

Nature, Community, and Faithful Living

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The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: ‘When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vineyard: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you; for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food.

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of seven years gives forty-nine years, Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and everyone of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you; you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not cheat one another. When you buy from your neighbor, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop years. If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you. You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God.

You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely. The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live on it securely. Should you ask, What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop? I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating from the old crop; until the ninth year, when its produce comes in, you shall eat the old. The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.

If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next of kin shall come and redeem what the next of kin has sold. If the person has no one to redeem it, but then prospers and finds sufficient means to do so, the years since its sale shall be computed and the

difference shall be refunded to the person to whom it was sold, and the property shall be returned. But if there is not sufficient means to recover it, what was sold shall remain with the purchaser until the year of jubilee; in the jubilee it shall be released, and the property shall be returned. (Leviticus 25:1-28)

Resistance is an important theme in the Christian tradition. From the prophets of the Hebrew Bible to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, believers are counseled, cajoled, and even coerced into thinking again, into questioning what has come to seem as unquestionable in our habits and practices and values and in those of the world around us. We are asked to consider and to orient our actions *against* such concepts as idolatry and sinful self-interest and *for* such concepts as openness to and regard for the other, along with self-sacrifice—concepts that others may find strange or even ridiculous. Thus we are asked to resist much of the logic of the world around us—both as an act of faith and as a way of loving the world that God has created. In different times and places, such resistance for the sake of being faithful has taken different forms. Today, in a civilization largely characterized by careless disregard for nature, by wasteful and thoughtless and individualist consumption, and by the widespread belief in money and material goods as the measure of the person, one of the forms that resistance takes is in the active and careful stewardship of all of God's creation. This stewardship is one way not only to care for our natural habitat, of which we are after all a part, but also a way to begin to live in relationship with others in ways not determined by socio-economic status but by values that promote community. As such, resistance is faithfulness to the tasks God calls us to.

I center my reflection on Leviticus 25 because it brings together themes that are basic to the human relationship with nature, to the human community, and to life lived in faithfulness. The three themes are the land, human relationships and, task.

- What is the value of land? How should that value be established?
- What are proper relationships between people?
- What is our proper human relationship to the land?
- What should we do about divisions of wealth internal to the community?
- Are we going to care for everyone in our community? How? What about the outsiders?
- Why are we here, what is our purpose?

While we all ask versions of these questions, we do not often ask them in a fundamental kind of way, at least to ourselves—probably because we are born into an already constructed society. As we grow up, our society and the communities within it are givens; its arrangements and the justifications for those arrangements are largely taken for granted; and, especially if we are comfortable and included, we come to take them for granted ourselves.

These questions, however, are elements of classical political thought. And, here in Leviticus 25, they are fundamental elements of self-organization for a people poised on the edge of a new land. They are questions about how best the Jews were to organize themselves once they reached

the promised land. This chapter in Leviticus is part of a larger whole that reflects the thought about and the anticipation of how the new society was to be arranged. In it are a number of categories that are clues to what these ancient peoples thought essential in their social organization. Thus, for example, we find a preoccupation with distinguishing between the clean and the unclean, the common and the holy, the insider and (literally) the outsider—including those outside the walls and outside the religion.

The major question posed here, the question that orients all the other questions, is the question which, if posed directly, might be put like this: How are we going to relate to the land that sustains us, to each other inside the community, and to those outside the community, in a way that reflects faithfully the over-riding and unforgettable fact that God is God and that God is our “reason for being”?

These passages are a partial answer to this very basic question. And they reflect strongly the insight that indeed human social organization is a demonstration of basic values and commitments. Thus, human social organization—political and economic life—can and should be intentionally arranged so that it reflects the faithfulness of these people of God to their understanding that God is God.

Since this North American society, as a society, is not organized by this basic understanding but rather by market forces, political parties, interest groups, social conflicts, and so forth, this question—How shall we organize ourselves to reflect our faithfulness to God who is God?—comes to us as unrealistic or quaint. The answers to the question turn our western, wasteful, market-oriented sensibilities upside down and provide a healthy occasion for self-reflection.

The Land. After decades of reading these passages, *when* I finally read them through “green” eyes, I discovered, to my surprise, the over-riding role of the land itself. Consider verses 2-4: “When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord; you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard.”

In this familiar passage clearly the land has its own integrity. It has integrity both in terms of being God’s creation and through its ongoing relationship to God. In the seventh year, the land needs to rest. It is a sabbath to the lord—not to people and their need to rest. Here, the first jubilee, the archetype of all jubilees, is that of the land. While the land will provide for the people of Israel, it has its own independent reason for being—its own worth in its belongingness to God, independent of its usefulness for humans.

The centrality of God’s relationship with the land makes the human relationship with the land secondary. It is the independent relationship that the land has with God and the independent relationship that the people of Israel have with God—these two separate relationships determine the relationship that the people of Israel will have to the land. God reminds Moses that the land

belongs to God, that the people are also in relationship with God, and that the people are on the land only in the fleeting fashion of a stranger or a sojourner. “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but alienms and tenants” (25:23). Since the relationship with God is the determinant of the human relationship with the land, God insists that obedience to God is the way to ensure the land’s productivity and therefore its ability to sustain God’s people securely. “You shall observe my statutes, and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely. The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill, and live on it securely” (25:18).

The major statute that God commands in these verses is that of the jubilee—every seven years for the land itself and every fifty years for the ownership of the land. The price paid by the non-observance of this statute is insecurity on the land and the question of the productivity of the land. Looking at our own situation, we can conclude that God was onto something. In our culture, we define the land as human property with which the owner can do whatever he or she wishes to do with it, rather than as God’s land to be taken care of as *God* wills. As we do this and as we ignore the growing concentration of land holdings over decades that has driven out a majority of small farmers in this nation, we might ask if the price we pay for our disobedience is the decreasing productivity of our land, loss of topsoil, low water tables that then mix with sea water, as well as over-reliance on petrochemicals, along with the rise of agribusiness. Are we more secure than we were before?

But if, as God insists to Moses, the land belongs to God, how were the people of Israel to determine its value? The answer is interesting. While the land itself has intrinsic worth and integrity, it has no intrinsic exchange value. The value it has to humans refers to how much it will produce until the next jubilee when it will most likely change hands again; or, similarly the value of the land has to do with how much it has produced since the last jubilee. That is, the value is determined not by exchange rates established by the market, which is to say not by human ownership (which is at best transitory and derivative of God’s ownership), but by its use value to humans—that is, by how much it produces or will produce in the future before the next jubilee or by how much it has produced in the past since the last jubilee. Consider, for example, “When you buy from your neighbor, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop years. If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you” (25:15).

Brazil is a country well known for its land disputes, due to the incredible gap between the millions of landless peasants looking for land to farm for their own survival, on the one hand, and the relatively few land owners who often own pieces of land the size of small countries, on the other hand. Over the years I have witnessed countless landless Brazilian peasants involved in countless land disputes making the same argument that God here makes to Moses. The value of the land for humans, they insist, lies in its ability to sustain life. The value of land for humans is its “use” value. The market value, especially in areas and times of rampant land speculation (which in recent years has been common in the Amazon basin), negates the use value by making the land a mere commodity to be bought and sold for profit like any other thing. Land viewed as a mere commodity makes a few people rich, perhaps; but at the same time it prohibits millions of

desperate peasants from wresting their own sustenance from the land. Land speculation negates God's intended use of God's land; and the peasants rather than the landholders pay the price for this disobedience.

Human Relationships. In Leviticus 25, human beings are understood and described in terms of their relationships not only with the land but also with God and with each other. God, land, and human relationships are all intertwined. In Leviticus, 25, one finds not only brothers, but also uncles, cousins, sons, children, kin, Levites, people dwelling outside the walls of a city, strangers and sojourners, and servants—both male and female and both from within and from outside the nation. In short, consideration is given to many people in many different walks of life. In our individualistic civilization, it is perhaps difficult for us to perceive how differently human relationships are portrayed in this text. Here the understanding of human identity and human worth is depicted in terms of the web of familial and other social relationships, not in terms of the individual. And very importantly, it is this web of relationships that establishes proper economic relationships, not vice versa.

Consider the following: “If any one of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next of kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold” (25:25). Or think about the portrayal of human relationships in this passage: “And if any of your kin fall into to difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens. Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance, or provide them food at a profit” (25:35). Or listen to this: “If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or bound laborers. They shall serve with you until the year of jubilee” (25:39).

In each of these passages, the human relationships are the independent variables. The human relationships, such as that of being a brother, are what determine the economic relationships. As a consequence, it is the human relationships that are the relationships to attend to. The human relationships guide the economic relationships all the way along, most dramatically in the year of the jubilee when land reverts to other owners, when servants are set free, and so forth. The jubilee is important. It is also important for us to understand that all the way along the human relationships—established by kinship, citizenship, religion, clean and unclean, holy and common—are the guides to the economic relationships.

This emphasis on human relationships as the key to determine economic status is almost the complete reversal of our own society in which money, that is, ownership, is taken to be the measure of the person—that which is taken to be central in the person. Thus it is the case that money, status, and ownership can and do tear families and friendships apart; or, on the other hand, these things can also create families and friendships. The passages in Leviticus 25 reflect a profound understanding of how disruptive uneven economic relationships can be to webs of kinship, to community, indeed to all kinds of human relationships. By contrast, the logic of resistance is one in which the person is valued as part of a larger whole to which he or she

belongs; and thus that person has value that is not defined by monetary value.

In these passages, the market—economic life—is subordinated to larger values. Economic life is obviously not unimportant, but it serves ends that are not its own, for it is not an end in itself. The jubilee ensures a kind of rough justice. And this rough justice may very well be a necessary pre-condition for real community. This is an insight shared by some indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest who periodically took whatever they had accumulated that exceeded the needs of the community, and they destroyed it! Or they consumed their accumulation all at once as a community in a practice known as potlash—precisely in order to rid themselves of excess and the need to re-distribute it and in order thereby to ensure in an ongoing way a kind of rough equality within their community. Like God, as he speaks here to Moses, they did not want economic inequalities to determine relationships. In the jubilee, liberation from slavery, liberation from debt, and liberation from servanthood were all good in themselves. Yet perhaps even more important is the fact that these practices were ways to nurture and ensure a rough justice considered necessary for meaningful community.

Task. The people depicted in Leviticus were people who were asked to serve ends beyond themselves. God tells them, “for to me the people of Israel are servants; they are my servants” (25:55). The jubilee arrangements—promoting justice and even forgiveness—are moral in themselves; but they are not ends in themselves. Rather, they enable other ends. To be sure, God insists that the people of Israel are there to till the land and to have relationships with each other; but ultimately they are there to have a relationship with God. Therefore, their relationships to the land, along with their economic and social relationships, are not autonomous from their relationship with God and thus should not be allowed to follow their own logic. Rather they are subject to human design, *in obedience to God*. It is according to this design, this task of their relationship with God, that they are evaluated by God.

I am struck by the way good stewardship of land, along with economic structures, just relationships, and obedience to God’s design, all come together in this text. And I am challenged by how little our own society and churches fail to measure up to this yardstick. As this text suggests, faithful resistance clearly includes careful stewardship of God’s land. Such stewardship in turn requires that we begin to view land and the rest of the natural world not primarily as commodities to be bought and sold for individual gain and profit, but as God’s creation—which, as such, bears intrinsic worth and integrity that we humans violate in disobedience to God and at our own risk.

Similarly, resistance requires that we begin to view each other not in relation to how much we have, but in terms of who we are, how much we need, and how faithful we are to God’s commands. Stewardship of creation, relationship in society and with nature, rough justice in community, the centrality of God as God of all creation—these are values to guide our resistance to materialism, to individualism, to the commodification of the natural world and of other people, and to an anthropocentrism by which we live human-centered rather than God-centered lives. The tasks are many; but they hold great promise in natural beauty and wild spaces, productive practices that will sustain not only us but also our grandchildren and their

grandchildren—as well as our natural habitat, our human relationships, our human communities sustained by ideals and practices of justice, and our faithful relationships to God sustained by God’s vision for us and for all creation.

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