

Luke 3:1-18

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Samantha Evans

December 12, 2021

The Honorable Harvest

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer weaves together her wisdom and knowledge as a botanist with her wisdom and knowledge as an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. I cannot recommend this book highly enough to y'all.

Every single chapter brought me a mix of immense joy, for the truth and beauty of her wisdom resonated deeply within my being, and it also brought immense sorrow, for in our current society, we are so very far from living according to this beauty and truth.

Today, I want to share with y'all one of the lessons Kimmerer calls the Honorable Harvest. It is a cautionary tale, which she shares and exists in one form or another within many indigenous cultures, and the moral of the story is what happens when one takes too much.

She shares a story of Nanabozho, who is a central character in many Anishinaabe stories. In the one about the Honorable Harvest, Heron teaches Nanabozho a new way of fishing, one that brings him an abundance of fish. So, day after day, elated, he goes to the river to catch as many fish as he possibly can. He is giddy, because he has this abundance of fish that is he is preserving so that is guaranteed to eat well throughout the entire winter.

And then one day, while he had many of these fish drying on a rack, he went down to fish for some more. But much to his dismay, he found that there were simply no more fish left to catch, for he had already caught all of them.

But he thought, well that's okay. Truth is, I already more than enough. So he went back to his home to take stock of all the drying fish he had, but when he got there he discovered that it was all gone.

For you see, the strong scent of drying fish had made it all the way to nose of Fox, who ate pretty good that day, but left nothing for Nanabozho.

Robin Wall Kimmerer shares that among Native peoples, there are many cautionary tales like this about taking too much, but she can't, and I can't either, think of a single one that exists in mainstream American culture.

In our consumerist society, we are encouraged to take more than we need. We are taught to look at the resources around us and assume that if we can, we should take them.

This is the culture we are living in. It's the dominant mindset. Kimmerer says, "Perhaps this helps to explain why we seem to be caught in a trap of overconsumption, which is as destructive to ourselves as to those we consume."¹

Any time I read a story about the John the Baptist, all I can see is a man heaven-bent on destroying systems and mentalities such as these. In this particular episode, we see him juxtaposed with the powers of the day. He is situated within the context of kings and rulers, both secular and religious. And then he's introduced as just some guy out in the wilderness going on about a baptism of repentance.

But when people heard him, they were moved by something he was saying. They were drawn to go to him. Something resonated within them and they thought that perhaps he could save them, protect them, make sure they were taken care of.

But this wasn't what John or Jesus came to do. Not exactly the way they thought, anyway.

John responded to these hungry crowds by saying, "You brood of vipers!" What do you think this is? Some easy absolution. No! John was not offering them cheap protection or justification, he was offering them a way out. A way out of the systems they were trapped in. Systems they helped maintain, even at their own expense. The tax collectors, the soldiers, they propped these systems up and exploited their own people because of the mentality they had bought into.

"Who told you to flee the wrath that was to come?" he says. The only way out of this is a complete turning. Repentance, means to turn around, 180 degrees. Upside-down, inside-out, 0 to 1 kind of turning.

The salvation John speaks of does not come about through conciliatory offerings given from a place of abundance. This salvation promised by God, communicated through John, and delivered through Christ, is built upon a complete turnabout. A 180 shift in our thinking.

¹ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. Braiding Sweetgrass (pp. 179-180). Milkweed Editions. Kindle Edition.

This salvation comes when the injustice and the oppression baked into in our system, baked into our very selves, has been uprooted. This salvation comes when we dismantle, reimagine, and rebuild our entire worldview.

Robin Wall Kimmerer shares another story about the Honorable Harvest, which I would like to share with you. She recounts:

I once met an engineering student visiting from Europe who told me excitedly about going ricing in Minnesota with his friend's Ojibwe family ... They were on the lake by dawn and all day long they poled through the rice beds, knocking the ripe seed into the canoe. "It didn't take long to collect quite a bit," he reported, "but it's not very efficient. At least half of the rice just falls in the water and they didn't seem to care. It's wasted." As a gesture of thanks to his hosts, a traditional ricing family, he offered to design a grain capture system that could be attached to the gunwales of their canoes. He sketched it out for them, showing how his technique could get 85 percent more rice. His hosts listened respectfully, then said, "Yes, we could get more that way. But it's got to seed itself for next year. And what we leave behind is not wasted. You know, we're not the only ones who like rice. Do you think the ducks would stop here if we took it all?" Our teachings tell us to never take more than half.²

The world we are living in has been created to ensure gross inequality of wealth and power. It is built on the oppression of the most vulnerable and suspicion of the other, and fundamentally, it is fueled by a false scarcity that validates, justifies, and encourages greed and the hoarding of resources, all in the name of efficiency and profit.

The way we are living right now is about ensuring that we capture as much rice as possible, and living this way is destroying our ecosystems, our societies, and our communities. We are destroying our neighbors and our very selves. Overconsumption and this scarcity mentality are causing profound harm to all of us.

And as people of faith, who are called to a baptism of repentance, we have a responsibility not to make and support conciliatory offerings and symbolic change, but to make a 180 turn in our thinking, in our systems, in our culture, in our leadership, in our priorities, and in our laws and policies.

² Kimmerer, Robin Wall. Braiding Sweetgrass (pp. 181-182). Milkweed Editions. Kindle Edition.

The Santa Clara County Human Rights Commission released this week an infographic that lays out the harrowing reality of housing in our county.

There are 4,409 students enrolled in K-12 schools who are currently homeless.

50% of African American households and 42% of Latinx households are at high risk of eviction.

427 affordable housing units have been completed since 2018...and the goal was 10,000 units by next year, 2022. And right now, if we were to provide housing for all of our extremely low-income neighbors, we would need to build 40,055 new units.

Everywhere I go, I see new housing being built. But the vast majority of it is luxury apartments that will cost well above market rate and because of our current rent control laws, that cost can and will rise and rise and rise to the property owners' and investors' hearts' delight.

There have been some serious wins in our law and policies. Back in 2016, the voters passed Measure A, which authorizes the County to allocate up to \$950 million to building more affordable housing.³

And this is huge, my friends, but there are still so many barriers to getting affordable housing built. I'm sure you've heard the term NIMBY (not in my backyard). There have been many people-led campaigns against the building of high-density housing. This is beginning to shift, however, 94% of San Jose is still zoned for single family housing.

People fear that the value of their homes will go down and the upkeep or safety of their communities will be negatively affected. Even though there have been many reports that building affordable housing is actually a common good. With it comes more parks, more cross walks, more diverse neighborhoods. These are all good things.

But not only that, for as the Honorable Harvest and John the Baptist teaches us, sometimes those who have more than enough power and wealth, if they desire to be faithful, they will have to give some up in order to make sure that others have enough.

This text ends with John talking about Jesus clearing the threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his granary and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire.

³ <https://osh.sccgov.org/housing-community-development/2016-measure-affordable-housing-bond/2016-measure-housing-bond>

And then it ends with: So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people.

Well I don't know about y'all, but that feels a little tongue in cheek to me. Which is perhaps the point. That the good news is always good news for the poor, but to those who have too much or more than they need, it doesn't always have the same ring.

But that doesn't mean that it isn't still good news. It's good news because the truth has been revealed to us, the invitation to repent has been extended, the path to God, to justice and peace and joy and home for all, has been laid out before us.

And if we chose to walk it, we will take part in dismantling the systems which oppress and abuse our most vulnerable siblings first, but ultimately, always tear at all of us in one way or another.

And so I pray that during this Advent season, as we prepare to welcome the Christ child, that we would find ways to practice the Honorable Harvest. To never take more than half and to always consider who else might like some rice.

For in doing this, we will be repenting, turning away from overconsumption and oppressive systems in our world, and turning toward the path which leads us to join in Christ's work to build a true home for all.

In the name of the Triune God, who creates, sustains, and redeems us all. Amen.