

Sample “Syllabus at a Glance”:

T218/T218-B: Spirituality and Ecology: The Sabbath Poetry of Wendell Berry

Bethany Theological Seminary

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Course Description:

As a novelist, poet, environmentalist, and farmer, Wendell Berry is well known for his scathing critiques of the industrial economy and corporate agriculture, as well as his support for local economies and ecologically sustainable farming. What is much less well known is his four decade long spiritual practice of writing poetry in light of his experience of Sabbath rest. This course will read Wendell Berry’s Sabbath poetry and consider his Sabbath practice in order to glimpse the spiritual heart of his agricultural and intellectual endeavors. We will primarily focus on the Sabbath poetry collections, with additional readings from his essays, interviews, short stories, and non-Sabbath poems to help contextualize his poetry and theology. Key themes to be explored will include: holiness, embodiedness, wholeness, membership, love, affection, economy, destruction, virtue, and hope.

Course Objectives:

1. Read and interpret texts carefully, critically, and generously.
2. Explore broad theological and religious themes through a non-discursive format and across the disciplines of theology, ecology, agriculture, poetry, and spiritual practice.
3. Integrate theological insights clearly in writing.

Required Texts:

Berry, Wendell. *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*. edited by Norman Wirzba. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2002.

Berry, Wendell. *Remembering: A Novel*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2008.

Berry, Wendell. *This Day: Collected & New Sabbath Poems*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2013.

Berry, Wendell. *The Art of Loading Brush: New Agrarian Writings*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2017.

Recommended Texts:

Berry, Wendell. *A Small Porch: Sabbath Poems 2014 and 2015 Together with the Presence of Nature in the Natural World*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2016.

Poems Available Elsewhere:

Sabbaths 2013 III-XX: Sewanee Review, Volume 122, Number 4, Fall 2014, pp. 552-562 [Moodle]

Some of Sabbaths 2016: <https://www.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/1429-sabbaths>

Sabbath VIII, 2016: <https://modernfarmer.com/2017/10/wendell-berry-not-prophet/> (scroll)

Or, at the end of *The Art of Loading Brush*

Sabbaths 2017 – six are found in “Sabbath Poems 2017” in *Front Porch Republic* vol. 3.1

Celebrating Wendell Berry in Music: [Lilly Library eResource or on Spotify or on Youtube]

Berry, Wendell, *New Collected Poems* – non-Sabbath poems.

Course Overview:

Each week we will read a selection of Berry's essays, poetry, and occasional short stories that are curated on a particular theme. The weekly themes are as follows:

Week One: Who is Wendell Berry?

Week Two: Biblical and Theological Background to the Concept of Sabbath

Week Three: Poetry, Attention, and Imagination

Week Four: Perceiving the Holiness of Creation & the Presence of God

Week Five: Delighting in Creatures and Embodiment

Week Six: The Anti-Sabbath Economy: Laments over Ecological Destruction

Week Seven: Re-Envisioning Economy: A Sabbath Economy of Gift

Week Eight: Remembering and Re-Membering the Membership

Week Nine: Sabbath-Worthy Work

Week Ten: Dame Nature as Vicar, Teacher, and Example

Week Eleven: Cultivating Peace and Hope in the Face of Violence and War

Week Twelve: Cultivating Love, Affection, and Gratitude

Week Thirteen: Having Hope?

Assignments:

Poetry Readings: Every week we will begin our class with a bit of poetry reading. Each student is required to sign up to read **three** poems for the class over the course of the semester. In preparation for this exercise, please practice reading the poem(s) in advance (note: these do not need to be memorized).

Poem Memorization Exercise: The goal of this exercise is for you to dwell with and in a poem for the course of the semester. Choose a poem at the beginning of the semester – skim *This Day*, *Sabbaths 2013*, and *A Small Porch* to find one that speaks to you. At the end of the semester, you will record yourself reciting the poem from memory. You may re-record as many times as you wish, uploading only the version you are satisfied with. These poems may be posted for your peers to watch and listen too as well.

Sabbath Practice Journal: Over the course of this semester you are to go on a walk at least once a week and observe what you see. Like Berry, pay attention to the details, go slow, savor the place you are in or lament its brokenness. Please keep a Sabbath Practice Journal to record your thoughts, prayers, art, and observations. Write at least one entry a week, a minimum of 13 entries by the end of the semester. Scan your journal (if hand written) and submit it through Moodle

Three Papers: Three short papers (6-7pgs each) will be due over the course of the semester on three assigned topics.

1. Sabbath Paper: Paper one is due week five.
2. Economy Paper: Paper two is due week ten.
3. Work, Virtue, and Spirituality Paper: Paper three is due exam week.