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Sermon 4.24.2022

“Treehugger”

When my younger brother was about 4, whenever he would get upset with us, he would pack his tiny suitcase, and walk down the street in a huff to the house on the corner. He would then would sit in the tree in the front yard, and declare that henceforth he would be living in this tree. To be fair, it was a great tree. It was big and strong, and sloped down in the middle as if to create a chair just right for sitting. Many of the kids in our neighborhood, including myself and my other siblings, would spend hours in that tree. Sometimes we were planning fantastical adventures, or sometimes we were escaping, or other times we were just watching the world go by. As an adult, I now wonder about the people who lived in the house with the tree on their property. As far as I remember, none of the neighborhood kids lived in that house, but the adults never shooed us away. I wonder if it was because they also knew that tree was special? Maybe they understood how much joy it brought us and that we needed it?

I think many of us would still love to escape to the tree down the road when times are hard. How great would it be if you could pack yourself a bag and just go live in a tree when you were dealing with times of great stress or difficulty? Many people find when times are tough, the best thing for them to do is go outside and listen to the birds, hear the trees rustling in the wind, and maybe smell the fresh air and feel the sun on their faces. There is something singularly comforting about being in the natural world. But I often wonder if we recognize the importance of our connection with the natural world. Do we embrace the give and take relationship we are in with nature rather than view it as something that is there just for our enjoyment? And do we sufficiently appreciate that

the natural world does not center around us? That trees and other plants as well as animals and other organisms have their own lives that has nothing to do with us? Are we seeing the fullness of who they are, and can we greet them as a friend rather than an object or an it?

In the last few years, I've started joking with my friends and referring to, "My friends the trees." Which always feels like a silly thing to say, but also stems from a recent recognition of the role of trees in my life. I was painfully shy as a child, and often found it difficult to join in with other kids, so instead, I would retreat to my friends the trees and find solace in their strong steadiness, and I still do.

Reverend Howard Thurman had a similar experience with an old oak tree in the backyard of his childhood home. He said,

Eventually I discovered that the oak tree and I had a unique relationship. I could sit my back against its trunk, and feel the same peace that would come to me in my bed at night. I could reach down in the quiet places of my spirit, take out my bruises and my joys, unfold them, and talk about them. I could talk aloud to the oak tree and know that I was understood.¹

He felt a kinship with that tree. An understanding that our experiences with the natural world are not always transactional or one-way, but that there is a relationship present and working.

But is that a relationship that we can sometimes take for granted? Botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer makes an argument that we have a tendency to "other" the natural world through the very language we use to speak about it. She further asserts that the language of science when referring to the natural world sometimes leaves us lacking.

¹ Thurman, Howard, *With Head and Heart*, Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego, 1979.

She says, “Science is a language of distance, which reduces a being to its working parts, the language of objects.”²

Kimmerer recounts a story of trying to learn the language of her ancestors, the Pottawatomi. She had particular difficulty with the language’s tendency to have verbs for ideas and concepts that in English would undoubtedly be a noun. For example, “to be a bay” is a verb. She recounts that at first she thought this concept was ridiculous, but then something clicked. In Pottawatomie, a bay is a noun only if the water is dead, but when speaking of the concept of “to be a bay” she says, “the verb releases the water from bondage and lets it live.”³ “To be a hill, to be a sandy beach” to be a bay, “all are possible as verbs in a world where everything is alive.” She adds, “This is the language I hear in the woods, this is the language that lets us speak of what wells up all around us.” Kimmerer posits that this is the grammar of animacy. She gives the example of seeing your grandmother standing at the stove and saying, “Look it is making soup.” In English we would never refer to a loved one or member of the family as “it” because you would be robbing them of their selfhood, of their kinship to you. Accordingly, in Pottawatomi and many other indigenous languages, they use the same grammar to address the living world as they do their family. Because, as she says, “It is our family.”⁴ Kimmerer argues that in English “you’re either human or a thing.” She tells a story of a field biologist who has shifted her language in accordance with her relationships. Who will say, “Someone’s already been this way this morning” when inspecting some moose

² Wall Kimmerer, Robin, “Learning the Grammar of Animacy.” *The Colors of Nature*, edited by Alison Hawthorne Deming and Lauret Savoy, Milkweed, 2011, p. 167-177.

³ Wall Kimmerer p. 173

⁴ Wall Kimmerer p. 174

tracks, or, “Someone is in my hat,” when removing a deer fly from her hat. “Someone, not some thing” Kimmerer stresses.⁵

She adds, “The arrogance of English is its underlying assumption that the only way to be animate, to be worthy of respect and moral concern, is to be a human.”⁶ She recounts an interaction with a student who asks, “Doesn’t this mean that speaking English, thinking in English, somehow gives us permission to disrespect nature? By denying everyone else the right to be persons? Wouldn’t things be different if nothing was an it?”⁷

In her poem, “Remember”, Joy Harjo says,

“Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to them, listen to them. They are alive poems.”⁸

What if we did that? What if we chose to speak about the natural world as being a part of us? Or as plants, animals and trees as having their own histories, their own stories to tell, and their own lessons to teach us? What if we regarded them as being in kinship with us rather than something separate and removed? How might that change, not only our beliefs surrounding conservation but maybe how we view the world when we are just outside? Imagine walking in a forest made up of friends rather than inanimate objects that are only there to advantage you in some way? Jane Goodall has said she went to *learn from* the chimpanzees rather than *about* the chimpanzees.⁹ That might

⁵ Wall Kimmerer p. 175

⁶ Wall Kimmerer p. 176

⁷ Wall Kimmerer p. 175

⁸ Harjo, Joy, “Remember” *She Had Some Horses*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1983.

⁹ “Robin Wall Kimmerer: Hope is the Power of Plants and Indigenous Knowledge.” Jane Goodall: Hopecast, from 27 February 2022, https://news.janegoodall.org/2022/02/27/robin-kimmerer-hopecast-s2-ep14/?_ga=2.183968035.426223540.1648480998-32172568.1648480998#utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss.

sound like a small distinction, but I think it is an important one. Sometimes in our want to learn all about something, we forget to recognize that there is a give and take with the natural world. There is much we can learn from them if we take the time to slow down and listen and observe.

My favorite characters from the Lord of the Rings¹⁰ books were the Ents which tree-like characters that, over time, became more and more like the trees they lived amongst. They moved slowly, so much so, that the characters interacting with them, Merry and Pippin, become frustrated with their slow, deliberative conversations. But they were taking the long-view, they had been in this world much longer than Merry and Pippin and they moved with slow deliberation. That is often how I view trees. They have been here long before me and they will (hopefully) be here long after me, so I clearly have a lot to learn from them.

Mary Oliver says in her poem *When I am Among the Trees*,¹¹

Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine.

As spring is blooming around us and the weather is warming, I encourage you to take some time to find a tree and sit. I often think of the verse from Micah 4:4 "Everyone shall sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid..." That's how I feel about the strong, steadiness of trees. They encourage me to

¹⁰ Tolkien, J.R.R. "The Two Towers," HarperCollins Publishers, United Kingdom, 1954.

¹¹ Oliver, Mary, "When I am Among the Trees." *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*, Penguin Press, New York, 2017.

slow down and rest, their presence is a reminder that though the wind may bluster, the rain may fall, and even tornadoes may happen, they will be there. The natural world is always there to welcome us as a friend (although sometimes from afar) but are we recognizing that kinship?