

Central Haw Creek "The Serviceberry" Study

Welcome to this study! Here at Central Haw Creek, we seek to be an authentic avenue towards intentional Christian community. This means that all of our gatherings are punctuated by a common form. The word for this is "liturgy."

Our gatherings all begin with this prayer said together:

Creator God, before we knew ourselves, we were known by you. Draw us near to you. Infuse our practice with your presence. Strip away our preconceived notions and well-formed words, liberate us from the want to impress or master, awaken in us a posture of humble curiosity. May our hearts and minds be open to the stirring of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

We then move on to getting to know one another and caring for one another on our journey of life.

We do this by considering the following questions:

- In what ways did you experience or observe God's presence over the last week?
- In what ways did you feel distant from God this past week?
- How would you like to grow in your relationship with God this next week?

Next, we discuss the assigned chapter and allow space for all voices to be heard. There are suggested questions that can help keep the conversation moving if we hit a lull.

And finally, we again join our voices in prayer:

God you are present to us in many ways, by your creation, your Son, and your comforting Holy Spirit. The workings of your love are mysterious and yet so familiar. We give you thanks that your love is bigger than our doubt. As we continue to journey together give us your peace. Amen.

We are so grateful you are joining us in study and in community!

Sincerely,
Patrick Neitzey
Campus Pastor: Central Haw Creek

Week 1: Introduction

Over the next four weeks, we will be reading Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer's book "The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World." My hope is that we will be open to how the Holy Spirit is stirring in our midst as we glean the wisdom of an Indigenous woman botanist.

While our source text is not inherently Christian, there is a tangible overlap of our call to care for creation. Dr. Ellen Davis in her book "Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture" reminds us that within the Hebrew Bible (The Old Testament), "beginning with the first chapter of Genesis, there is no extensive exploration of the relationship between God and humanity that does not factor the land and its fertility into that relationship."¹ By holding in conversation scripture, "The Serviceberry," suggested reading, and our own experience, I hope that we might form a deeper understanding of God's grace and our place in this world.

In preparation for reading "The Serviceberry" by Robin Wall Kimmerer, here are some suggested readings that help us consider all of creation as a gift, a tangible example of grace. These readings also give faith-based language to Kimmerer's theme of gift economies.

Suggested Readings

- Exodus 16:1–36
- Luke 12:13–21
- "Grace is the Currency of the True Economy":
<https://www.frontporchrepublic.com/2019/10/grace-is-the-currency-of-the-true-economy/>
- "Two Economies" by Wendell Berry
http://www.worldwisdom.com/public/viewpdf/default.aspx?article-title=Two_Economies_by_Wendell_Berry.pdf
- An excerpt from Dan Barber's "The Third Plate: Field Notes on the Future of Food":

"And the Klaas Martens rose to tell his story. Standing six foot three, with his John Deere baseball cap askew and his overalls hiked alarmingly high, he looked

¹ Davis, E. F., & Berry, W. (2014). "Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible." Cambridge University Press.

more Gomer Pyle than agricultural statesman. I decided to get back to the kitchen, but as I turned to leave, Klaas offered the group a simple question: 'when do you start raising a child?' Just like that. It was an oddball opening to a talk about his life's work, but Klaas's humble, practical tone drew everyone's attention. I stayed for the answer.

Klaas said he'd come to the question through his interest in the Mennonite community, a group he had known over the years and greatly respected. He explained that Mennonites forbid the use of rubber tires on their farm tractors. The Fertile Dozen shook their heads in near unison. Klaas smiled, acknowledging the severity of the decree—steel-tired tractors inch along, slow as oxen.

He said one day he got up the nerve to ask a Mennonite bishop why rubber tires were forbidden. The bishop answered Klaas's question with a question: 'When do you start raising a child?' According to the bishop, Klaas told us, child rearing begins not at birth, or even conception, but one hundred years before a child is born, 'because that's when you start building the environment they're going to live in.'

Mennonites, he went on, believe that if you look at the history of tractors with rubber tires, you see failure within a generation. Rubber tires enable easy movement, and easy movement means that, inevitably, the farm will grow, which means more profit. More profit, in turn, leads to the acquisition of even more land, which usually means less crop diversity, more large machinery, and so on. Pretty soon the farmer becomes less intimate with his farm. It's that lack of intimacy that leads to ignorance, and eventually to loss."

Week 2: Discussion of Chapter 1

In preparation for this week's discussion, please read chapter 1 of "The Serviceberry." While you read, be attentive to how you feel. What are your initial reactions? What piques your interest? What sticks out as new and novel?

Scripture: Matthew 6:24–34

Suggested Additional Readings

Two excerpts from "The Gift of Good Land," the final chapter in the book "The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural" by Wendell Berry:

"The Creator's love for the Creation is mysterious precisely because it does not conform to human purposes. The wild ass and the wild lilies are loved by God for their own sake and yet they are part of a pattern that we must love because it includes us. This pattern that humans can understand well enough to respect and preserve, though they cannot "control" it or hope to understand it completely. The mysterious and the practical, the Heavenly and the earthly, are thus joined. Charity is a theological virtue and is prompted, no doubt, by a theological emotion, but it is also a practical virtue because it must be practiced. The requirements of this complex charity cannot be fulfilled by smiling in abstract beneficence on our neighbors and on the scenery. It must come to acts, which must come from skill. Real charity calls for the study of agriculture, soil husbandry, engineering, architecture, mining, transportation, the making of monuments and pictures, songs and stories. It calls not just for skills but for the study and criticism of skills, because in all of them a choice must be made: they can be used either charitably or uncharitably."

"The Divine mandate to use the world justly and charitably, then, defines every person's moral predicament as that of a steward. But this predicament is hopeless and meaningless unless it produces an appropriate discipline: stewardship. And stewardship is hopeless and meaningless unless it involves long-term courage, perseverance, devotion, and skill. This skill is not to be confused with any accomplishment or grace of spirit or of intellect. It has to do with everyday proprieties in the practical use and care of created things—with 'right livelihood.'"

Week 3: Discussion of Chapters 2–3

In preparation for this week's discussion, please read chapters 2 and 3 of "The Serviceberry." As you read, what sticks out to you? What challenges you?

In reflection on the two chapters, consider the following questions:

- Does grace beget grace?
- Do we view the world as a gift? as commodity?
- What does prosperity look like to you?
- What does it mean to be "a member in the web of reciprocity"?
- What does it mean to be a member in the body of Christ?

Scripture: John 15:1–17

Suggested Additional Readings

An excerpt from Henri Nouwen's book "Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life":

"Hospitality, therefore, means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment. It is not an educated intimidation with good books, good stories and good works, but the liberation of fearful hearts so that words can find roots and bear ample fruit. It is not a way of making our God and our way into the criteria of happiness, but the opening of an opportunity to others to find God and their way. The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances, free also to leave and follow their own vocations. Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own."

An excerpt from Norman Wirzba's book "Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating":

"To be a personal creature is thus to be one who is from the beginning shaped by and called into hospitality and fellowship. Trinitarian creation means that life is founded upon an unending sharing and receiving of each other, a perpetual 'making room' within ourselves for others to be. Rather than being a possession, life is a gift—a movement of self-offering and receiving love. [. . .] *What is the character of the world?* The world consists not of individuals but of memberships that in the joining of members to each other make life possible. Membership is not optional. The relationships we live through—most obviously and practically through our eating—constitute, inspire, nurture, and fulfill us. *What is the goal of this world and this life?* To move from membership into the deep communion of love and peace. We live currently in ways that distort and degrade, even refuse, membership, because we see relationships as a burden or threat. But when our life more fully participates in the Triune Life we also move into the domain of heaven, which is the perfection of communion."

Week 4: Discussion of Chapters 4–5

In preparation for this week's discussion, please read chapters 4 and 5 of "The Serviceberry." What does this week's reading stir up in you?

In reflection on the two chapters, consider the following questions:

- Where have you seen gift economies appear?
- What makes a gift economy tough to create and sustain?
- What are we entitled to on the Earth?

Scripture: Genesis 1:26–31

Suggested Additional Readings

"The Meaning of Dominion" by Ellen Davis:

- English version: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/the-meaning-of-dominion/>
- Spanish version: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/meaning-of-dominion-spanish/>

Excerpt from Wendell Berry's essay "[Christianity and the Survival of Creation](#)":

"If we read the Bible, keeping in mind the desirability of those two survivals—of Christianity and the Creation—we are apt to discover several things that modern Christian organizations have kept remarkably quiet about, or have paid little attention to. We will discover that we humans do not own the world or any part of it: 'The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof: the world and they that dwell therein' (Ps. 24:1). There is in our human law, undeniably, the concept and right of 'land ownership.' But this, I think, is merely an expedient to safeguard the mutuality of belonging without which there can be no lasting and conserving settlement of human communities. This right of human ownership is limited by mortality and by natural constraints upon human attention and responsibility; it quickly becomes abusive when used to justify large accumulations of 'real estate,' and perhaps for that reason such large accumulations are forbidden in the twenty-fifth chapter of Leviticus. In biblical terms, the 'landowner' is the guest and steward of God: 'the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me' (Lev. 25:23).

We will discover that God made not only the parts of Creation that we humans understand and approve, but all of it: 'all things were made by him; and without him was

not anything made that was made' John 1:3). And so, we must credit God with the making of biting and dangerous beasts, and disease-causing microorganisms. That we may disapprove of these things does not mean that God is in error, or that the creator ceded some of the work of Creation to Satan; it means that we are deficient in wholeness, harmony, and understanding—that is, we are 'fallen.'

We will discover that God found the world, as he made it, to be good; that he made it for his pleasure; and that he continues to love it and to find it worthy, despite its reduction and corruption by us. People who quote John 3:16 as an easy formula for getting to heaven neglect to see the great difficulty implied in the statement that the advent of Christ was made possible by God's love for the world—not God's love for Heaven or for the world as it might be, but for the world as it was and is. Belief in Christ is thus made dependent upon prior belief in the inherent goodness—the lovability—of the world.

We will discover that the Creation is not in any sense independent of the Creator, the result of a primal creative act long over and done with, but is the continuous, constant participation of all creatures in the being of God. Elihu said to Job that if God 'gather unto himself his spirit and his breath; All flesh shall perish together . . . ' Job 34:15). And Psalm 104 says: 'Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created.... ' Creation is God's presence in creatures. The Greek Orthodox theologian, Philip Sherrard, has written that 'Creation is nothing less than the manifestation of God's hidden being.' Thus we and all other creatures live by a sanctity that is inexpressibly intimate. To every creature the gift of life is a portion of the breath and spirit of God. As the poet, George Herbert, put it,

Thou art in small things great, not small in any.... For thou art infinite in one and all.

We will discover that, for these reasons, our destruction of nature is not just bad stewardship, or stupid economics, or a betrayal of family responsibility; it is the most horrid blasphemy. It is flinging God's gifts into his face, as of no worth beyond that assigned to them by our destruction of them. To Dante, 'despising Nature and her gifts' was a violence against God. We have no entitlement from the Bible to exterminate or permanently destroy or hold in contempt anything on the earth or in the heavens above it or in the waters beneath it. We have the right to use the gifts of Nature, but not to ruin or waste them. We have the right to use what we need, but no more, which is why the Bible forbids usury and great accumulations of property. The usurer, Dante said, 'condemns Nature. . . for he puts his hope elsewhere.'

William Blake was biblically correct, then, when he said that 'everything that lives is holy.' And Blake's great commentator, Kathleen Raine, was correct both biblically and historically when she said that 'the sense of the holiness of life is the human norm.'

The Bible leaves no doubt at all about the sanctity of the act of world-making, or of the world that was made, or of creaturely or bodily life in this world. We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy. Some people know this, and some do not. Nobody, of course, knows it all the time. But what keeps it from being far better known than it is? Why is it apparently unknown to millions of professed students of the Bible? How can modern Christianity have so solemnly folded its hands while so much of the work of God was and is being destroyed?"

Week 5: Discussion of Chapters 6–7

In preparation for this week's discussion, please read chapters 6 and 7 of "The Serviceberry." As you finished the book, what did you feel? How were you, if at all, changed by this work?

In reflection on the two chapters, consider the following questions:

- What does Community look like?
- What is the difference between abundance and scarcity?
- How can we be agents of transformation moving from tragedy to hope?

Scriptures: John 6:35–40; Acts 4:32–37

Suggested Additional Readings

Excerpts from Wendell Berry's essay "[The Unsettling of America](#)":

"The terms exploitation and nurture, on the other hand, describe a division not only between persons but also within persons. We are all to some extent the products of an exploitive society, and it would be foolish and self-defeating to pretend that we do not bear its stamp.

Let me outline as briefly as I can what seem to me the characteristics of these opposite kinds of mind. I conceive a strip-miner to be a model exploiter, and as a model nurturer I take the old-fashioned idea or ideal of a farmer. The exploiter is a specialist, an expert; the nurturer is not. The standard of the exploiter is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care. The exploiter's goal is money, profit; the nurturer's goal is health – his land's health, his own, his family's, his community's, his country's. Whereas the exploiter asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it can be made to produce, the nurturer asks a question that is much more complex and difficult: What is its carrying capacity? (That is: How much can be taken from it without diminishing it? What can it produce *dependably* for an indefinite time?) The exploiter wishes to earn as much as possible by as little work as possible; the nurturer expects, certainly, to have a decent living from his work, but his characteristic wish is to work *as well* as possible, the competence of the exploiter is in organization that of the nurturer is in order – a human order, that is, that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery. The exploiter typically serves an institution or organization; the nurturer serves land, household, community place. The exploiter thinks in terms of-numbers, quantities, 'hard facts'; the nurturer in terms of character, condition, quality, kind."

“Food is *not* a weapon. To use it as such – to foster a mentality willing to use it as such – is to prepare, in the human character and community, the destruction of the sources of food. The first casualties of the exploitive revolution are character and community. When those fundamental integrities are devalued and broken, then perhaps it is inevitable that food will be looked upon as a weapon, just as it is inevitable that the earth will be looked upon as fuel and people as numbers or machines. But character and community – that is, culture in the broadest, richest sense – constitute, just as much as nature, the source of food. Neither nature nor people alone can produce human sustenance, but only the two together, culturally wedded.”