

## Region As Rabbi?

The second in a series on Watershed Discipleship toddwynward@gmail.com

Watershed discipleship, when lived out in daily practice, defies our culture of conspicuous consumption and converts us to Sabbath living. Sabbath living, writes Ched Myers, is the antithesis of conspicuous consumption; rather, it is about gift and limits: “the grace of receiving that which the Creator gives, and the responsibility not to take too much, nor to mistake the gift for a possession.”

Is this what Jesus meant when he said the meek shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5)? The ancient Hebrew for meek is *anav*—meaning the humble, those who do not grasp and hoard, those who do not think too highly of their own importance and needs. Is Jesus saying these are the ones who can coexist and live within the blessing of creation, while the haughty are unable?

Through the lens of watershed discipleship, another of Jesus’ well-known sayings takes on new meaning: “Consider the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:25).” Jesus seems to be saying examine how the lilies thrive where they are planted; model your life upon what they teach you. Be a student of God’s creation that thrives in your watershed. See your region as your rabbi.

Seeing your watershed differently leads to acting in your watershed differently. As I learn to re-inhabit the place I live, I’m seeing my region as my rabbi in three specific ways.

**Watershed as Sustainer, Teacher, and Corrector.** Try on this idea: All of my food needs, my watershed can provide. Sounds crazy? It does to me. I mean, I know most of humanity for all of history were sustained by their watersheds, but those were primitive people, primitive times, right? What about my Italian parmesan and my Florida orange juice? What about my olive oil and coconut milk?

Can all the items my family loves be sourced in my bioregion? Of course not. But this line of inquiry leads me to pursue two questions. First: How much of what we desire can be sourced from our watershed? In the high deserts of New Mexico where I live, the answer is bleak. For my family to obtain what we like eating, I’d have to drive hundreds of miles before I found the first orange tree or avocado orchard. This leads me to a second question: To what extent can we become creatures who thrive within the limits of our bioregion? In other words, to what extent can we adapt?

Wait—me, adapt my wants to my watershed? As an entitled American consumer steeped in the values of Empire, this suggestion is not only absurd; it is scandalous. I’m trained to buy whatever I want whenever I want, without a second thought to planetary consequences. To be asked to limit my lifestyle, to curb my appetites, fills a part of me with indignant fury and fear. I’m an American, dammit! I want to roar.

Yet my watershed, my rabbi, corrects my spoiled behavior. Just like in any master-apprentice relationship, my rabbi corrects me as part of my training, just as a master refines and re-forms an immature or out-of-shape disciple. This is a kind of conversion, *metanoia*, the transformation of worldview and habits that early followers of Jesus

underwent. They were taught to walk away from the self-advancing values of Empire and instead care for the poor, love their neighbors, and anticipate a modest bounty of daily bread. These age-old precepts were central to the teachings of Jesus; they are equally central to the teachings of my watershed. They cause me to look anew at the two troubling and transformative questions raised earlier: What can my watershed provide? How can I adapt my wants?

A few years ago, some neighbors and I decided to have some fun with these questions. Instead of bemoaning the arid sparseness of northern New Mexico's high country, we began to explore what kinds of food sources could thrive in our dry mountain environment. At the same time, with a perverse joy, we began to break from Empire-based thinking, and explore if we could learn to be happy with what our watershed provided. My ranching friend, Daniel, has managed small herds to see which livestock could thrive with minimal inputs while being maximally useful to us. What has he found? Goats and sheep, we want to keep. They adapt well to our bioregion, are fairly easy to manage, and provide milk, cheese, meat, kefir and yogurt. But yaks? Not so much. After five years of experimentation and hard work, Daniel concluded that they're substantially more trouble than they're worth. As for vegetables and fruits, we've found success with plenty of the usual fare—carrots, onions, beets, tomatoes, zucchini, apples, plums, greens galore. Also, under the guidance of my mentor gardener Seth, I've adapted my habits and taste buds. I now appreciate hand-ground cornmeal, new types of beans, high-altitude quinoa, plum preserves, wild amaranth and lamb's quarters, sorrel, kale chips, broccoli leaves, and new varieties of squash and potatoes..

I'm finding that many of my current life practices—habits formed unconsciously growing up within a culture of excess--have no part in the life of a watershed disciple, nor of a serious Jesus follower. Even as I slowly transform, however, a large part of me wants to remain an unconscious and self-absorbed consumer, a well-trained cog of Empire. Are you feeling it too? We both know it's easier to remain a spoiled child instead of becoming a responsible adult. Yet in this "watershed" moment of history—with our existence in the balance--it's clear our watersheds are calling us to do something old-fashioned: repent, turn around. To exist within the limits of our watersheds, we'll need to release our attitudes of entitlement and retract our rude-boy appetites. To what extent can we thrive within the bounty—and the boundaries—of our bioregions? This is a question I'll be living into for quite a while.