

September 14, 2014 Land (Sunday School Theme)

In several of John Steinbeck's novels the land plays a prominent role. If you were forced to read *The Grapes of Wrath* you'll remember the displaced Oklahoma family just longed to resettle on a bit of land they could call their own. In *Of Mice and Men* you meet the short smart guy George and his big and strong as an ox, but severely mentally retarded companion, Lennie. Their dreams too are to have a bit of land. Lennie daydreams constantly about what it will be like when they are no longer migrant workers, but land owners. He will have rabbits, and he will love them and pet them. Lennie always concluded his daydreams with, "And we'll live off the fatta the lan'."

In Steinbeck's novels the characters felt that to have land meant to have a place to call home, to put down roots. And the land would provide for them: food and a little income.

Steinbeck's books were written decades ago, and many of them during the Great Depression when millions of people were displaced and economic conditions made it hard for them to recover. Even though we do not live in an agrarian community I

think we all echo the longing for a bit of land that Steinbeck's characters also longed for. Maybe we don't want to raise all our own food, or want to own a great estate, but we want a place we can control, a place where no one can kick us out, a place that we can shape to our liking.

Of course not everyone has that - apartments, trailer parks, condominium complexes and the like all provide a place to stay, but not land that it owned. Those of us who own land, even if it is only a little bit, should consider ourselves lucky.

Land is such a fundamental part of our existence that we seldom think about it. Most of our food comes from the land. Land can be used to build cities and roads, factories and restaurants. There are lush fields and forests, stark mountain peaks, barren deserts, and swampy areas where land and water are hard to distinguish.

We can change land. We can clear forests to plant crops. Or, we can plant trees in fields. We can dam rivers, dig mines, build things or even move hills and mountains. God has given us

the power to change the land to suit our purposes. It's hard work, but it's doable. We can impact God's creative work.

Of course it makes sense to be a good steward of the land. Pollute it and you can ruin it. Remove all the vegetation on a hillside and it will erode. Our power to make changes comes with responsibility and can lead to our own peril.

The Bible has some interesting theological thoughts about the ground. Our first reading from Genesis has two parts - the curses God makes to Adam and Eve for their rebellion, and the Cain and Able story. In the Adam and Eve portion God says the ground is cursed because of Adam's transgression. I think this could easily lead to all sorts of bizarre conclusions and I'm not going to push them too far. You quickly wonder why God is cursing or punishing the innocent land for a problem it did not cause. That's not the point. The point is that the Bible sees a connection between humanity's plight in life, the ground, and God's purposes.

On Ash Wednesday we hear the words of Genesis 3:19,
"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

While our bodies certainly aren't land, there is no doubt that the molecules that make up our bodies are of the earth. The only difference between earth and our bodies is the life that God breathes into them. Again, Genesis reminds us that life, dirt and God's purposes are all wrapped together.

But this will not be so always. If we move to our second reading from Romans 5 we meet Adam again; we also meet Jesus. We discover that Jesus is a new Adam, and he will remove the curses that God called upon the ground. But this time the curses are being reversed.

Once again, if we think about the details of this too much we will run into trouble, but overall Paul and Genesis wants us to recognize something. Humanity's brokenness from God is not just a human/God thing. We do not live as broken humans in the midst of an otherwise perfect world. The fall involves all of creation - humans, land, animals, plants, etc. All of the created order of things is enmeshed in brokenness. And all of the created order is enmeshed in God's plans for salvation.

Several places in the Bible hint at that. Perhaps the most concise is Colossians 1:19-20 which reads, "For in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven..." And in Romans 8 we find Paul writing, "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

Once again, if we dwell on the details and all the possibilities our thoughts will run us into a ditch. But if we stick to the main idea we realize that God's redemptive plans go for more than just humans.

Dr. Richard Carlson, my one seminary professor puts it this way: God plans to redeem everything, absolutely everything, including every last blade of grass that your lawnmower cuts.

It is a silly thought, and one we can't understand, (At least I can't. Maybe you do.) but it speaks to how big God's salvation plans are.

As we consider the land today we are not talking about something other than ourselves. We are talking about another part of God's creation which engages our lives in many ways. And ultimately God will save it too. What it will all look like I cannot say. It is probably one of those many things that human brains cannot comprehend, but it is God's plans.

Thanks be to God for the land which provides for us, makes us up, gives us a home, and partners with us in life. May we always be good stewards of God's good gifts. Amen