

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost: Matthew 21:33-46

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So, I've been trying to come up with a good name for my land. "The Land" is an accurate enough descriptor, and if I say "The Land" out loud, it gets my dogs' tails to wagging and they rush to the door like it's been time for a good, 10-acre romp. But "The Land" isn't terribly evocative. Land is everywhere, but that piece of land is different because I'm responsible for it. Something like Walden Pond probably wasn't a great name before Thoreau went and sat by it, but now, that's a pretty good one. Narnia, Oz, Middle Earth? They're magical places, but none of them quite fit. Westeros is probably too messy, and anyway, that one brings up too many sour memories. But something evocative and enticing, that's what I'm looking for.

Did you know the internet is full of suggestions on how to come up with a name for your property? There's even a podcast on how to do this with considerations ranging from what's appropriate to what's legal, and how available the domain name is in case you ever want to sell something from your well-named land. Puns are good. I like puns, and most folks seem to tolerate them fairly well. Here's a few good names I found rummaging through Google: Fifty Shades of Hay, *Greenish Acres*, and my personal favorite, Back Acres Stone Quarry (That's "acres" spelled like the unit of measurement. *Back Acres...get it?*). There's even a guide to generate a Biblical name, if you're so inclined, but much as I do love scripture, I'm hesitant to name that plot of land Eden or Heaven or even The Divine Dude Ranch. That just feels hokey and a tad presumptuous. Most likely, I'll end up on something playful, maybe something poetic if the Muses strike that day, or maybe it'll just keep on being The Land, seeing as how my dogs already know that one.

All that to say, the other day I was out on Hillside Homeland -- just trying out a name, here, I don't think I've settled on that one -- I was out on that yellowing hillside admiring my big stretch of rocks when I realized what a privilege it is to have a sanctuary like that. Before the many stresses of 2020, it was already becoming a great escape, a place where I could go and hide from the concerns of the world for a time, connect to nothing electronic, and look for God in the beauty of creation. And now, it's about the only place I can go to that hasn't been touched by the weirdness of the year. There's no need for a mask, no stranger to run into on the sidewalk, no timeline for reopening. It's just there, same as it always was, waiting for someone to come and traipse around it's rolling hills. Well, that's not entirely true. There are changes up there, nearly every day. Milkweed pods shift from weird, fleshy things to hard, cracked shells full of down feathers. Deer show up alone one day and trailed by little fawns with spots on the next. Water in the stream rises or falls depending on the week's rainfall or whatever's happening miles upstream. Some yaywho from Arkansas dropped a shed on the hilltop, another dug a fire pit, and their pal from Tennessee cuts a driveway with his tire tracks just about every afternoon. But the kinds of changes are different somehow; they mostly have nothing to do with the will of man. It's not that God moves more out there, it's that there are fewer excuses not to see God.

I can't help but move on that land without feeling my spirit lifted higher. It's not exactly the Land of Milk and Honey, more like the Land of Milkweed and Invasive Honeysuckle, but it still feels holy. When I line up the stones some of your strong backs have helped to heft, I feel like Joshua, who called on all the Tribes of Israel to set up a sacred ring of stones to remember entering the Promised Land. Or like Peter, whose name means "Stone" and who feels perhaps the least ready to be the foundation for the rest of the church to pile on. Or like Jacob, who built the altar at Bethel and put a stack of stones down just about any time he encountered God. The stones I'm saving and, soon, building with, they've been around as long as any of the ones those fellas lifted. I like to imagine their stories, older than the pages of our sacred books but part of them, too. Pulling a stone too big to lift off the back of a truck and watching it fall, I'm reminded of the unnamed woman who freed her people when she dropped a millstone on the evil king Abimelech. You better believe I get my steel-toed boots out of the way a little quicker when that story comes to mind! But over and over, I keep hearing Jesus's

words from Matthew: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” Most of what I’m using comes from fields or someone’s garden. I’ve broken up some massive blocks and I’ve pinched gravel out of sand. And yes, I even have some stones that a builder friend of mine doesn’t have any use for. This stone wall, one day, will hold my land in place, hold me in place, root me down with something older than I can comprehend, and hold me to the earth. It’s like these stones keep the holiness of the land itself from floating away, and maybe they keep my soul from floating away, too.

That line about the rejected cornerstone that Jesus says, it comes from Psalm 118, a song of a victory won by an underdog. Whoever the world and its ways would’ve expected to triumph didn’t while the scrappy author of the song did. And whoever that scrappy author was, they’ve included a beautiful and incredibly trying stanza. It goes like this, “It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in princes.” I get some kind of reminder of that when I’m out at the Homeshed -- trying that name on, too. I like the playful reference to the only building on site, but it won’t last once something more substantial lands nearby. Homeshed, hmm. Anyway, I get that reminder that true refuge is in God when I’m out there, turning stones in my hands. I suspect that’d be a good reminder any time, but lately, especially after the week, month, year?, years we’ve had, it’s a reminder I cannot live without.

See, nearly everything I do in town harkens back to something about the princes of this world and the claims mortals make on each other. I can’t pick up my phone without pulling up the news, checking to see how many people have died since the last time I picked up my phone. I can’t open a book without thinking about how idealistic and hopeful the setting is compared to now OR how hauntingly familiar an imagined apocalypse feels. I can’t put on a mask without wondering who’s going to challenge my decision to do so, I can’t denounce atrocities in clear contradiction with scripture without someone saying preachers should get out of politics and stay in their lane. I can’t hear a story in the Bible without thinking of a politician, a headline, or a tweet. And y’all, that’s a problem. If scripture could be distilled down into one thing (ok, two, if we follow Jesus’s model), it’s this: Love God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind. And while you’re at it, love your neighbor. When we give into the compulsive political thinking nearly every form of media that touches our hands demands of us, when we give into that, we begin to think that we can make all things right if we just vote hard enough. And by all means, please, vote. Please. But know that if our trust is only on princes and mortals, we’ve got things upside-down. These old stories, these psalms, these familiar and sometimes hard sayings in scripture, they’re meant to remind us that there is no aspect of our lives that can’t connect us to God. The way my mind, at least, has been connecting everything to politics lately, is a sign that I’ve gotten something out of whack. And I don’t think I’m alone on this one. I suspect a number of y’all have gotten things all twisted around, too, ‘cause that’s what the world always tries to do to us people of faith. The world wants us to think, no, to believe that the only way to win is on its terms.

But God is bigger than the world’s terms. God’s bigger than party, God’s older than stone, and God’s stronger than whatever forces we’re facing. No matter who wins come November, we’re still going to have work to do. That vineyard of wild grapes Isaiah’s hollering about, that’s his land, his home, his Promised Land that’s gotten it’s priorities all flipped around by an ancient version of our same struggle. That vineyard was meant to be the Kingdom of God, but the ways of the world soured it. God expected to find justice there, but instead found bloodshed and a cry. Calls for the same echo here, in our Land. This country is also a vineyard turned wild, with justice far from sight for too many, with bloodshed too common, with cries unheard by princes. But I promise you, God hears those cries, God sees that blood spilt, and God feels the injustice, deeply. Trust in that and love the one who hears you. Because this world, all too often, and all too callously, doesn’t.

Now, I still don’t know what I’m gonna name my land. But when I go there, I do know that I’m filled with a new spirit. The world gets turned back over. Like a stone in God’s hands, it’s put right again, at least for

a time. Coming back to big city life, that clarity of priorities oriented back to God's Kingdom holds me down to the earth, and when I pick up my phone again, I can make sense of at least the first few headlines, remembering to put my trust in God and not whichever mortal I like that day. And I'm not just saying this to show off.

There's a whole 20 acres of land out there for y'all to walk around on, too. It's set aside for holiness, set aside for you to connect with God, set aside for you to reorient all your heart, all your mind, and all your soul. The next time you feel the heat rising up your neck and into your eardrums because of some horrible thing someone said, go there. Or if you can't make the trip out there, go out your backdoor and look at the ground there. Find a stone and turn it in your hands, or kick it with the rubber of your boot, or just admire it in its place. Whatever you do, connect to that ancient piece of Creation that's been in the ground far longer than any of your concerns, and know that you and it and all this world, belong first to God.