

**The Land Is The Land
Joy Filled Generosity Sunday, October 15, 2023, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman**

Hear the Gospel according to the Sufi mystic Rumi,

*“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
There is a field.*

I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,

The world is too full to talk about.

*Ideas, language, even the phrase each other
Doesn't make any sense.”*

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I've been in Rumi's field a couple times in my life.

Like the wardrobe that leads to Narnia, you almost have to stumble into it with a mixture of intentionality, openness, dumb luck ... and enough naivete to trust that new worlds are possible.

And ... whenever I do ... I am changed.

Whenever I get beyond the ideas of rightdoing and wrongdoing. Beyond yours and mine. To that place where even the phrase “each other” doesn't make any sense, just for a moment I get a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

And I am renewed with hope that someday, we will get there, someday we will become it together.

I stumbled into Rumi's field several years ago at, of all places, a dinner celebrating the 250th birthday of the City of St. Louis.

I was seated next to a tribal elder from the Wa Zha Zhe nation –what we more commonly call the Osage today. And at one point -- driven by my feelings of shame and desire to ease my own discomfort – I commented that it must be difficult to be at what was essentially a celebration of “when we took your land.”

I'm sure I had hoped for words of absolution ... recognition that I was one of the good, enlightened colonizer descendants. Instead, after listening patiently, my dinner companion paused, sighed ever so softly, and said with gentleness and love:

“This is where you always get it wrong. You didn't take our land. It wasn't ours then. It isn't

yours now. The Land is always the Land."

The Land
is always
the Land.

For indigenous peoples, the Land is not an "it"
... not a commodity to be owned and used.
The Land is a "who."

Disputes over ownership of land make as little sense as the phrase "each other" in Rumi's field.

Land is to be loved, shared, sustained as it sustains us.

But never owned.

The Land is much too ancient, much too wise, much too sacred for ownership.

Recently, I heard an interview with former Bishop Mark MacDonald, the first National Indigenous Bishop in the Anglican Church of Canada, and he dove even more deeply into what that elder had told me that night.

He said:

"In Western thought Land is ... conceived of as a space that is empty and abstract, that is free, available, or unoccupied. However, in Indigenous philosophies and worldview, Land is a living entity.... the source of life itself, such that there is no life without the Land.

"Land is seen as a manifestation of Spirit and as the source of all Indigenous knowledge, it is both teacher and pedagogy holding all Indigenous truths."

The Land is the Land.
Not a resource to be owned and dominated.
But a being to be in relationship with.

And lest we think that alternate views of land are purely indigenous concepts lost to the post-enlightenment West, consider that in the late 18th century, Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau made the same general point when he wrote:

"The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying 'This is mine,' and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society.

"From how many crimes, wars and murders, and from how many horrors and misfortunes might not any one have saved (humanity) by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch, and crying to

his fellows: 'Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody.'"

And yet, neither indigenous theology nor the Genevan philosopher could overcome the runaway train that was and is private property and the nation state.

The land is the land.
Not a resource to be owned and dominated.
But a being to be in relationship with.

And yet, clearly that is not the world we live in ... and it's not the church we live in either.

So much of Christian thought has been consumed by the Western concept of land and property rights that the best it seems we can do is talk about ethical stewardship of what we own and extract from and not a relationship with the land as a living, breathing, teaching, loving being, full as we are of the Spirit of the Divine.

And it's killing us.
And it's killing the Land.
And we are certainly killing each other in the process.

And that is where we find ourselves today, certainly not only in the land so many faiths call Holy ... but Gaza is where our attention is trained, and our hearts are breaking.

And before we turn to the Land, it's with the breaking hearts that I want to begin.
Because broken hearts are what we know best.
And broken hearts are where we are needed most.

In a world where we seem to have a great poverty of reason, what we have no shortage of is intense, searing grief.

And since grief touches grief and pain touches pain, the grief we are seeing pouring out of Jews and Palestinians, intense as it is on its own, gets magnified when it touches our own grieving hearts, weary from a season of loss and change deeper and longer than many of us have ever experienced.

And that's the first thing I hope we can just acknowledge ... that all of us are all hurting. And if you ain't hurting ... God bless you.

We are hurting in ourselves and we are hurting for each other. And many of us are afraid ... if not for actual people we know who are in peril – and many of us are that - then certainly at least for the direction this world is taking.

And that pain, grief and fear are the silent drivers of what is happening in Gaza and what is happening in our hearts. And it is those that implore us to meet them with healing. In each other. In ourselves.

Pain, grief, and fear often get expressed as anger. And that's understandable. Forget what you have been taught by the church. Anger is not a sin. It is a natural, human response to and expression of not only pain and fear but injustice. And there is plenty of all of that to go around right now.

And ... pain, fear and anger can be a deadly cocktail.

I can't tell you how many emails and texts I have gotten this week demanding that I stand with Israel or stand with Palestine. The chatter is deafening, too overwhelming, hard to find my way home. ... and the primary way people want me to do that is by not only condemning but demonizing the other. And that can be a litmus test of relationship for some people. By joining their quest to exterminate. By turning my own pain, fear and grief – and I've got my own -- against the other in righteous rage.

I mean, I get it. When we have been wounded by another, that pain can become the greatest thing in our lives. Pain can make things that are incredibly complex seem pretty simple:

You are hurting me and people I love.
 You are killing me and people I love.
 Stop it.
 Make them stop it.

And yet, now is the time when we need to get beneath the anger to the pain, grief and fear that fuels it. Now is the time for us to lean both into humanity and complexity ... and they are related.

Because there is nothing simple about our humanity.

Leaning into humanity means holding every hand and wiping away every tear. To sing as our youth did, "so take my hand ... don't let go." Both because compassion for pain and leaning into each other's humanity is the only path away from dehumanization ... which is the only way to a just outcome ... and because the power of emotion will supersede rationality almost every time.

Whatever and how salient and brilliant our points we want to make may be, right now, the fight is about the pain, grief and fear, and unless we deal with those, unless we heal them, we will never get to the point of looking at solutions. Which is truly hard because the pain, fueled by anger and fear and grief, keeps on coming.

What that means for us is reaching out to both our Palestinian and Jewish friends and siblings

and sitting with them in their pain. Our work does not end there, but that is where it must begin. And we must have the courage in some instances to risk the friendship of one as we insist on holding the hand and wiping away the tears of the other.

That's leaning into humanity.

Leaning into complexity means refusing to settle for the simple narrative and instead looking for the deeper context to help us understand if not excuse.

Naming the tragedy and the injustice.

I am so deeply grateful for the amazing friends and siblings. Palestinian and Jewish. Ken Chasen, Rabbi of Leo Baeck Temple and Allison sitting here joining us today, and Ken, you have done so much to educate me this week. And others. And I have been listening and I have heard so much that is hard to hold together, that is hard to hold in tension and yet that's what we need to do. That's what we are called to do.

Gaza has been called the world's largest open-air prison, with nearly 2 million Palestinians ghettoized under severe restrictions. And any honest power analysis of the region will show that the Israeli government has the power and have consistently used it to oppress Palestinians – and are currently taking an already appalling humanitarian situation in Gaza and making it a disaster by any human standard.

And, if you do that same power analysis regionally, Israel is surrounded by nations that wish not for it to find a peaceful coexistence with Palestinians but wish that both Israel and the Jewish people cease to exist. And this is not an historical anomaly but the latest in centuries unto millennia of persecution and attempted genocide of Jews.

That's not an excuse for Israel's oppression of Palestinians ...and yet it still has to be part of the equation. Just as the oppression of Palestinians does not excuse the actions of Hamas ... and yet still has to be part of the context if we are to understand this. As is the role the West plays in supporting oppression not just in Palestine but throughout the Arab world, which has its own dire consequences.

Yes, Palestinians absolutely were displaced in the last century ... and continue to be displaced as the nation of Israel does to them in the name of security what we did and continue to do to our own natives in the name of manifest destiny ... both at great human cost.

And, the Jewish people have just as ancient a history on that land ... and on being pushed off it. We cannot act like there is some magic expiration date to being able to call your home your home. Protesting occupation – which is a hugely problematic word in any sense -- cannot mean there is no room for Jewish people in a land that is their ancestral home, too.

Now none of this is to try to draw equivalencies or to say that one's pain is easier or worse than the other. Especially at a time when so many are in pain, that's actually not helpful right now. When we are in pain we generally don't care if the others is worse than ours - even if we are causing it. And it often takes having our own pain acknowledged before we can even begin to see the pain of the other and our complicity in it.

There are no simple narratives here ... and yet that invites us to lean into the complexity instead of trying to reduce it.

Love requires that we can neither act like it is simple just to choose a side nor can we throw our hands in the air and say it's just too complicated to deal with.

And that brings us back to Land.

As I spent this week listening and studying and looking at way too many lines on maps, the words of Mark MacDonald and the Wa Zha Zhe tribal elder echoed in my ear.

The Land is the Land.
It is not a resource to be owned and dominated.
It is a being to be in relationship with.

That Land is a living, breathing, teaching, loving being, full as we are of the Spirit of the Divine.

And the Land is a beautiful polyamorous lover – not restrained by the notion of single partnership but capable of loving and sustaining and teaching any number of peoples without jealousy or favoritism, and urging them to love each other as she loves them.

There is no ownership.
Ownership only leads to pain and inequity.

And this morning, we hear in our reading from Acts that the earliest followers of the revolutionary and resurrected Jesus understood this concept.

“All were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they shared with anyone who was in need.”

What is revolutionary about Jesus ... and what we as the Church are most afraid to preach because it is what got Jesus on the cross ... is the truth that tribal elder imparted to me that evening and of which the indigenous peoples in our midst have been waiting for centuries for us to understand.

The Land is the Land.
There is no theirs or ours, yours or mine.
The Land is always the Land.

That is what we are beginning to understand in our own growing relationship with the Tongva nation as we work together to tell the whole story about the land we are sitting on right now and discern what healing and reconciliation look like among us.

We don't own this Land ... and we didn't steal it from the Tongva because they didn't own it either. We are just stubbornly clinging to this idea not just that we own it but that Land can be owned to begin with.

The earliest followers of Jesus recognized this ... and if we are going to get past trying again and again to put the pin back in the grenade until the next time it gets pulled out again not only in Palestine and Israel, but all over the world ... including right here ... we have to get back to that theological sensibility that is truly the core of our faith.

And we cannot hope to have it happen there if we do not start doing it here.

After Mark MacDonald talked about the indigenous theology of land, the interviewer, honestly struggling to figure out where to go from here said, "well, are we all just supposed to give up all our property?"

Now, you probably know me well enough to know that the radical in me was really hoping that Mark MacDonald would say YES!

Don't worry ... that's not what he said.

What he did say was that this is the conversation we need to start having. In fact this is a conversation that is decades overdue – politically, economically and perhaps especially ecologically.

And so, we are.

And so, we will.

And I hope we can do it together.

We started having it when those in our community experiencing homelessness showed up at All Saints Church during the pandemic and we had to wrestle with what it really means for us to be ethical stewards of this Land and the buildings on it.

We started having it when members of the Apache nation asked to use All Saints as their base of operations when they were fighting the government over the strip mining of sacred lands in the ninth circuit court of appeals and, remembering our conversations with the Tongva, told them that of course they could... not because we were letting them be on *our* Land but because we are slowly learning that we do not own this Land, we are just caring for it and they have as much a right to enjoy it as we do.

We can have it in this season of giving when we recognize that if everyone in this congregation recognized this truth and gave just 10% of what God has provided for us in income -- or frankly, even 5% -- to All Saints Church we would have enough money to care for so many of us who are in need and any of us who fell into need.

We can have it as we sit and look into the eyes and wipe away the tears and hold the hands of our Jewish and Palestinian siblings and listen to their sacred stories of land ... and honor them ... and sit with them ... and weep with them. Not trying necessarily to find an easy solution because there is none. But honoring that the feelings they have and the connection that they have is real.

We can have it as we look at insisting that national borders and who crossed what with what paperwork have nothing to do with the human rights to food, shelter, education and health care to which all are entitled.

During my time in Kathmandu this summer, as I watched Hindus and Buddhists share sacred spaces, I remembered Mohandas Gandhi's words of "I am a Hindu, and a Muslim, and a Christian, and a Jew" and also his urging for us all to "be the change you wish to see in this world."

This is possible.

And ... We cannot act as if the fire in Gaza is contained to that part of the world. The fuel is coming from right here in America ... yes from the military resources we are providing but mostly from the theology of land we continue to export to the peril of all the people on this planet and the planet itself.

And that work is ours. The work of proclaiming the ancient indigenous and Christian truth that the land is the land. And it starts with a conversation. Not one of shaming and condemning, of right and wrong, of us and the other. The world is too full to talk about in those terms.

Out beyond all those ideas there is a conversation to be had and Land to be loved and shared and rejoiced not just in but with.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field, a wonderful Land that is neither owned nor dominated but simply is.

I'll meet you there.

Amen.

