

Thought of Wendell Berry Theo 6332  
North Park Theological Seminary  
Summer Intensive June 2-7, 2025

Instructor

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Course Description

Wendell Berry is one of our greatest cultural, political and spiritual critics. His multifaceted work includes novels, short stories, poetry, and perhaps the most important essays of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. He addresses the challenges of community, agriculture, politics, education, family, marriage, work and worship in a culture given to waste, acquisitiveness, and ignorance. For the purposes of this course his critique of the church and Christianity is particularly pertinent. Throughout his work he manifests a love/hate relationship with the church and the Christian tradition that is, nevertheless, hopeful and constructive. During our time together we will explore the major themes of Berry's work. These themes intersect in his essays, fiction, and poetry. I trust we will engage in rich conversations about the corporate and personal challenges of his work.

Objectives

1. To introduce students to the important themes, virtues, and moral commitments of Wendell Berry's work through reading, discussing, and researching his key essays, stories, and poetry. (MDiv LO #1)
2. To integrate his work through conversation, reading, writing, and research into the work and ministry for which the students are preparing. (MDiv LO #3)
3. To challenge the wasteful and destructive ways of living we are all subject to in the west and to raise very personal questions regarding our personal and ecclesial ways of living. (MDiv LO #4, #5)
4. To engage Berry's critique of the church and explore what a "Berrian church" might entail. (MDiv LO #2)

**ACADEMIC HONESTY<sup>1</sup>**

In keeping with our Christian heritage and commitment, North Park University is committed to the highest possible ethical and moral standards. Just as we will constantly strive to live up to these high standards, we expect our students to do the same. To that end, cheating of any sort will not be tolerated. Students who are discovered cheating will receive a failing

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<sup>1</sup> Institutional policies. Syllabus includes standard text for policies on academic honesty, accommodations, and Title IX.

grade on the assignment and are subject to discipline up to and including failure of a course and expulsion. Our definition of cheating includes but is not limited to:

1. Plagiarism – the use of another’s work as one’s own without giving credit to the individual. This includes using materials from the internet.
2. Copying another’s answers on an examination.
3. Deliberately allowing another to copy one’s answers or work.
4. Signing an attendance roster for another who is not present.
5. Use of ChatGPT or other AI composition software to impersonate individual assignments.

For additional information, see the Seminary Academic Catalog.

## **ACCOMMODATIONS**

Your experience in this class is important to me. North Park is committed to creating inclusive and accessible learning environments consistent with federal and state law. If you have already established your accommodations, please share your accommodation letter with me so we can discuss how your accommodations will be implemented in this course. If you have not yet established services and have a temporary health condition or permanent disability that requires accommodations, please email the Disability Access Specialist or contact by phone (773-244-5737). Student Engagement facilitates the interactive process that establishes reasonable accommodations.

## **TITLE IX & EQUITY**

In accordance with Title IX, North Park employees who become aware of any incident of discrimination, harassment or retaliation based on sex, gender, including pregnancy or related medical conditions, and other protected classes are required by law to notify North Park University's Title IX & Equity Team by submitting a report [here](#). The Title IX Coordinator will respond and manage concerns about students. The Senior Director of Human Resources and Deputy Title IX Coordinator will respond and manage concerns about employees. More information can be obtained here: [NPU's Discrimination and Harassment Policy](#).

## **INCOMPLETE GRADES**

If, due to extenuating circumstances (specifically, pregnancy, illness, personal and family issues, military assignment, etc.), a student anticipates they will be unable to complete

course work within the allotted time, that student may request a grade of incomplete from the course instructor before the last week of class clearly stating the reason(s) for this request. Overscheduling and/or lack of self-discipline are not considered extenuating circumstances. If the request is timely and meets the criteria, student and instructor will submit the incomplete grade form and the grade for that class will be listed as “I” until the last day of the following semester. If coursework is not submitted by the last day of the following semester the listing of “I” will automatically be changed to “F.” For the full policy, see the Seminary Academic Catalog.

#### Required Texts

Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed.

Norman Wirzba, Counterpoint, 2003 (ACP)

Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers*, Shoemaker and Hoard, 2003 (CP)

Wendell Berry, *The Way of Ignorance*, Shoemaker and Hoard, 2005 (TWI)

Wendell Berry, *That Distant Land*, Counterpoint, 2003 (TDL)

Wendell Berry, *New Collected Poems*, Counterpoint, 2012 (NCP)

Note: Many of these texts may be found inexpensively as used books online.

#### Assessments/Requirements

Grading follows the scale found in the Student Academic Catalog. Students are required to do the following:

1. To read all the assignments selected from the required texts. The required essays, stories, and poems are noted for each day. Students will keep a record of their reading. Twenty percent (20%) of the grade is for the reading. Students are strongly encouraged to begin their reading well before class since reading the assignments for the next day's work will be difficult.
2. Students will lead a discussion for the class of one of the essays, short stories, or poems that interests them. The students are asked to discuss how this piece of work demonstrates the key concerns of Wendell Berry and how it applies to her or his ministry and life. (20%)
3. Students will be asked to read one additional novel, collection of essays, or collections of short stories after the completion of the class and prepare a final paper demonstrating their understanding how Berry's key themes are played out in the work. They are also to demonstrate how this work and Berry's themes impact the life of the church and their ministry. (40%)
4. Students are required to attend each class and participate in the discussions with their colleagues and instructor. (20%)

#### Additional Novels and Short Story Collections for paper:

##### *Novels*

*Jayber Crow*, Counterpoint, 2001.

*Hannah Coulter*, Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004  
*A Place on Earth*, 1967/2001 (revised)  
*Remembering*, Counterpoint, 2008

*Short Story Collections*

*A Place in Time*, Counterpoint, 2012  
*How it Went*, Counterpoint, 2022

Additional Essays for paper:

*The Unsettling of America*, Counterpoint, 2015/1977 (Foundational work)  
*The Hidden Wound*, Counterpoint, 2010, Second Edition (1969) This is Berry's important book on race and the south.  
*The Gift of Good Land*, Counterpoint, 2009 (1981)  
*The Art of Loading Brush*, Counterpoint, 2017  
*Our Only World*, Counterpoint, 2015

Monday, June 2: Introducing Wendell Berry

Morning: The Agrarian World of Wendell Berry; A discussion of "Watch With Me"; Introducing the poetry of Wendell Berry

Essays: ACP: "A Native Hill", "The Unsettling of America", CP: "The Agrarian Standard", "Still Standing"

Story; TDL "Watch With Me"—Note: How do Berry's key themes interact? How does this speak to pastoral ministry?"

Poetry: NCP "The Dream", "To Think of the Life of A Man", "Window Poems", "The Man Born to Farming", "The Satisfactions of the Mad Farmer."

Afternoon: Wendell Berry and Community—the "Membership"

Discussion of Wendell Berry's Notion of a Coherent Community

Discussion: How is the church a coherent community in Berry's sense, or not.

Discussion of "Pray Without Ceasing", considering again what this says about ministry

Essays: ACP "Sex Economy, Freedom and Community", "People, Land, and Community"

Stories: "Pray Without Ceasing", "It Wasn't Me", "Fidelity"

Poetry: NCP: "The Handing Down," "The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer", "Meditations on the Spring Rain," "At a Country Funeral", "Elegy", "The Mad Farmer, Flying the Flag of the Rough Branch, Secedes from the Union."

Tuesday June 3

Men, Women, and Marriage and Christianity and the Church

Morning: Men, Women and Marriage: We will focus on the important programmatic essay “The Body and the Earth” and the marriages represented in the stories.

Essays: ACP: “The Body and the Earth”, “Men and Women in Search of Common Ground”, “Feminism, the Body and the Machine.”

Stories: TDL: “A Consent”, “Nearly to the Fair”, “The Solemn Boy”, “A Jonquil for Mary Penn”, “The Wild Birds”

Poetry: NCP: “Marriage”, “The Country of Marriage”, “Envoy”, “A Marriage, An Elegy”, “The Mad Farmer’s Love Song”, “An Anniversary”, “Ripening”, “The Way of Pain”, “To Tanya at Christmas”, “A Marriage Song” “Duality”, Burley Coulter’s Song”.

Afternoon: Christianity and the Church: We will explore Berry’s rather complicated relationship with Christianity and the Church and consider how theology and the biblical text shapes his moral universe. Here the two stories are especially apt and profoundly moving.

Essays: “The Gift of Good Land”, “Christianity and the Survival of Creation”; TWI: “The Burden of the Gospels”

Stories: TDL “Pray Without Ceasing”, APT “A Desirable Woman”

Poetry: “Canticle”, “The Birth (Near Port William)”, “At A Country Funeral”, “To the Holy Spirit”, “The Way of Pain”, “Voices Late at Night”, “While Attending the Annual Convocation of the Cause Theorists and Bigbangists at the Local Provincial University, the Mad Farmer Intercedes from the Back Row”.

Wednesday June 4

Morning: The Two Economies: An exploration of the agrarian and industrial economies and their impacts on individuals and communities—including the church.

Essays: ACP: “Economy and Pleasure”, “Two Economies”, “The Whole Horse”, “People, Land and Community”, TWI: “Quantity vs. Form”, “Renewing Husbandry”.

Stories: TDL: “The Discovery of Kentucky”

Poetry: NCP “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front”, “The Mad Farmer Manifesto: The First Amendment”, “The Reassurer”, “In Art Rowanberry’s Barn”, “Some Further Words”.

Afternoon: Individual in Community: The Membership. This is perhaps the heart of Wendell Berry’s thought the joys and dangers, the growth and dissolution of the coherent community—the “membership.” This speaks profoundly to the church.

Essays: ACP: “Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community”, “People, Land, and Community”; TWI: “Imagination in Place”.

Stories: TDL: “It Wasn’t Me”, “Fidelity”, and we will take a look back at “Pray Without Ceasing”.

Poetry: NCP: "The Handing Down", "The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer", "Meditation on the Spring Rain", "At a Country Funeral", "Elegy", "The Mad Farmer: Flying the Flag of the Rough Branch, Secedes from the Union."

Thursday June 5

Today we will look at the key Berrian concept of "health"—health of both body, land, and community and how we have and continue to endanger all three and what we might do to overcome our failures.

Morning: Land and Health

Essays: ACP: "Solving for Pattern", "The Use of Energy", "The Pleasures of Eating", CP "A Long Job, To Late to Quit"; TWI: "Agriculture from the Roots Up."

Stories: "The Boundary".

Poetry: NCP: "The Wild", "The Broken Ground", "The Meadow", "The Peace of Wild Things", "Grace", "The Stones", "Enriching the Earth", "Air and Fire", "The Mad Farmer Revolution", "The Mad Famer in the City",

Afternoon: Body and Health: Berry's critique of the healthcare industry and the failures of science.

Essays: ACP: "Health and Membership", CP: "Twelve Paragraphs on Biotechnology", "Stupidity in Concentration: TWI: "Quantity vs. Form", "The Way of Ignorance", and review "The Body and the Earth",

Stories: TDL: Review "Fidelity", "The Inheritors".

Poetry: NCP: "Three Elegiac Poems", "At a Country Funeral", "Testament", "Requiem", "Elegy", "Epitaph", "Seventy Years".

Friday June 6: How Should we Live? What does Berry have to say about ministry?

Morning: What does Wendell Berry want from us? Or rather, what does the land, the people, our community want from us as individuals and the church?

Essays: ACP: "Think Little", CP: "Let the Farm Judge"; TWI: "Rugged Individualism", "We have Begun", "Local Knowledge in an Age of Information".

Stories: TDL: "Thicker than Liquor", "The Lost Bet".

Poetry: NCP: "The Guest", "The Design of the House: Ideal and Hard Time", "The Morning News", "Air and Fire", "A Standing Ground", "Awake at Night", "From the Crest", "Rising", "How to Be a Poet".

Afternoon: Questions for the Church

1. What does Berry's Notion of community or "membership" say to the church?
2. What does Berry's understanding of nurture and care say to the church?

3. What does Berry's understanding of Women, Men, and Marriage have to say to the church?
4. What does Berry's understanding of the industrial vs. the agrarian economy suggest to the church about its mission?
5. How does Berry's critique of Christianity and the Christian story help the church?

The students will be asked to prepare to discuss these as a way of bringing our work over the week together and to especially focus on one of the questions.

### **Some Hints on Reading Wendell Berry**

1. Berry is recognized as one of the best essayists of our time. His essays are varied. There are some that are long, rich, challenging and bordering on academic. Others began their lives as speeches or magazine articles and are much less dense and challenging and often comic. I encourage you, especially on the longer pieces (e.g. "The Body and the Earth"), to read deliberately and take notes of the flow of the argument Berry is making. There are key themes in Berry that he weaves together throughout his essays: community, wholeness, health, coherence, good work, stewardship, frugality, responsibility, "membership", attention—and many more. There are things he consistently criticizes: waste, ignorance, arrogance, the industrial economy, separation of body and spirit, inattention, cruelty, and many more. Note how these things interact as well. What is written in his essays is often illustrated in his stories. The more you read, the more connections you will make, especially to the life of the church and your ministry.
2. Reading the poetry: It will help you in reading Berry's poetry, and all poetry, if you read *according to the punctuation and not according to line*. Berry rarely does a rhyming couplet so reading by the line will confuse you rather than help you. Follow the punctuation. Also, read it out loud if you are not clear. Berry's poetry is thankfully clear and its meaning often plain. He is writing for his readers and not for critics. Here too, the more you read, the more it will make sense.
3. Finally, there are many more collections of essays, collections of stories, and poetry. I have done nothing with the whole class of what Berry calls "Sabbath Poems". These are poems he wrote walking around his farm on Sundays while his family was in church! Some of quite wonderful, but I have having you buy too much to begin with.