writers responded to the election Junot Diaz wrote about radical hope. He quotes the philosopher Jonathan Lear, "What makes hope radical," Lear writes, "is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is." Diaz goes on to say "Radical hope is not so much something you have but something you practice; it demands flexibility, openness, and what Lear describes as "imaginative excellence." Radical hope is our best weapon against despair, even when despair seems justifiable; it makes the survival of the end of your world possible. Only radical hope could have imagined people like us into existence. And I believe that it will help us create a better, more loving future."⁴

Despite what our minds or intellects assent to, our bodies are daily being subjected to liturgies that teach them about anxiety and scarcity. But we can choose to put our bodies in alternative liturgies to cultivate deep joy (not so much the frenetic and forced gaiety of the

³ I owe this reading of the text to my friend and weekly lectionary discussion companion, David Lott, Theology and Ministry Editor.

⁴ <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/aftermath-sixteen-writers-on-trumps-america#diaz>

season that can distract but does not nurture), liturgies to cultivate gratitude, expectation, and hope.

Church is only a small part of these liturgies, but we can learn good things and form good habits here. But we must be less passive in our participation in them - bring more attention and awareness to your practice. Make eye contact at the peace, smile; feel the hand of the person shaking yours. Take deep breaths during the prayers; chanting the psalms is primarily about breathing together. Taste the bread, chew it consciously and take pleasure in its giftedness just for you. Hold the wine in your mouth, let it activate your senses. Try singing a little louder than you normally would. Don't be embarrassed. Say the words of the liturgy like you were auditioning for a play as if you were playing the part of someone who had total faith in the goodness of the universe.

It will be hard to move those hope and gratitude muscles at first, especially if you're discouraged now. You might have to push through the discomfort. The future is uncertain, and this means there is no need to despair. When our minds cannot fathom or have faith in a good future for this broken world of ours, our bodies can start preparing for one. Choose your liturgies with care.