

Proper 18 - The Potter and Eminent Domain

Sunday, 4September2016

Jeremiah 18: 1-11

Property Rights

- High on the list of things that people would like to see accomplished in Anacortes (other than fixing the potholes in front of their homes) is the completion of the Guemes Channel Trail, the waterfront trail that has been making its way from west to east along the old railway.
 - Frank McCoy, as a member of the Parks Foundation, has been visiting people whose houses abut the trail, and demonstrating how there are economic and other advantages to having a public trail nearby.
- However, there are some, I understand, who would rather not have the Guemes Channel Trail run by their houses
 - But the unspoken threat, if you will, has been the Big Hammer that the city holds: the right of Eminent Domain, established by the 5th Amendment, which allows government to confiscate private property for the purposes of roads, bridges, public infrastructure, and parks, for example
 - No one in the city wants to exercise this “takings” option
 - But this right of Eminent Domain, although it is unstated, does cause some anxiety.
 - One of my associates who owned an old cannery on the waterfront, foresaw the coming of the trail— 11 years ago, and told me, “This is my property, and I have the right to anything I want with it, and I’m not going to let the city tell me what I can and cannot do with my land.”
 - So he packed all his belongings and moved to Corvalis, Montana, where the men are men and the 5th Amendment is rarely discussed
- In any event, the right of Eminent Domain is here to stay, at least outside of Corvalis Montana.
- However, there is another right of Eminent Domain over and above the one held by the city of Anacortes.
 - This is one spoken of by Jeremiah when he writes about the Potter and the Clay.

- In the parable of the potter and the clay, Jeremiah uses a story that asserts God's right of Eminent Domain over the Kingdom of Judah and all its people.
 - The parable of the Potter and the Clay is God's answer to our feeble squawking:
 - "This is my land and I can do what I want with it."
 - "This is my country and no one is going to tell us what do with it."
 - "This is my life, and I can do with it what I will. My destiny is in my own hands."
- It seems that the parable of the Potter and the Clay is an echo of David's Psalm 24: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it/ the world and those who live in it."
 - God's right of Eminent Domain was also later spoken of by Paul (1 Cor 6:19): "Don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you? Don't you know that you have the Holy Spirit from God, and you don't belong to yourselves?"
- At first glance, it seems to be that Jeremiah (and David and Paul) are saying that we are entirely at the mercy of the Potter.
 - As the potter builds, a quick flick of the thumbs and fingers and a bowl appears on the wheel; just some added pressure in the right place and a vase rises from the wheel.
 - Another small shift in the hands, and the clay collapses in a heap
- "You are like clay in the crafter's hands," God says through Jeremiah.
 - "Am I not free to do with you, O House of Israel, just as this potter has done?"
- So what is Jeremiah saying here? That we have no control over our own destinies? That we are like lumps of clay that passively are acted upon by God, following his own whims and fancies?
 - No, there is a lot of dialogue that goes on between the potter and the clay
 - The potter has an idea what he wants the clay to be, but as he begins to work it, he discovers that the clay talks back:
 - The clay has a small lump, or an air pocket, or an imperfection that lets the potter know that he needs to start all over again, maybe with the same lump and perhaps with a different lump of clay.

- God can shape. God can control. But God does does not act completely on his own
 - We have the power to change God's mind.
 - God as the potter had the desire to create a beautiful work in the People of Israel, a people unique and special to God,
 - but the people, through their own free will, refused to allow God to shape them and mold them,
 - And therefore God had no other choice but to remold the clay into another form
- God can create goodness and beauty from a lump of clay
 - But God can also has the power and the right to turn his back on his creation.
 - God tells the people through Jeremiah, "Look, if you do evil in my sight, then, despite all my good intentions for you, I will become a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you."
- So what, in Jeremiah's and God's eyes, was the particular evil they were doing?
 - Despotic rulers who made alliances against the needs of the people; following god's other than Yahweh
 - But overarching all that there It's a theme that we hear throughout the Hebrew and Christian Testaments:
 - The leaders and the people have been derelict in their responsibilities, especially toward the poor:
 - Here's the bill of indictment that God presents to leaders and people of Judah (in Chap 7):
 - You no longer act justly with one another;
 - You oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, and for that reason, I'm moving out of your neighborhood; Jerusalem, God says, is no longer my permanent home. (Jer 7; 3-7)
 - God is greatly disappointed; "I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do for you," and, instead, I will now act to punish those responsible."
- But, wait a minute. If the Hebrews were God's chosen and holy people, why would God threaten evil against them?

- The answer is very simply stated: God wishes the best for us, but our response as human beings is often, “Thanks, but no thanks.”
 - We would rather exercise our choice to say Yes or No to God...and often the answer is “No.”
- We human beings often have the overwhelming desire to take back God’s right of Eminent Domain over us and claim it as our own
 - And this is why the people of Israel suffered and why the world continues to suffer.
 - It is by denying God the right of Eminent Domain that allows someone to drive drunk on the interstate and ram into other cars
 - It is by denying God the right of Eminent Domain that enables us to place certain people on the fringes of society and deny them the ability to vote, or buy a house, or get married, or eat in a restaurant
 - We can either grant God the right of Eminent Domain over our lives or we can deny it, and by doing so we will we either move closer to or farther from God. It is our choice. It is our decision.
- But freedom of action is a funny thing. Here’s what I’ve found out:
 - Once I quit trying to B.S. God with all the plans that I have for the way the world ought to work
 - And once I return to God the right of Eminent Domain in my life
 - the benefits have always been for the common good and not for my own personal gain or self-aggrandizement and
 - the result has always been something more than I could ever imagine;
 - It seems that once we give back to God the right of Eminent Domain and once we quit struggling against the hands of the potter,
 - Suddenly, we are freed of all that static that drowns out the Good News of God
 - And we find that God is using his power of Eminent Domain in us,
 - to give to us what we can never achieve on our own.

- As much as we might like to proclaim that we are the captains of our own fate, ultimately, we have to acknowledge the fact that God is the Lord of all creation, and that ultimately our destiny is in God's hands alone.
 - And that's a good thing.
 - If we human beings are left to our own devices, the result is often a mess: wars, greed and random acts of violence.
- On the other hand, when we work within God's eminent domain
 - We can experience the joy and peace and satisfaction of being who God envisioned us to be.
- God asks each of us each day, "Am I not free to do with you as I choose?"
 - Our answer can only be, "Absolutely."