

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

*Rev. Ross Smillie*

June 23, 2019

## **Disposable Land, Disposable People**

*Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden. – 1 Kings 21*

In the Pacific Ocean, as far away from inhabited land as it is possible to get on this planet, somewhere between California and Hawaii, winds and currents push floating plastic garbage into a massive swirling gyre. It has come to be known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, and it is enormous, three times the size of France. But, it is only the largest of five great accumulations of plastic – one in each major ocean.

Plastic has invaded every corner of the planet, and it's harming every form of life. Whales and turtles die from eating plastic bags and tiny microplastics are now present in the water we drink and the food we eat. By 2050, it's estimated there will be more plastic in our oceans than fish.

So it was good news last week when the federal government announced plans to ban single-use plastics – straws and bags, packaging and other products that are designed to be used once and thrown away. We assume once we have thrown it away that it will disappear. But it doesn't.

Plastic is only one example of the many ways in which our society has become a disposable society. We have become so comfortable with disposing of things that we think of just about everything as disposable, from diapers to watersheds to people. Some of the most horrifying crimes in recent Alberta history have involved murders of people whom the murderer found inconvenient, and simply decided to dispose of them. When Sears Canada shut down, employees who had worked there for years were not only laid off, but their pension fund was seized; I imagine many of them felt they were being treated like trash. When cases of missing and murdered indigenous women are not thoroughly investigated, they are treated as disposable. When we pollute (or risk polluting) fragile ecosystems, we treat them as disposable. What kind of world do we live in that we treat the extinction of species so casually – a recent UN report predicts that 1,000,000 of the world's

estimated 6,000,000 species are in danger of extinction – and it barely made the news. What kind of world treats so much, as disposable?

It appears to be a world in which everything and everyone is at risk of being treated as disposable. But is that God's world? Or is it a world in rebellion against everything God hopes and dreams for? The Bible story we read this morning challenges the idea of a disposable world.

King Ahab wants a vineyard close to his palace, and he makes the owner, Naboth, what seems like a fair offer, either its fair value in money or an equivalent piece of property elsewhere. Ahab sounds very modern, because for us, too, land is a commodity, which can be bought and sold, acquired and disposed of at the whim of its owner. For us, and for Ahab, land is disposable. In philosophical terms, land and nature are of instrumental value. They are valuable primarily for their value to us, for what we can get out of them, and when they are no longer valuable, they are unimportant and can be disposed of. That is a very common attitude in the modern world.

But Naboth has a very different understanding of the meaning of land. His understanding of land is much closer to that of First Nations people. In fact, at one church meeting, when asked what Native people see as the problem, what they wanted, a native leader stood up and said, “read 1 Kings 21, the story of Naboth's vineyard. What happened to Naboth, happened to us.”

Naboth's understanding of land is also one that is closer to the emerging ecological consciousness, which sees land as having intrinsic rather than purely instrumental value. For Naboth, the land is not just a commodity that can be bought and sold. It is his ancestral home. The land does not belong to him so much as he belongs to the land. Land cannot be reduced to a cash value, nor can one piece of land simply be exchanged for another. There is a deeper connection that that.

As Chief Seattle said in his famous speech in 1854 (actually this is from the fictionalized account): “The earth does not belong to people; people belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth. Humans did not weave the web of life. We are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.” The Scriptures are

deeply sympathetic to Naboth's viewpoint, that land is not just a commodity to be bought and sold and traded, but something much more.

For King Ahab, land is a commodity, it can be bought and sold, disposed of and reclaimed. But it is not a very big step from treating land as a commodity, something disposable, to treating people that way, and after Ahab sulks for a while about Naboth's refusal to sell his land, his wife Jezebel decides that Naboth is disposable. She takes matters into her own hands, and arranges for Naboth to be brought up on trumped-up charges and executed. For Jezebel and for Ahab, Naboth is an inconvenience to their plans, to be dealt with accordingly. And by silencing him, they think they have silenced this strange alternative view, that land and people are not commodities, to be held on to when they are convenient and disposed of when they no longer serve our own narrowly defined purposes.

But Ahab and Jezebel have failed to account for the God of Israel, or for God's prophets. Naboth can no longer speak, but the prophet Elijah can and does. He pronounces judgement on Ahab and Jezebel, and on their way of thinking. That means that we need to take heed, for their doom will come on us when we follow their way rather than God's way. For God, neither land nor people are commodities to be disposed of as we see fit, however much our society encourages us to see them that way.

However, no matter how badly we fail, God does not abandon us. Even when we treat people and the earth as disposable, God does not dispose of us.

This morning we are celebrating the achievements of graduates that are part of our wider community. Education is an important part of a good life, and we cannot be good people without becoming good at something. But it is perfectly possible to be so good at something that you become successful, rich, even powerful, and yet to utterly fail as a human being. As in the case of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, success and power can rot your soul. Even the pursuit of goodness can be corrupted, when goodness becomes a source of pride and a means of looking down on others. Real goodness, however, is not an accomplishment, but a continual struggle, in which we never leave behind the awareness that there is much we need to be forgiven. Real goodness is not a destination that we arrive at, where we can rest content. Real goodness is a journey, on which there is always another step to

be taken, another hill to be climbed, another river to ford. And on that journey, your awareness of your own failings and limitations, your own need for abundant forgiveness, is the fuel that drives you forward into great love. For it is in love, generosity and grace that real goodness and real greatness is found.

**Let us Pray:** Gracious God, we confess that we are sometimes like King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, who treat land as a disposable commodity, who treat people as as inconvenient and embarrassing. Help us to see the ways in which we are part of the web of life, belonging to the land as much as it to us. Help us to follow the way of Jesus, so that in being forgiven much, we can also learn to love much. Amen.