

Today we continue our sermon series on things the Bible doesn’t talk about. You might imagine my angst regarding this series as a relatively recent seminary graduate where I was taught to preach on things the Bible DOES indeed talk about. Homiletics classes, or classes on how to craft a sermon, taught us how to thoroughly examine a passage of scripture and explore what relevance the message has for a particular congregation in a particular context. Not once, did I receive instruction on how to speak to what the Bible DOES NOT talk about. Yet, the writers of scripture could not have imagined, in their wildest dreams, some of the issues of our time. However, as Pen pointed out to us over the last few weeks, we **can** find clues if we examine the Bible carefully. For example, while the Bible does not mention area medium income as a percentage of housing cost or gentrification and displacement, this morning I think we can extrapolate together and learn of the Lord’s intent regarding housing as found in scripture. I invite you to begin the journey with me from the book of Leviticus, chapter 25.

“You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of 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 every one 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 until 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.”

The book of Leviticus, is a laborious book to wade through even for the most committed students of scripture. It is 27 chapters of tedious rules and regulations that are often repetitive and can be a good sleep aid if you happen to be having a restless night. This book is where you can find laws about what to sacrifice for specific sins or what ritual practices are needed for purification. You can even learn about the proper slaughtering of

animals and how to dispose of their blood. Suffice it to say, a good bit of this book might seem irrelevant to us today and mostly gets overlooked when considering passages for modern sermons.

However, just as contemporary legal experts explore old court rulings to discern abiding principals, readers of Leviticus can do the same to discern some of God’s abiding truths. In doing so, we read that holy people of the Lord must work towards impartiality in the administration of justice, fairness in treatment of the poor, sharing of our resources, and scrupulous honesty in business dealings. The laws also proclaim we must look to the Lord for our ultimate provision both in times of work and times of rest. With this argument for relevance being the case, let’s take a closer look at our passage for today, tedious as it may be.

Leviticus 25 opens with a detailed description of practices of Sabbath. For many Christians today, we see the gift of Sabbath only as something that God intends for our mental and physical well-being. We read books on Sabbath rest but mostly in the personal sense, encouraging individuals to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Don’t get me wrong, I am fully in favor of “me time,” but Leviticus is all about the care and salvation of the community and NOT the individual. Sabbath was not intended to always be personal. The interest of the divinely inspired writers of Leviticus was how to keep the newly formed nation of Israel holy, set apart from the secular world, and dependent upon their creator. Important ways to accomplish these goals were for them to treat creation and one another fairly and to work for the good of the whole over the good of the individual.

As a largely agricultural society at the time of the writing, God commanded Sabbath for the land every 7 years as a necessity for healthy crops. It was also a good reminder to the people of their dependence on God for their ultimate provision. The land needed to rest regularly to continue to thrive and God promised care for God’s creation in the interim. However, with agriculture as basically the only vocation, necessity at times due to illness in the family or other unexpected adversities, meant that someone encountering a tough year might have to sell their property to a neighbor. In the worst circumstances, Israelites would sell their children and perhaps even themselves into slavery. In God’s wisdom, the law declared that every 50 years, debts would be forgiven, servants would be set free with provisions, and land would be returned to its original owners. The Year of the Jubilee has been called the “giant reset” as the Lord never intended for some of creation to have much and some to have little.

There are many verses in the Bible about good Christian charity: about taking the poor into your home and providing hospitality for the widow, the orphan, and the alien, and this type of work IS important. However, a closer look at the prophets in Scripture reveals a deeper reality that our God calls us to work towards. The prophet Micah tells us that in the kingdom our Lord envisions for this earth, “Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid.”

Isaiah states similarly that in the city of our Lord, when the old has passed away and the Lord creates a new heaven and a new earth, the people shall “build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat.” The Lord desires for each of his beloved to have life abundant yet no more than is needed as humankind is prone to use our excess to exploit others.

The Bible does not speak of the destruction of urban renewal or absentee landlord extortion as the authors at the time could not conceive of such things. However, when Israel did not follow the God-given laws of the land as greed and power tempted them to do otherwise, the prophets cried out with warnings.

Ezekiel proclaims:

“Enough, you princes of Israel! Stop all your violence and oppression and do what is just and right. Quit robbing and cheating my people out of their land! Stop expelling them from their homes.”

Likewise, Amos states:

“...you hate honest judges and despise those who tell the truth. You trample the poor and steal what little they have through taxes and unfair rent.”

The result of the unfair practices in Israel, despite fair warning, led to the people losing their land altogether and the fall of an entire nation into occupation for nearly 70 years. No doubt those were horrific times for the people of God, and our scriptures are full of their laments. However, the Lord heard their cries and understood he could not keep people from their homes for more than one generation and restored them to their land.

In our world today, access to land ownership and community building is still the path to mental well-being and generational wealth that can be the difference for a family between abundant living and barely getting by. Habitat for Humanity founder, Millard Fuller, understood this and worked his entire adult life to make home ownership an accessible reality. What started as a small experiment in Georgia has grown into Habitat being the largest home builder in the world, providing opportunities for land and home ownership around the globe. It is a wonderful example of God’s economy of abundance at work in the world. As those of you who have been on build sites know, Habitat homes are not extravagant by today’s standards. However, they offer struggling families the opportunity for a stable home as they strive to nurture a place to grow and thrive. These families do not have to purchase land at the market rate, as that would be far beyond their reach, but the benefits of land ownership for them can change the trajectory of their family for generations.

In his recent book, “Our Trespasses,” local author, historian, and theologian Greg Jarrell writes of the destruction of the uptown Brooklyn neighborhood just a few blocks away from our sanctuary. Two hundred and thirty-eight acres of homes, businesses, and houses of worship were bulldozed in the name of progress and urban renewal. Churches with vibrant congregations were destroyed and families who worked their way into home ownership were displaced with few alternatives for relocation. The book follows the journey of Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, which we know is today a thriving congregation, yet had to overcome intense hardship when their beloved sanctuary of 70 years was demolished. In September of 1963 the faithful disciples at Friendship worshiped in their sanctuary every night for a month, lifting prayers for guidance and songs of praise into the wooden rafters. On October 1<sup>st</sup>, they stood and together watched the bulldozers destroy the building that had lovingly held their prayers and praise. I don’t know about you, but I can’t help but wonder how we would respond if the city suddenly claimed the block at 200 West Trade Street.

The book also tells the story of Abram and Annie North. Both born enslaved in South Carolina, they moved to Charlotte and they did exactly what our culture celebrates as the American Dream. They worked tirelessly and fought their way into stability and home ownership. They bought land, built a home, founded and supported a church, hosted neighborhood celebrations, and were leaders in their community. They rocked babies, planted gardens, and greeted neighbors from their front porch. Abram and Annie created for themselves a beautiful small corner of the world which they left to their daughter, Hazeline North Anderson.

In 1964, the city of Charlotte bulldozed Hazeline’s lovely home that her parents had built with years of blood, sweat, and tears. On this site today sits the campus of First Baptist Church on land that was given to the church by the city in the name of urban renewal. If the North family still owned this property, that is a small portion of the church’s parking lot, it would be worth nearly \$500,000 today. Instead, the family descendants pay rent on the west side of town and dream about what home ownership could have meant for them. Tiffany North works as an insurance agent, pays her rent and student loans, and wonders if life could have been different for her family if they still owned land.

The story of the North family is but one of many in our city and countless others around the country from the 1960’s and 70’s. And while the Bible does not talk about housing development and urban renewal, it does talk about cheating people out of their land and unfair lending practices. I wonder what it would mean for the North family to celebrate the year of the Jubilee and get the deed back to a small plot of land in uptown Charlotte? While we are not an agricultural society these days and we view land ownership in dramatically different ways, I wonder how scripture calls us to the modern-day equivalent to offer the disadvantaged and displaced opportunities to thrive? What is the economic reset for our time?

Some of us were lucky enough to hear Jemar Tisby speak recently in Charlotte and he published an article this week about two cities that are trying to help families that were displaced in the name of urban renewal. Both communities have met with opposition and lawsuits to their efforts. We have looked a bit this morning about

“Things the Bible Doesn’t Talk About: Affordable Housing”

Rev. Lucy Crain

**Date:** June 16, 2024



the “why” we should seek to provide housing to all in our city but I wonder about the reasons that folks entrench themselves in the “why not.” The Sabbath laws proclaim that God will provide for God’s people and all will receive provision as we rest in God’s intent for abundant life. How today is the year of God’s Jubilee calling us to participate in a “reset of wealth” that might include home and land ownership for future generations? How are we as the congregation of First Presbyterian Church called to work towards God’s economy of abundance for all people? How are we meant to be “For Christ in the Heart of Charlotte?” I am not sure I have the answers to these questions but I ask you to be in fervent prayer with me in the discernment as we discover together how we are being called to usher in the kingdom of God where all will sit under their own fig tree. That will be a glorious day indeed.

All thanks be to God.