

**Sermon on the Amount**  
by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.  
Niantic Community Church  
October 8, 2023

Scripture: Leviticus 27:30; Malachi 3:8-10; Matthew 23:23

As I gathered thoughts on this morning's Stewardship message, I knew I would be preaching on Indigenous People's Sunday. This reminded me of an amazing book that I know at least some of you have read – *Braiding Sweetgrass*, by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Robin is not only an Indigenous American, but a botanist and author who serves as the Director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. I found my copy of *Braiding Sweetgrass* and opened it to a chapter entitled, "Maple Sugar Moon." I thought it might provide some fodder for my Stewardship message.

Just like the first time I read this chapter, I found myself captivated by Ms. Kimmerer's eloquence, wisdom, and quiet humor. The subject of "Maple Sugar Moon" is not Stewardship, *per se*. Yet it speaks to a way of life that is vitally aware both of the extraordinariness of the gifts God gives us, and our responsibility with respect to these gifts. As such, it offers a perspective on Stewardship that draws not from a book of the Bible, but the Book of Creation. It reminds us of the sacred responsibilities of both giving and receiving.

Initially, I tried merely to work parts of "Maple Sugar Moon" into the Stewardship sermon. About halfway through, I realized that every word I deleted from "Maple Sugar Moon" in order to make room for my own thoughts took away from the beauty and majesty that had so powerfully drawn me to this chapter. So, I am yielding the floor to Ms. Kimmerer this morning.

While some of you may be disappointed not to hear "my" thoughts on Stewardship (at least before hearing from Ms. Kimmerer), rest assured that her thoughts *are* my thoughts, only stated in a way that is beyond the ability of this white, Anglo Christian preacher to write. However, while my hand did not create what you are about to *hear*, my hands did create what you are about to *eat*. At Fellowship Hour, you will find a giant batch of Maple Cookies, made with real maple syrup, inspired by "Maple Sugar Moon," that I baked yesterday just for you!

**A Selection from "Maple Sugar Moon"** (from *Braiding Sweetgrass*, by Robin Wall Kimmerer, Milkweed Editions, 2020)

*When Nanabozho, the Anishinaabe Original Man, our teacher, part man, part manido, walked through the world, he took note of who was flourishing and who was not, who was mindful of the Original Instructions and who was not. He was dismayed when he came upon villages where the gardens were not being tended, where the fishnets were not repaired and the children were not being taught the way to live. Instead of seeing piles of firewood and caches of corn, he found the people lying beneath maple trees with their mouths wide open, catching the thick sweet syrup of the generous trees. They had become lazy and took for granted the gifts of the Creator. They did not do their ceremonies or care for one another. He knew his responsibility, so he went to the river and dipped up many buckets of water. He poured the water straight into the maple trees to dilute the syrup. Today, maple sap flows like a*

*stream of water with only a trace of sweetness to remind the people both of possibility and of responsibility. And so it is that it takes forty gallons of sap to make a gallon of syrup.*

*Plink.* On an afternoon in March when the late winter sun is starting to strengthen and moving north a degree or so each day, the sap runs strong. *Plink.* The yard of our old farmhouse in Fabius, New York, is graced with seven Maples, big ones, planted almost two hundred years ago to shade the house. The largest tree is as wide at its base as our picnic table is long.

When we first moved here, my daughters reveled in rooting through the loft above the old stable, a space full of the flotsam of almost two centuries of families before us. One day I found them playing with an entire village of little metal pup tents set up under the trees. “They’re going camping,” they said of their various dolls and stuffed animals, who were peeking out from under their shelter. The loft was full of such “tents” that fit over old-time sap buckets to keep out the rain and snow during sugaring season. When the girls discovered what these little tents were for, of course they wanted to make maple syrup. We scrubbed out the mouse droppings and readied the buckets for spring.

During that first winter, I read up on the whole process. We had buckets and covers, but no spiles – the spouts you need to drive into the tree to allow the sap out. But we live in Maple Nation and a nearby hardware store carried all things maple sugaring. *All things:* molds for forming maple sugar leaves, evaporators of every size, miles of rubber tubing, hydrometers, kettles, filters, and jars – none of which I could afford. But tucked away in the back, they had old-fashioned spiles, which hardly anyone wants anymore. I got a whole box for 75 cents each.

Sugaring has changed over the years. Gone are the days of emptying buckets and sledging barrels of sap through the snowy woods. In many sugaring operations, plastic tubing runs right from the trees to the sugar house. But there are still purists out there who cherish the *plink* of sap into a metal bucket, and that requires a spile. One end is formed into a tube like a drinking straw, which you tap into a hole drilled in the tree. The tube then opens into a trough about four inches long. And at the base there is a handy hook on which to hang the bucket. I bought a big clean garbage can to store the sap, and we were ready. I didn’t think we would need all that storage space, but better to be prepared.

In a climate where winter lasts six months, we always search assiduously for signs of spring, but never more eagerly than after we decided to make syrup. The girls ask every day, “Can we start yet?” But our beginning was entirely determined by the season. For the sap to run, you need a combination of warm days and freezing nights. *Warm* is a relative term, of course, 35 to 42 degrees so that the sun thaws the trunk and starts the flow of sap inside. We watch the calendar and the thermometer, and Larkin asks, “How do the trees know its time if they can’t see the thermometer?” Indeed, how does a being without eyes or nose or nerves of any kind know what to do and when to do it? There are not even leaves out to detect the sun; every bit of the tree except the buds is swathed in thick, dead bark. And yet the trees are not fooled by a midwinter thaw.

The fact is, Maples have a far more sophisticated system for detecting spring than we do.

There are photosensors by the hundreds in every single bud packed with light-absorbing pigments called phytochromes. Their job is to take the measure of light every day. Tightly furled, covered in red brown scales, each bud holds an embryonic copy of a maple branch, and each bud wants desperately to someday be a full-fledged branch, leaves rustling in the wind and soaking up sun. But if the buds come out too soon, they'll be killed by freezing. Too late and they'll miss the spring. So the buds keep the calendar. But those baby buds need energy for their growth into branches – like all newborns, they are hungry.

We who lack such sophisticated sensors look for other signs. When hollows appear in the snow around the tree bases, I start to think it's tapping time. The dark bark absorbs the growing heat of the sun and then radiates it back to slowly melt the snow that has laying there all winter. When those circles of bare ground appear, that's when the first drops of sap will plop onto your head from a broken branch in the canopy.

And so with drill in hand, we circle our trees searching out just the right spot, three feet up, on a smooth face. Lo and behold, there are scars of past taps, long healed over, made by whoever had left those sap buckets in our loft. We don't know their names or their faces, but our fingers rest right where theirs had been, and we know what they too were doing one morning in April long ago. And we know what they had on their pancakes. Our stories are linked in this run of sap; our trees knew them as they know us today.

The spiles begin to drip almost as soon as we tap them into place. The first drops splat onto the bottom of the bucket. The girls slide the tented covers on, which make the sound echo even more. Trees of this diameter could accept six taps without damage, but we don't want to be greedy and only place three. By the time we're done setting them up, the first bucket is already singing a different tune. The *plink* of another drop into the half inch of sap. All day long they change pitch as the buckets fill like water glasses of different pitch. *Plink, ploink, plonk* – the tin buckets and their tented tops reverberate with every drop and the yard is singing. This is spring music as surely as the cardinal's insistent whistle.

My girls watch in fascination. Each drop is as clear as water, but somehow thicker, catching the light and hanging for a second at the end of the spile, growing invitingly into a larger and larger drop. The girls stretch out their tongues and slurp with a look of bliss, and unaccountably I am moved to tears. It reminds me of when I alone fed them. Now, on sturdy young legs, they are nursed by a maple – as close as they can come to being suckled by Mother Earth.

All day long the buckets fill and by evening they're brimming. The girls and I haul all twenty-one to the big garbage can and pour until it is almost full. I had no idea there would be so much. The girls rehang the buckets while I build the fire. Our evaporator is just my old canning kettle set on an oven rack spanning stacks of cinder blocks scavenged from the barn. It takes a long time to heat up a kettle of sap and the girls lose interest pretty quickly. I am in and out of the house keeping fires going in both places. When I tuck them into bed that night, they're full of anticipation of syrup by morning.

I set up a lawn chair on the packed-down snow next to the fire, feeding it constantly to keep up a good boil in the now-freezing night. Steam billows from the pot covering and uncovering the moon in the dry, cold sky.

I taste the sap as it boils down, and with every passing hour it is discernibly sweeter, but the yield from this four-gallon kettle will be nothing more than a skin of syrup on the bottom of the pan, scarcely enough for one pancake. So as it boils down, I add more fresh sap from the garbage can, hoping to have just one cup of syrup by morning. I add wood, and wrap myself back in blankets, dozing until I can add more logs or sap.

I don't know what time I woke, but I was cold and stiff in my lawn chair and the fire was burnt to embers, leaving the sap lukewarm. Beaten, I went inside to bed. When I returned the morning, I found the sap in the garbage can frozen hard. As I got the fire going again, I remembered something I had heard about how our ancestors made maple sugar. The ice on the surface was pure water, so I cracked it and threw it on the ground like a broken window.

People of the Maple Nation made sugar long before they possessed trade kettles for boiling. Instead, they collected sap in birch bark pales and poured it into long troughs hollowed from basswood trees. The large surface area and shallow depth of the troughs was ideal for ice formation. Every morning, ice was removed, leaving a more concentrated sugar solution behind. The concentrated solution could then be boiled to sugar with far less energy required. The freezing nights did the work of many cords of firewood, a reminder of elegant connections: maple sap runs at the one time of year when this method is possible.

Wooden evaporating dishes were placed on flat stones over the coals of a fire that burned night and day. In the old times, families would all move together to “sugar camp,” where firewood and equipment had been stored the year before. Grandmothers and the youngest babies would be pulled on toboggans through the softening snow so that all could attend to the process – it took all the knowledge and all the arms to make sugar. Most of the time was spent stirring, good storytelling time when folks from the dispersed winter camps came together. But there were also pulses of furious activity: when the syrup reached just the right consistency, it was beaten so that it would solidify in the desired way into soft cakes, hard candy, and granulated sugar. The women stored it in birch bark boxes called *makaks*, sewn tight with spruce root. Given birch bark's natural antifungal preservatives, the sugars would keep for years.

It is said that our people learned to make sugar from the squirrels. In late winter, the hungry time, when caches of nuts are depleted, squirrels take to the tree tops and gnaw on the branches of sugar maples. Scraping the bark allows sap to exude from the twig, and the squirrels drink it. But the real goods come the next morning, when they follow the same circuit they made the day before, licking up the sugar crystals that formed on the bark overnight. Freezing temperatures caused the water in the sap to sublime leaving a sweet crystalline crust like rock candy behind enough to tide them over through the hungriest time of year.

Our people call this time the Maple Sugar Moon. *Zizibaskwet Giizis*. The month before is known as the Hard Crust on Snow Moon. People living a subsistence lifestyle also know it as the

Hunger Moon, when stored food has dwindled and game is scarce. But the maples carried the people through, provided food just when they needed it most. They had to trust that Mother Earth would find a way to feed them even in the depths of winter. But mothers are like that. In return, ceremonies of thanksgiving are held at the start of the sap run.

The Maples each year carry out their part of the Original Instructions, to care for the people. But they care for their own survival at the same time. The buds that sense the incipient turn of the season are hungry. For shoots that are only one millimeter long to become full-fledged leaves, they need food. So when the buds sense spring, they send a hormonal signal down the trunk to the roots, a wake-up call, telegraphed from the light world to the underworld. The hormone triggers the formation of amylase, the enzyme responsible for cleaving large molecules of starch stored in the roots into small molecules of sugar. When the concentration of sugar in the roots begins to grow, it creates an osmotic gradient that draws water in from the soil. Dissolved in this water from the spring wet earth, the sugar streams upward as rising sap to feed the buds. It takes a lot of sugar to feed people and buds, so the tree uses its sapwood, the xylem, as the conduit. Sugar transport is usually restricted to the thin layer of phloem tissue under the bark. But in spring, before there are leaves to make their own sugar, the need is so great that xylem is called into duty as well. At no other time of year does sugar move this way, only now when it's needed. Sugar flows upstream for a few weeks in the spring, but when the buds break and leaves emerge, they start making sugar on their own and the sapwood returns to its work as the water conduit.

Because the mature leaves make more sugar than they can use right away, the sugar stream starts to flow in the opposite direction from leaves back to roots, through the phloem. And so the roots, which feed the buds, are now fed in return by the leaves all summer long. The sugar is converted back to starch, stored in the original "root cellar." The syrup we pour over pancakes on a winter morning is summer sunshine flowing in golden streams to pool on our plates.

Night after night I stayed up tending the fire, boiling our little kettle of sap. All day long the *plink, plink plink* of sap filled the buckets and the girls and I gathered them after school to pour into the collecting can. The trees gave sap much faster than I could boil it, so we bought another garbage can to hold the excess. And then another. Eventually we pulled the spiles from the trees to stop the flow and avoid wasting the sugars. The end result was terrible bronchitis from sleeping in a lawn chair in the driveway in March and three quarts of syrup, a little bit gray with wood ash.

When my daughters remember our sugaring adventure now, they roll their eyes in groan, "That was so much work." They remember hauling branches to feed the fire and slopping sap on their jackets as they carried heavy buckets. They tease me about being a wretched mother who wove their connection to the land through forced labor. They were awfully little to be doing the work of a sugaring crew. But they also remember the wonder of drinking sap straight from the tree. Sap, but not syrup. Nanabozho made certain that the work would never be too easy. His teachings remind us that one half of the truth is that the earth endows us with great gifts, the other half is that the gift is not enough. The responsibility does not lie within Maples

alone, the other half belongs to us; we participate in its transformation. It is our work and our gratitude that distills the sweetness.

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Why give your scarce resources of time, talent, and treasure to your church? It takes forty gallons of maple sap to produce just one scant gallon of syrup. Each part of the Maple plays an integral role to create its abundance, much like those who have come before us have worked hard and faithfully to create a church that we can call home. Yet, just as Maple sap doesn't become maple syrup all by itself, so we are called to do our part. Equipment must be bought and maintained. Long hours of labor are required, sometimes extending late into the night. Yet when we give our time, talent, and treasure to condense the "sap" of the Holy Spirit into the sweet "syrup" of Christian fellowship, social justice, and the healing a broken world, we carry out God's Original Instructions, just as the Maple Tree and those who harvest its sap carry out their part. What is produced from our efforts not only provides life-giving nourishment, but life in abundance, both for us and for the world.

And now, to bring together the message of this whole morning, here is a little of the sweet syrup you have helped produce lately ...

**A Letter to Niantic Community Church**, written by Chelsea Duarte:

Dear NCC,

I haven't been coming here for a year yet, but I would call this my spiritual home. I originally came here to offer thanks and gratitude to God for carrying us through chemo and giving us a remission declaration back in February. I was ready to put my head down and start giving back. Some might say that it was divine intervention that brought me here because shortly after, we found out about the relapse. I don't know if I will ever be able to forget the moment that we saw the scans and the words "consistent with disease progression." How many times will God let your world crumble to pieces in such a short time? It's a question I've posed to Him quite frequently over the past few months. In desperation, I asked for prayers on a prayer request card.

It was just words...written on a paper...spoken to a congregation....that turned into actions and eventually, an entire movement. A few weeks ago, Eric mentioned that there were people in this congregation that felt that they weren't doing enough to serve. Instantly, my mind was blown. I would just love to see by show of hands, who has supported us in some way? Who has prayed for us? Who has given us hugs, little trinkets that they thought would make Tiago happy or donated gift cards or therapy equipment? Who has donated their time and energy to our cause? Who has told others about a little boy at church who needs a bone marrow transplant? Who signed up, or attempted to sign up to be our donor? Who has volunteered at events, bought a shirt or sent along opportunities for potential campaign events? Who has volunteered to be in nursery, even though my screaming banshee (Luna) would likely be there?

It's astonishing to me that anybody would ever think that this community is anything but proactive, and I am just one. We are one family in an enormously loving congregation that has been carried almost single handedly by the members of this church for nearly 6 months. We are one family, but to this one family, you have been our lifeline. Because of YOU, more than 300 people have been inspired to sign up to donate their bone marrow in honor of Tiago. Let me rephrase that: because of YOU, more than 300 potential matches will be made, that's more than 300 lives saved.

But again, we are just one. We are one small facet of this multidimensional church. We are a tiny piece in a 1000 piece puzzle that makes up the love poured out by this community.

A while ago, I called Kaleigh over to ask her some big questions that I had been struggling with in my faith. Unfortunately, she didn't have the answers to the universe or an answer to my big "why." I was frustrated and struggling. I had felt God's presence so tangibly before, but felt that He had stayed quiet this time around. I think the hard truth is that I am so desperate for a very specific answer that I was telling God how He should answer me; "Dear God, where are You? If You could answer by sending a lightning bolt that cures cancer, that would be great. Thanks!" It took some coaxing and a few sermons based on love to realize that I had been surrounded by Him all along: He gave me this church. He truly surrounded us in love through this church and beyond and made sure that we were and are loved and held. Don't get me wrong, I'd still love a lightning strike to answer all my prayers, but I think realistically, it will look like a match willing to give, a new immune system and a community to lean on while we recover. Through all of this, all I can do is offer my sincerest thanks and maybe a mirror to remind you of the good work that you already do.