

Occupy Good Pasture

Ezekiel 34:11-24

By Jin S. Kim

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We have a word from the Lord today. The people of Judah had been exiled to Babylon, for they had been conquered by the most powerful nation of the day. In fact, the Babylonian Empire was the greatest empire in history up to that time.

The interesting thing about human nature is that even among the oppressed, people will seek supremacy, a pecking order. We human beings have great capacity for tenderness and compassion, and we're also the meanest things in the world, aren't we? And even when we are oppressed together, we will try to find some advantage over others, some way of asserting our superiority at the expense of others.

"As for you, my flock, saith the Lord, I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture?" In other words, Do you have to get what's yours and at the same time mess it up for others?

I'd like to reflect today about who the sheep might be, the fat and the lean, as we consider together where we are as a country.

How about this interesting statistic? Poverty is greater in the suburbs of America today than in our inner cities. Poverty is at a 33% rate in the suburbs and 28% in the inner city. And the six cities where that disparity is greatest today are Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Houston, Oklahoma City, and Minneapolis.

Between the late 1950s and the mid 70s, the US poverty rate dropped from 22% to 11%. The poverty rate dropped in half(!) mostly due to the decrease in the destitute elderly, meaning poor old people, because of the increase in benefits to Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security.

Education is one of the primary drivers of socio-economic upward mobility. We had a vast welfare program after World War II in higher education called the GI Bill. It allowed millions of former soldiers to basically get a free education, to become the first person in their family to receive higher education, setting them on an upwardly mobile course. Many of us here are beneficiaries of that particular welfare program. But, interestingly, the GI Bill was severely restricted for non-white people. So it was basically government-funded welfare for white people, as so many government programs are. Ever heard of 40 acres and a mule? What was that but a massive welfare program for white people?

Our public schools are primarily funded by property taxes. No wonder some public schools look like college campuses and others look like war zones! How do we fund PUBLIC schools this way when our society is still marred by racism, white flight, redlining and racial profiling? Property value is still highly correlated with race, and so this form of taxation is particularly unjust.

Economists tell us that a primary driver of poverty in a nation is the extreme accumulation of wealth by a relative few. When 1% of Americans own 40% of assets, you know we live in a new Gilded Age. We have a greater disparity in wealth now than since 1929, when the stock market crash led to the Great Depression.

In 1933, four years after the crash, the Glass-Steagall Act was passed to control speculation and to separate traditional banking from investment banking. The separation of banking practice meant that traditional banks handled home mortgages, car loans, business loans and personal loans, while investment banks raised large amounts of capital in a central trading place like Wall Street to finance big business. But we also know that investment banking means taking on high levels of leveraged risk, manipulating the value of currency, and speculating on stocks and bonds that do nothing to actually help build an economy. Wall Street is just legalized gambling for millionaires.

In 1999, the Graham-Leach-Bliley Act dismantled Glass-Steagall, and that allowed big banks to buy each other up. These “too-big-to-fail” banks on Wall Street could now take the mortgages, car loans and business loans made from their main street branch and then repackage and resell these loans in piecemeal fashion endlessly around the globe. In 2007, when one of these “too-big-to-fail” banks actually *was* allowed to fail, we had a massive global economic crisis. After that, none of these behemoth institutions were allowed to fail, and so the government spent \$700 billion to bail out Wall Street – a crisis precipitated by a foolish Republican Congress and an equally foolish Democratic White House that signed it into law.

Economists recently calculated that \$300 billion would restore all underwater mortgages to a sustainable level. So here’s the score: \$700 billion for Wall Street, \$0 for homeowners. This is what we’ve come to? Let’s try to get a handle on what \$700 billion is worth.

In the 1980s, the US government finally did the right thing by paying reparations to the survivors of Japanese internment camps during WWII. A mere \$20,000 isn’t much, but it was a concrete expression of remorse by the nation – a bill passed by a Democratic Congress and signed by Ronald Reagan. If we provided \$20,000 to every African American man, woman and child as reparations for chattel slavery and Jim Crow segregation today, that would amount to \$700 billion. I understand that we had to prevent the global economic system from crashing, but what are we willing to pay to address our moral conscience as a nation?

So I am asking, What individual initiative? What private enterprise? I believe that the private initiative of individuals is a great driver of economic productivity. Nevertheless, government policies do rein in some of the excesses of human bullying, of the human penchant for endless greed. A government’s job isn’t just to redistribute resources; it is also to create equitable rules and regulations.

Can you imagine American football, a violent sport that I love dearly – can you imagine football without rules? This sport has more officials than almost any other sport I know. There are *so many* referees and judges, and even some above in the booth doing instant replays. That is because the sport is so violent and complex.

When we have an economy as large as the American economy, you need robust rules and regulations, lots of officials observing the thing, making sure that people are not plundering

one another. There is something gravely wrong with our country when the bottom 10% of the workers pay a 30.5% effective tax rate, and the top 10% pay a 10.4% tax rate, and the top 1%, those who make over \$472,000 a year, pay the lowest effective tax rate of all – 9.7%, because of all the tax loopholes custom-designed to favor the rich.

Is this free enterprise? Is this equal opportunity? I'm just wondering if God has something to say about this.

I believe in free enterprise. I also believe that American football should be played by rules and regulations, and that when human beings come into contact with one another, that fairness should govern us all.

What is being contested today is the vision of commonwealth. There are some in this country who are beholden to the logic of empire, a way of thinking that says that the average person is merely a commodity, that says that no amount of unfairness is too much as long as these commodified bodies produce more bricks with less straw, all in the name of procuring shelf space at Walmart. There are some who think that they can keep calling our rigged system "equal opportunity," and that the people will keep consuming empty rhetoric as truth. There are some who still use the ugly and false categories of race to divide and conquer.

Some of us have a different story to tell, a story told by a humble man from Nazareth. Jesus represented the logic/Logos of God's kingdom, because he was God's Word made flesh. Jesus talked of repairing the breach between opposing people groups, and the oneness of humanity because we are all made in God's image. When empire tried to divide by race, Jesus sought to unite by faith. People of faith throughout this great land are coming together to stand up for a fair, just, sustainable commonwealth. We don't believe the ancient imperial lie, the logic of scarcity that leads people to be reduced to dog eat dog. We believe in shared prosperity, in a true commonwealth where there is enough health and well being for all.

The church must first of all repent of our silent complicity in such a system. I make this humble confession on behalf of the people of God, but we have no problem with the powers and principalities overhearing this confession either.

We believe that God has a word for us today:

"Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture?" Is it not enough for you to be an average millionaire or a billionaire? "But you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet and drink what you have fouled with your feet? Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide. I will save my flock, and they will be no longer ravaged. I will judge between sheep and sheep."

I want to point out that this is good news not only to the poor. This is good news to the rich too. The Lord promises through the prophet Ezekiel, "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them [poor and rich alike]. He shall feed them and be

their shepherd. I, the Lord, will be their God, and David shall be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken.”

This is good news for those in Washington and Wall Street and Main Street. There will be one shepherd over *all*, the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots, the light-skinned and the dark-skinned, the new immigrants and the settled immigrants. **All of us will be fed justice.** And for some it will go down smoothly, and for others, we will be choking on it. But all of us are going to be better off by feeding on God’s justice.

Yes, we have one president after another. We vote in one Congress and then we vote out another. But there is a true shepherd, a true servant of the Lord, coming. And his name is Jesus. And this Jesus came in the midst of an extremely oppressive, uneven, unfair time called the Roman Empire 2000 years ago. And this Jesus is coming again.

In the midst of these trying times, we need to make sure to live and move and have our being as if God were in charge. It’s not about being in denial about our underwater mortgages and about our outrageous student debt. Speaking of which, we now have young people graduating from public universities with an average of \$35,000 in debt, and from *Bible* colleges with \$40,000 of debt majoring in missionary work and Bible. When a college degree today means that our young people must face 20+ years of indentured servitude, something is wrong with our system.

We trust that God is making a home for us already in heaven, and that part of God’s plan is creating Christian communities called the church, where we stake a claim on a piece of the kingdom here on earth, praise God. In preparation, we will occupy a portion of God’s good pasture *here*. And that is what the church is for. We have to confidently occupy this space, and then let this space expand until people in Wall Street and Washington and St. Paul are ashamed by the shabbiness of what they have built. God offers us true pasture, good pasture, a just and equitable pasture. We have to live in that pasture confidently *now*, that we might meet our Maker one day and hear, “My good and faithful servant, well done.”

We are *in* this world, but we are not *of* this world. We must give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, just as Jesus commanded. But we don’t need to make Caesar our master. As Dr. King once said, No one can ride our back if we stand up straight! Our heart and soul, our entire disposition, posture, and stance needs to bend toward the kingdom, and even in this moment, occupy God’s good pasture, as this passage in Ezekiel promises.

We can’t do it alone. That is why God gives us the beloved community here on earth, to be a witness together that a different pasture is possible. May our Almighty God help us to live into this promise of a new pasture, and through it, a renewed commonwealth. Amen.