

## “Trustees of the Land”

### ‘On Generosity’

(prayer from “Inscribing the Text”, by W. Brueggemann, p. 4-5)

On our own, we conclude: that there is not enough to go around, we are going to run short of money, of love, of grades, of publications, of sex, of beer, of members, of years, of life: we should seize the day, seize the goods, seize our neighbor’s goods because there is not enough to go around. And in the midst of our perceived deficit; You come, You come giving bread in the wilderness; You come giving children at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour; You come giving homes to exiles; You come giving futures to the shut-down; You come giving Easter joy to the dead; You come-fleshed in Jesus. And we watch while the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed; the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor dance and sing. We watch and we take food we did not grow and life we did not invent and future that is gift and gift and gift and families and neighbors who sustain us when we do not deserve it. It dawns on us—late rather than soon—that “you give food in due season, you open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.” By your giving, break our cycles of imagined scarcity, override our presumed deficits; quiet our anxieties of lack; transform our perceptual field to see the abundance . . . mercy upon mercy, blessing upon blessing. Sing your generosity deep into our lives that your muchness may expose our false lack that endlessly receiving, we may endlessly give, so that the world may be made Easter new, without greedy lack, but only wonder; without coercive need, but only love; without destructive greed, but only praise; without aggression and invasiveness-all things Easter new-all around us, toward us and by us all things Easter new. Finish your creation . . . in wonder, love, and praise. Amen.

But Naboth said to Ahab, “The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.”

1 Kings 21:3

In today’s old, old, story of faith, a Jewish vineyard keeper named Naboth, challenged the secular view of land ownership. It all began when the evil Jewish king Ahab covetously looked down from his palace and wanting to own the vineyard, did what entitled people of privilege and power naturally do: he went to Naboth and offered him a deal that a sensible man could not refuse. But Naboth said ‘NO, not now, not ever.’ It wasn’t the ‘no’ that sent the king into the downward spiral of sickness, weakness, and depression. Rather, it was the ‘because’ that did it. Naboth said I won’t sell because, “The Lord forbid that I give you my ancestral inheritance, But how could the king, who had long since given up listening to the Word of God as spoken through the prophets, have known that when Naboth prayed he heard the voice of God saying back to him:

The fish in the torrent	Does not belong to you
The bird in the air	Does not belong to you.
The bee in the blossom	Does not belong to you.
The dew in the dawn	Does not belong to you.
The dark of night	Does not belong to you.
The red of the feather	Does not belong to you.
The soaking rain	Does not belong to you.
The lapping wave	Does not belong to you.
The tight-lipped horse	Does not belong to you.
The lofty height	Does not belong to you.
The level plain	Does not belong to you.
Nothing on the Earth	
Or in the Sky	Belongs to you.

(Brent Hodgson in Cherish the Earth, p. 63)

The king misjudged Naboth. He didn’t know that the vineyard keeper considered himself trustee rather than owner of his Maker’s land and, therefore was not permitted to either trade nor sell it off. Hebrew scholar Walter Brueggemann explained: Naboth’s refusal ‘represents traditional covenantal language in

which the land is not owned in a way that permits its disposal. It is "inheritance," which is held in trust from generation to generation, beginning in gift and continuing so, and land management is concerned with preservation and enhancement of the gift for the coming generation. Naboth is responsible for the land, but is not in control over it. It is the case not that the land belongs to him but that he belongs to the land. Naboth perceives himself and the land in a covenantal relation, with the relation between the two having a history of fidelity which did not begin with him and will not end with him. Thus the term "inheritance" insists that the land be understood as a dimension of (YHWH's) family history (The Land, p. 93).

In this story of political intrigue it's easy to sort out the good guys from the bad. King Ahab and Jezebel were the greedy bad guys who took more than they needed. They were violators of procedural justice who used their power to manipulate the judicial system to get what they wanted. They were murderers who got off scott free. They eliminated the man who stood in their way without standing trial for the blood that was on their hands.

The good guys were Naboth and the Elijah. As a trustee of YHWH's land, Naboth was concerned with both the preservation and the enhancement of the gift for future generations. He turned his attention to what The Creator needed to both protect the land and to guard its vital place in the interdependent web of life. He did all he could to sustain the integrity of the land so that the Ever-Creating Spirit could bring forth abundant life from the earth. He did not manage YHWH's land for short term self gain, but rather tended to the land in order to get on board with God's purpose of sharing earth's abundance with the vulnerable, oppressed, poor, and marginalized. Elijah was God's prophet who spoke truth to power. Elijah spoke YHWH's Word of judgment against the sin of the king. And because Ahab killed and took possession of the land he went down in the Jewish history as the most evil of

kings and the king forever linked to the demise of the monarchy in Israel.

An old, old, story that echoes into today.

Our ownership of land, the using of it for self gain, and the lack of concern for those harmed along the way still contributes to procedure injustices in our legal system; still weakens the bonds of neighborly love; and still contributes to the demise of God's good earth. We have all heard it said (and have said it ourselves): 'It's my land and nobody can tell me what to do with it!' As taxpayers and keepers of our property it's hard to see ourselves as anything but owners of our deeded land. It's even harder to change our secular view from owner to faith's view of trustee of God's land. Deep down in our bones we know we cannot take this leap of faith on our own steam but must rely on help from the Holy Spirit. This week She spoke to me through this 'Pollinator' article: 'On the wall of my office is a quote from the French Catholic priest Abbe Pierre who was a champion for the homeless and one of the most beloved public figures in France until his death in 2007. The quote reads, "We must always keep both eyes open, one eye on the world's suffering so that we can fight against it, and the other on its wondrous beauty so that we can give thanks for it." I cannot think of any other quote that I have personally found so helpful when engaging in the work of environmental justice. If I keep any eye closed to the beauty around me, I don't think I would be able to sustain myself in the ministry. In addition to the natural beauty of God's creation, I also find beauty in the resilient and committed spirits of others seeking a better world. As we continue in the work of love, may we each see with both eyes open'. (UCC Pollinator, June 2016)

This week, another way I felt the Holy Spirit turning me ever so slightly from 'owner' into 'trustee' of God's land was through the heartfelt prayer, 'On Generosity'. Theologian Walter Brueggemann prayed it after meditating on today's Old Testament covenantal story about God's Justice and Love. As we hear it together, may the Holy Spirit open the eyes of our hearts and bless us with mind transforming faith.