

*A Sauntering Sacrament* (Ps. 19.1-4)  
Jeremy Rutledge, Covenant Church  
April 26, 2009

Most of my favorite people have been walkers. By this I mean that, of the people who have influenced me most deeply, almost all of them have given themselves to the practice of taking regular walks. My father was a walker, and he invited me to walk with him every day. The same is true of my partner, with whom I have gone for more evening strolls than I can count. My son, having only recently become bipedal, is perhaps the most enthusiastic walker of all. Many Saturday mornings we visit the Houston Arboretum, where he can tromp along the soft, leafy trails until his smiling cheeks flush with fatigue. Even when I am sedentary, it seems that I come into contact with some very dear walkers. Sitting in my study to prepare for a sermon, say, I open the sacred stories to read about our rabbi who was always on the road from one place to the next. I pull a volume of Vassar Miller's poetry off the shelf and hear her whispering to us all to "steal by this day barefoot."<sup>1</sup> Or I go to a favorite literary companion, Henry Thoreau, arguably as committed a walker as there ever was. And it is to old Hank that I'd like us to turn this Earth Sunday morning because his ambling philosophy invites us to consider that we are on the spiritual path any time we put one foot in front of the other and walk right in to newfound awareness of the present moment and our place in it.

I suppose that most people remember Henry Thoreau for his famous experiment in solitary living in a spartan cabin near Walden Pond. He wrote a beautiful memoir of that time in the woods, and many of us memorized long passages from it when we were

---

<sup>1</sup> Vassar Miller, "Birthday Card to Myself," in *If I Had Wheels or Love: Collected Poems* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1991), 246.

young, vowing that we, too, would get to the marrow of this life and drink of its most enchanting experiences. But, the more I have come to learn of Thoreau, the more I have come to understand him as any anything but an individualist huddled over a page, transcribing there his inner dialogue. The older he got, the more Thoreau devoted himself to a thoroughgoing naturalism that joined him to a much larger conversation meant to include all of the flora and fauna around his native Concord. This conversation was born of his daily walks, wherein through regular contact with the natural world, he simply fell in love with it. “‘We must go out and re-ally ourselves to Nature every day,’ he wrote. ‘We must make root, send out some little fibre at least, even every winter day. I am sensible that I am imbibing health when I open my mouth to the wind.’”<sup>2</sup> Yet Thoreau didn’t only taste the wind.

In his later journals, we learn that, as Thoreau walked for hours on end, he chewed on much of what he found. He did this literally, putting things into his mouth, almost like a child learning the world for the first time. In the words of historian Donald Worster, “[Thoreau] put as much of nature’s variety into his stomach as he could...he would not...[approach] the world gingerly—afraid to bite hard, to crack the shell, and so to taste the rich flavor of its nutmeat. Huckleberries, sassafras roots, birch sap, wild apples, acorns—all went into his experimental craw.”<sup>3</sup> So as he made his way down country lanes, along lakesides, and deep into the forest, Thoreau took it all in. He actually ate it and drank it, breathed it into his lungs, and brought it forth again in poetry and prose,

---

<sup>2</sup> Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 78.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

inviting his fellows to join in this great spiritual ecology. And, to be sure, this was more spiritual than physical for Thoreau. He wrote that the world was not made of dead, inert matter so much as it was infused with the mystery of life, every element playing a role in a kind of sacred cycle. This infusion of mystery was a sacramental notion, and, the older Thoreau got, the more he wrote of the entire world as if it were his church, the muskrats and chickadees his heavenly choir, the wild huckleberries his tiny bursts of communion wine.

Perhaps what is most striking about Thoreau's later journals is the idea that the world he fell in love with was the world he found within walking distance of his doorway. He did not travel to faraway peaks or set out to find nature's most awe-inspiring vistas. He simply rose from his writing table again and again to walk the place that was his own, his particular corner of the good Earth. And his call to us is that we do the same. It's interesting, then, this Earth Sunday, to consider what it would mean for us to just go for a walk. We could do this right after church or perhaps in the cool of this evening. Some of us might wake early to walk in the predawn quiet or even take a ten-minute stroll during an office lunch break. Of course, there are those who have difficulty walking. So we might also choose to sit on the porch and watch the birds light on the branches or look out the same window every day to see the subtle changes in our place over time. The point is that each of these is a grounding practice that might help us root ourselves in both the physical and the spiritual at the same time. For, as we wake to one, we invariably become more conscious of the other. Putting one foot in front of the other, we can feel our physical connection with the ground beneath us. Taking one breath after the other,

we can feel the inner and outer movement of air, of spirit, blurring the sharp boundaries we have created between self and world.

There are, of course, good green reasons for walking. And this Earth Sunday we really should mention that taking our sandals instead of our sedans can reduce our footprint considerably, as can using the public transportation system, or arranging a carpool to take us where we need to go. For that matter, we can continue with our regimen of cloth bags, buying locally, switching to halogen bulbs, recycling, and, perhaps most importantly, consuming less with every passing year. All of these practices should be encouraged as part of a faithful ecological ethic. But the routine of going for daily walks is really meant to turn us into stewards of the Earth in a deeper way than that of simply lightening our impact on the environment. What walking really does is help us to get to know our natural place. Like Thoreau, through daily connection we develop a relationship with our Gulf Coast ecosystem. We learn its animals and plants, noting when the sweet peas are ready to eat, watching the azaleas bloom, and waiting for the annual influx of hundreds of species of birds from Central and South America. And, as we learn our place, we gradually develop a relationship with it. With time and with many seasons, it might even turn into a kind of natural love story, which is precisely the point. For only when we know something will we be able to truly love it, and only when we love it will we be able to care for it as our own.

There is no real trick to falling in love with the world. And we cannot even say that everyone who gets regular exposure to nature will turn into an enthusiast on a Thoreauvian scale. But I do believe that if we were to spend more time on our feet, out of doors, then each of us would come to a different awareness of this great and wonderful

story of which we are a part. I believe that we would each have a moment when we fall silent in response to the ineffable beauty of a honeysuckle blossom or a brilliant patch of orange in the sky. In the words of Buddhist teacher Stephanie Kaza, “The experience...is different for each person, but it is often described as spiritual awakening, a sense of being ‘one’ with the miraculous world and suddenly motivated to care for it with new fierceness. The experience itself becomes the teacher...”<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, we might just end with an invitation to experience. This Earth Sunday, may we each find a moment to get out of doors and let the experience itself be our teacher. Let us find ourselves held in the world’s embrace, listening to the lessons it would whisper. For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, the Earth’s wisdom is all around. Listen as we close with Thoreau’s description of a walk:

“The sun sets on some retired meadow, where no house is visible, with all the glory and splendor that it lavishes on cities, and perchance as it has never set before,—where there is but a solitary marsh hawk to have his wings gilded by it...and there is some little black-veined brook in the midst of the marsh, just beginning to meander, winding slowly round a decaying stump. We walked in so pure and bright a light, gilding the withered grass and leaves, so softly and serenely bright, I thought I had never bathed in such a golden flood, without a ripple or a murmur to it. The west side of every wood and rising ground gleamed like the boundary of Elysium, and the sun on our backs seemed like a gentle herdsman driving us home at evening.

---

<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Kaza, *Mindfully Green: A Personal and Spiritual Guide to Whole Earth Thinking* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2008), 92.

So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bankside in autumn.”<sup>5</sup>

Amen.

---

<sup>5</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” in *The Essays of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Lewis Hyde (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 177.