



*Rural Sunday May 7, 2017*

**Rural Life, Love, and Labor**

*Reflection on Psalm 23 and Matthew 9:35-37*

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When I was a child living in the city, a beautiful Sunday afternoon might find my family out “going for a ride in the country.”

Did anyone here ever do that?

My fond memories of this time in the late 1950s and early 1960s include driving south out of Columbus, Ohio, on U.S. 23, perhaps to visit the Adena State Memorial, the gracious stone home of onetime Governor Thomas Worthington near Chillicothe and the Appalachian foothills.

Perhaps we might have driven east or west on U.S. 40, Thomas Jefferson’s National Road that brought so many people over the Appalachian Mountains in Conestoga wagons to spread out across the Midwest, including Illinois. If we headed east, we could explore the small towns in and near the Allegheny Plateau, with the dusty antique shops my mother and I loved to haunt. If we headed west on U.S. 40 toward the flatter, richer farmland, we could visit my mother’s Adams cousins or one of her high school friends whose family owned Hollandia Gardens, a nursery with fascinating greenhouses.

If we went southeast along U.S. 33 toward Canal Winchester—again toward the Allegheny Plateau—we might go to a dairy farm that sold this absolutely delicious vanilla ice cream flowing with creamy milk and heavenly honey.

It now seems heretical for me to say so, but I liked it better than mint chocolate chip.

Sometimes, we would make a whole day trip southeast toward Athens and the Hocking Hills State Parks, romantically named Old Man's Cave, Cedar Falls, and the like. It is sacred land, surrounded then by the ravages of coal mining.

All of these trips, and many more, with three older brothers in the station wagon

—windows rolled down with no air conditioning

—far too many comments about the sights, sounds, and smells of the country landscape

—and no seatbelts—

still allowed me to survive so that rural life could become my lifelong passion.

Rural life was something romantic then. Before the vastness of sprawl had set in, even within a short drive of the city, rural areas were diverse, with different landscapes, historical sites, seasonal changes, and ways of garnering a living from the land or in small towns. Those rides in the country brought me closer to something I yearned for and still seek out, a peaceful feeling sometimes harder to find in the city.

Rural land and life demonstrate the beauty of God's Creation in the works of human hands or in nature left more or less wild and less touched. Human hands or the impacts of our lives have touched all of the land around the world by now, for better or for worse. Still, the mystery and the beauty of it all seeks to endure.

Perhaps our readings today illustrate a way to understand some of our deepest needs and feelings about rural landscapes and their inhabitants, expressed in the love of our Creator.

Psalm 23 is literally a pastoral view of rural life, with its quietly stunning images of a shepherd whose needs are fulfilled with God in nature.

Green pastures and still waters restore the soul.

Surely this is a right path, the path of God in all of its righteousness, free from fear, filled with peace. Just as importantly, but unspoken, this Psalm is not only about the shepherd. It is about the whole flock. When the shepherd feels safe, the whole flock feels safe. And perhaps really is safe, for now, at least.

Remember, God's creatures can almost always read our calm, or our fear.

Rural life in America still has its pastoral romanticism that can calm our often-turbulent lives. Not only on this Rural Sunday, but every day, we need to be especially grateful for our natural bounty and beauty—whether worked by human hands or left alone—that vitalize our physical and spiritual peace and overall well-being, part of the Covenant our Creator God has made with us.

At the same time, however, I often view the rural landscape with some alarm, including:

- the intensive use of farm land that certainly boosts our farm productivity now, but might affect our health, and certainly has serious implications for the environment—soil, water, air, and our fellow creatures—even now
- the grinding poverty on the backroads and in small towns of the U.S. and across many parts of the world.

When I consider recent and proposed domestic environmental policy changes, I grow more fearful. No one wants to be a Chicken Little, But I would, if time permitted, argue strenuously that the new direction of the country's environmental policies is dangerous and rejects ethical and spiritual understandings of the way we must treat God's sacred Creation that is entrusted to our hands.

Our earth is in the house of the Creator. At our best, we help set the table in our everyday kindnesses of working, eating, and drinking, and perhaps sharing stories of thankfulness for the goodness that comes to us from rural places around the world, including our own. Sometimes, we don't do such a good job at the labor or the love for each other and the land.

Jesus suggests the crux of our problem as stewards of rural life—in all its forms—in Matthew: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.”

Today, in an industrialized rural world, there is a tinge of irony in this statement. Farm mechanization sent so many people off the farms and into other rural and urban jobs. Our country towns and small cities have suffered from this phenomenon for well over a century, with population loss all but a constant in many parts of rural America, including Western Illinois. We almost always have plentiful harvests, with few human laborers.

So, how much do we, a diminishing and generally aging rural people, appreciate our rural landscape and the wide variety of life it supports, not only on farms?

What do those of us who do not live on farms, have to offer to rural life?

We live in a rural area here, but so many, possibly even ourselves, are basically divorced from direct connections with rural life. We are surrounded by farms, fields, grasslands, and forests, the wonderful stuff of God's loving and living Creation. But how close are we really to the gift of our abundant rural life?

Why, 2,000-or-so years ago, did Jesus travel across the countryside making statements about plentiful harvests and scarce labor? Do we see the problem in our life today?

Matthew tells us that Jesus went to the towns and villages, teaching, healing, and proclaiming the Good News. Even before His death, Jesus shared the redemptive work of God on earth, calling disciples, healing the sick and needy, sowing the seed of the Spirit, building the church that we now call Christian.

He promised a plentiful harvest then. But Jesus, the Son of God, needs workers. He still needs us to carry on His work begun so long ago.

The ministry of Jesus was and is empathetic, full of love. He had compassion for the crowds “because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

He wanted to lead the people then—and us now—to green pastures and still waters, a place where all of us can live without fear, with peace.

He wants us to help in that labor, offering frightened souls, including ourselves, a place at home around the human and divine table of life and love.

When I was a child living in the city, going for a ride in the country was a fun thing to do, perhaps a luxury, even with three older brothers who could inflict fear in many different forms. That did not deter me. I found my calling.

Rural life, whatever criticisms I may offer, whatever fears I may have, is my evolving vocation, all, in one way or another, part of trying to understand the goodness of God's Creation. Even in a rapidly changing world where the human touch can be all too heavy, there remains solace and grace in loving work for and with rural places and people.

The harvest remains great. Indeed, we are few laborers, as much in need of overcoming our own fears as we are in need of answering the call to Christian love and labor, whatever the risks, whatever the rewards.

Loving labor toward a better rural life, endowed with the blessings of our Creator God, begins with us, the people of this church, in the city of Canton, in rural Fulton County—wherever we are called to teach, heal, and proclaim the Good News with our deepest love and understanding that overcomes fear and offers a way to the peace of a bountiful harvest near still waters.