



Session Two Hand-out

Synopsis of Walter Bruggemann's article, "Land: Fertility and Justice"

by David Hansen

In the book Theology of the Land, published by Liturgical Press of Collegeville, Minnesota, 1987, Walter Bruggemann is the contributor for chapter two, entitled, "Land: Fertility and Justice" (pp. 41-68). Bruggemann presents the biblical understanding that the land is a gift of God to the human community and is a part of the whole covenantal relationship between God and humanity (Genesis 1&2). God is a creator who desires to see fertility and productivity in the land and in order for such to happen there must be justice and righteousness in the social relations among the people and the land must be managed with care and tending as a partner.

There are two temptations that are to be avoided if humankind is to uphold the covenant. Promiscuity and domination. The temptation to promiscuity is to be in a relationship only so long as it is convenient then move on to another. This promiscuity can be in relation to one's spouse or to the land. Human behavior is of one piece. When the mate or parcel of land no longer suits one's desires it is discarded for another.

The other temptation, domination, is to hold and control the partner, be it spouse or land, so tightly so as to squeeze the life out of such. There are no regards for the right of the spouse or the land. In both cases it reduces the spouse and the land to commodities. They are there for the sole benefit of the possessor and the owner is free to use, abuse, and discard at one's convenience.

The root cause of violation of the covenant by humanity is idolatry, the assigning of a higher loyalty to something or some other than God. Two scriptures that make this point are Ezekiel 18:6-8 and 16:46-50. These two passages not only show the moral misconduct that springs from idolatry, but also the connection between sexuality and economics. In the latter passage the prophet recasts the Sodom story of sexual aberrations in Genesis 18-19 into an indictment on economic distortions.

Bruggemann explores three biblical themes that are contrary to Israel's theory of land as inheritance and relate to productivity and justice. The first of these is the right of enclosure. This is a practice whereby the strong and the powerful are able either by legal means or otherwise, to get land from the weak and poor.

“Enclosure is a formidable act that imagines the land and one’s possession of it is unattached to and unconcerned for social relation” (p. 50). A case in point is found in I Kings 21. King Ahab desires Naboth’s vineyard. When Naboth responds that he cannot sell it because it is an inheritance, the King and his wife Jezebel proceed to use their power and influence to acquire it. In which case the land was reduced to a tradable commodity and meant that “nobody’s land was safe and secure, but that land became an arena for commercialism and all the social problems that emerge when the strong are aligned against the weak” (p.46). Deuteronomy 19:14 lifts up Israel’s theory of land as inheritance and is designed to resist monopoly. The prophets in Amos 5:7, 6:12 and Isaiah 5:7 speak out against those who pervert justice through legal channels in taking land from orphans and socially marginalized people.

In our time the theory of autonomous markets has become a means of enclosure. “Until the 18th century, the market was not held to be autonomous in its operation, but was an aspect of social policy) (pp. 49050). In effect the autonomous market as a means of enclosure is “a practice of triage, that is, the intentional elimination of those who are judged to be superfluous, marginal and not of sufficient value to sustain...It behooves us to recognize that all free market theory that seeks to separate economic transactions from social relations is destructive” (p.50).

The second theme is you shall not covet. “That commandment has largely been trivialized into a psychological matter concerning jealousy and envy—but is to be understood in terms of public policy and social practice” (p. 51). “Do not covet your neighbor’s house, your neighbor’s wife, your neighbor’s field...” (Ex 20:17, Deut 5.21). Thus the commandment also concerns land policy. Again I Kings 21 deals with “the rapacious policies of the monarchy which legitimized confiscation of a most greedy kind” (p.52). The prophets in Micah 2:1-5 and Isaiah 5:8-10 state the consequences of land seizure. “Undisciplined and unneighborly land practice finally leads to a reckoning” (p. 53). The land will become unproductive and things will be reversed when God sides with the poor and displaced. “Just social relations are foundational and prerequisite for productive land” (p.55).

The third theme is defilement of the land. This theme is more difficult for us to handle because in our secular society ritual defilement is a notion quite alien to us. “Now we are in the sphere of shame and contamination, that is much more elemental than guilt and morality. Such defilement renders the object impure, unavailable for religious use. The Holy God of Israel will not and cannot stay in a place that is defiled” (p.55-56).

The text for this theme is Deut. 24:1-4. “This law concerns marital relations. It is about a situation in which a man divorces a wife. She goes to a second husband. But the second marriage also ends. Then she wants to return to the first husband and resume that relationship. The point of the legal prohibition is that the first husband, even if he wants to, may not take the woman back again...The reason that such a return is prohibited is that she was intended for the singular ‘use’ of the first husband. But having been put to other use, i.e. the second husband, she is no longer suitable for the first, proper relationship. Now this may strike us as primitive and severely sexist, for matters are clearly not symmetrical for the man and the

woman. But on its own terms, one may consider this defilement. The prohibition refers to improper use that renders proper use impossible” (p.56).

Verse 4b is a theological commentary on this prohibition and makes an important move in interpretation: “...for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt upon the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance.” “The commentary labels the second relationship an abomination, which means a distortion that endangers the entire community. We may say such marital maneuvering may threaten social solidarity and order, but the usage attributes an almost material notion of abomination, as though a substance of destruction is thereby introduced into the community” (p.56). The further theological comment that especially interests us is that such an act will bring guilt on the land of inheritance. “The distorted marital relation causes distortion of the land” (p.56). It is significant how Jeremiah used this text from Deuteronomy. Jeremiah lived at a moment when Judah was to be exiled and lose its land and he presents an argument about how land is lost. He builds a metaphor in 3:1ff on the law in Deut. 24:1-4. “Yahweh is the first husband who has been violated by the wife, Judah. Judah the wife has been rejected in infidelity, and she goes to a second husband, presumably Assyrian alliance and Canaanite religion. But those connections do not work, so Judah wishes to return to Yahweh, to reestablish the covenant relation with God. The torah precludes that resumption of relation, however” (p. 57).

The prophet makes two important points. God yearns for the restoration and is even willing to violate the prohibition of the torah. Against the torah God urges Israel to repent and come home (Jer. 3:12, 14; 4:1-2). The second point is that Jeremiah also uses the language of defilement as in the old teaching of Deuteronomy.

The language of defilement is an important one for speaking about land abuse. We have cases where chemicals have contaminated the land, threatened the water table and endangered the productivity of the soil. Regarding nuclear fallout we refer to it as pollution and contamination, and we speak of dirty bombs that so defile the earth as to make life impossible except in its lowest form. “Taken together, the technology of contamination may create a moral situation in which the possibility of life is jeopardized. That, in fact, is what the priestly tradition of the Old Testament is about” (p. 58).

These three themes together — moving boundaries, which translates into the practice of enclosure, coveting, which we understand as rapacious land policy, and defilement, which we understand as pollution of the ecosystem of life — are ways in which the bible speaks about land management. These three themes respectively concern geographic, economic, and ritual dimensions of life. All of them together articulate policies that end in death” (pp58-59).

“Finally, the Bible affirms that land can be managed in ways that give life. It does not need to be handled toward death...Against moving boundaries and enclosure systems, the Bible celebrates the old land theory of inalienable patrimony as cited in Jer. 32;1-15” (p.59). There is the conviction that the old inheritance rights will finally prevail and the economy will be reestablished. Against coveting, Israel celebrates land redistribution, which breaks up monopolies and gives back land to those who

should properly have it. In Joshua 13-19, care is taken that tribal groups receive their proper entitlements” (p.60). While this land division was obliterated by the monarchy, Ezekiel 47 and 48 anticipate the reapportionment of land as remembered in Joshua 13-19. Another principle of land redistribution is the year of Jubilee as set forth in Leviticus 25 in which land is returned to its rightful owner. “Against defilement and abomination, the Bible anticipates a time when the land is free of such contamination so that production can be full and the blessings of life abundantly available” (p.61). After the fickleness and harlotry that had led to defilement of the land as expressed in Hosea 5:3 and 6:10, there is the promise of new creation in Hosea 2: 21-23. “In that day, says the Lord, I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth, and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel and I will sow him for myself in the land.” In Isaiah there is a similar pattern. Isaiah 6:5 asserts that judgment comes against massive defilement, but then after the judgment and exile and loss of land there is to be restoration as proclaimed in Isaiah 62:4-5. “You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My delight is in her, and your land married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married.”

These are the ways of life and death. We must ponder that the ways of enclosure, covenant and contamination have become acceptable policy among us. Now we are at a crisis point...The human covenantal issues do not admit of technical solution. Land management must be restored to its place in the fabric of social relations. Productivity requires attention to justice. Fertility causes us to rethink economics. Sexuality raises questions of righteousness. Without righteousness and justice in land management, there may come a destroyer who will ‘make your land a waste’ (Jer.4:7). “It need not be so, but it can happen, and is indeed happening before our very eyes. “ (pp.63-64).

Questions for discussion

- 1) What examples can you name where we have tried to have production without justice? *Justice here means the proper treatment of people and the proper treatment of the environment.***
- 2) What are the implications of the biblical concepts as outlined in the article by Bruggemann for what is happening in your community?**
- 3) Bruggemann argues that autonomous markets become a method of economic triage that deprives the weak and poor of land and opportunities, can you give examples?**
- 4) While it is unrealistic to think that we could somehow go back to a time in our nation where land could be redistributed by some ancestral formula, what public policies could counter the direction in which we are now moving toward greater and greater concentration of land and wealth into fewer and fewer hands?**