



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

The Green, Green Grass of Home
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 29, 2019
The Rev. Paul McLain

'Buy my field that is at Anathoth for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.'

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Like many of you, I have been watching the Ken Burns documentary on country music over the last two weeks. I must admit, that before watching this documentary, the only way I imagine you could find hope, resurrection, or redemption in country music would be to play it backwards – for then, your dog comes back to life and your ex-wife brings back your pickup truck.

But as we learn from every Ken Burns documentary, the real story is a lot more complex and nuanced than we ever imagined. Many of our popular songs started out as country songs. One example is "The Green, Green Grass of Home." While it became an international hit when sung by the Welsh pop star Tom Jones, it was actually written by country music songwriter Curly Putnam and was originally made popular by Porter Wagoner, the country singer whose television show launched the career of Dolly Parton.

The first part of the song goes like this:

"The old home town looks the same
As I step down from the train
And there to meet me is my Mama and Papa
Down the road I look and there runs Mary
Hair of gold and lips like cherries
It's good to touch the green, green grass of home.
Yes, they'll all come to meet me,
arms reaching, smiling sweetly
It's good to touch the green, green grass of home
The old house is still standing
tho' the paint is cracked and dry
And there's that old oak tree that I used to play on
Down the lane I walk with my sweet Mary
Hair of gold and lips like cherries
It's good to touch the green, green grass of home."

It sounds like a man having a joyous time of reunion as he returns to his childhood home. But listen to the second part of the song:

"Then I awake and look around me
At four grey walls that surround me
And I realize, yes, I was only dreaming

For there's a guard and there's a sad old padre
Arm in arm, we'll walk at daybreak
Again I touch the green, green grass of home
Yes, they'll all come to see me
In the shade of that old oak tree
As they lay me 'neath the green, green grass of home."

We learn the song is really the dream of a man on death row in prison. He will never again physically see the green, green grass of home. Instead, it will be his burial place. For this man with seemingly no hope, finds redemption and resurrection in knowing that, at long last, he will be reunited with the green, green grass of home.

If you read carefully in our Old Testament lesson today, you will find that the prophet Jeremiah is also a prisoner. He too is writing in a time of seemingly no hope for him nor for his people of Judah. The Babylonian army now surrounds the city of Jerusalem, just as he had prophesied. Jeremiah himself is arrested on a false charge by his own people of Judah. He is beaten. He is now in jail. Things could not be bleaker for the nation of Judah. Nor could they be bleaker for Jeremiah himself. So, in the midst of all this doom, gloom, and utter despair, what does Jeremiah do?

He buys a field. Why does he buy this particular field? You see, this field is in his home village of Anathoth. This field has been in Jeremiah's family for generations. It's the old family farm and Jeremiah longs to get it back. The field is now in the hands of Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel who is probably down on his luck because the land is being ravaged by war. The field may be about to be taken back by a creditor or may have to be sold outside the family. But, according to Jewish law, '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 relative has sold.'

This law was designed to keep property within the family. The bond between Jeremiah's family and this field was a sacred one and it was not to be broken. But what difference does this make now? The Babylonians are literally at the gate! In all likelihood, Babylonian troops are camping on this very field just a few miles outside Jerusalem. And Jeremiah is now old, beaten, and in jail! As Jeremiah himself prophesied, the field is under and will be under Babylonian occupation for a long, long time. Under these dire circumstances, what does it matter who holds a worthless deed to a field that the family can no longer cultivate or enjoy, a field that Jeremiah will probably never set eyes on again?

It matters because Jeremiah wants to make a tangible act that says in this time in which his people have forgotten the laws God commanded them to live by, Jeremiah is going to buy this family field to put into action the words of the great leader Joshua, 'as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.'

But this command to buy the land is not just from the law. God wants Jeremiah to buy this field. Not only to keep the farm within the family, but to show to God's people that even in this dark time of despair, God is still personally active in our history. God still cares about us and our stories. And, based on that, there is hope for the future.

But it's not just the law about family property and the personal voice of God that prompt Jeremiah to buy this field. You see, he knows a secret about this field. The field *never really belonged* to Jeremiah's family. And despite Jeremiah's symbolic act with the deeds, it still doesn't belong to him. And many years later, when the Babylonians no longer occupy the field, it will

never really belong to his heirs. Because early on in scripture, God tells us, 'The land is mine! With me, you are but aliens and tenants.'

Jeremiah acknowledges this later in a prayer. 'Ah, Lord God! It is *you* who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm!' Jeremiah knows he just a tenant on God's land, just as we are all tenants on God's property. When the voice of the Lord works through Hanamel to say, 'Buy my field' it's really God saying to Jeremiah and to us, 'Buy *my* field' – God's field. The act of buying God's field gives Jeremiah hope in a future in which God would once again entrust Jeremiah's family to be good stewards of this field – God's field.

Jeremiah leaves no doubt as to where he is investing the money and the life that God has given him. He is investing it all in the only source of eternal hope – he is investing it all in the kingdom of God. In the ceremony of counting out his 17 sheckels receiving the deed to this land, and placing it in an earthenware jar for safekeeping, Jeremiah teaches us that everyday life, the very stuff, subject, and essence of country music - our Monday through Saturday lives of working hard and living hard, are not separate from the sacred. They can be and are called to be just as sacred as what we do here each Sunday.

The offering each time we come to this table is not only the bread, the wine, and the money placed in the offering plate. It is us! Our whole lives – everything we are and everything we do. Because, like Jeremiah's field, our lives don't belong to us. They belong to God. And we are called to be good stewards of them as well. God desires us to step out in obedience and courage and invest ourselves in being good stewards of God's fields – fields of mission, fields of sharing and caring, fields of hope. God's very personal word is tied directly to how we live – how we invest our time, money, energy, and thoughts. Are we investing what we have been entrusted by God in the eternal field of hope that is the kingdom of God?

Jeremiah made a courageous investment in tough times. He bought God's field. Much like the prisoner on death row in the song, he found his redemption in the dream of returning to the family farm. He and we find our hope and resurrection in the blessed assurance that God is leading us both backward and forward to nothing less than the green, green grass of home. *Amen.*