“We Would Be Building”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I am not surprised by the response of the people with Moses, who trusts that *God* had stirred the men, Eldad and Medad, to prophesy. Neither am I surprised by the passage I was reminded of during our Thursday bible study recently as we read in Luke: “whoever is not against us is for us,” the disciples say, when it is brought to their attention that others were casting out demons in Jesus’ name.

So, what are we “for”? What is God compelling us to do as the Spirit flows fresh and powerfully among us? I would say that I have struggled with today/s sermon, except that I have been writing it for about six weeks, and then it was spurred agasin Tuesdasy evening when I went to the town meeting for the comprehensive plan focused, in part, on housing. Then, I read an author I highly recommend (tongue-in-cheek) to you. It’s an unusual theological source, Dorothy Gillman. First, though, I’d like to read a simple line to you that I read in the *Washington Post*: “Family caregiving should be seen as an expectation, not an exception. Solving the caregiving crisis requires a conceptual shift from caregiving as an aberration to caregiving as synonymous with human life.” Isn’t that beautiful? I’m reminded of it lately because of the caregiving that has been going on for Ruth Anne, our sister in faith, our sister-in-love, watching people stepping up and surrounding her with their care. I’m also reminded of it when I read books that take to task characters like one woman in the novel, *Incident at Badamya*. She is a woman of some means first assumed to be English, but who is American. She has inherited a great deal of wealth. She is confronted by a Mr. Gunfer, to whom she says, “’I dare say, as a socialist your sympathies must lie with the insurgents, Mr. Gunfer’ ‘I don’t approve of their methods!’ ‘Not when they include you, of course, no.’ ‘But I certainly approve of their plans and dreams for making Burma a socialist country.’ ‘Is that what they want?’ ‘From what I have heard and read, yes.’ ‘So, you’re a communist,’ she said accusingly. ‘Not at all. Socialism,’ he told her ‘is quite different. But not to your liking either, I’m sure, because in the distribution of wealth and land, Lady Waring, you would certainly have to share your fortune.’ ‘What fortune!? Since the war, England is a ravaged nation with shortages of everything. I cannot believe this would have happened if Mr. Churchill were still our prime minister. It’s been a great shock to me, the country turning to the Labor Party.’ ‘I’ll bet. How many castles did you have to sell?’ ‘No castles, Mr. Gunfer, she told him coldly. But it’s been necessary to sell a country home that’s been in the family for generations!’ ‘Country home,’ he said savagely. ‘And may one inquire how many rooms are in this *country home*?’

Lady Waring hesitated, and Gen, accustomed now to battles waged, guess that Mr. Gunfer was going to win this one, and she grinned. Thirty rooms’ said Lady Waring, ‘Leaving you with . . .’ ‘I will not be interrogated, Mr. Gunfer.” ‘The shortages, the ravages being only among the poor, Lady Waring, you suffer shock? In an ideal society, you would have only one home, and everyone, Lady Waring would also have a home.’”

I am struck by this passage, because I am a fortunate woman. I got to know Maine because I’m a summer person. My father grew equity by buying land and creating building by hand, carving out plateaus with pickaxe and shovel himself. He was a pastor, and so I grew up my first four years in a parsonage and then lived in a parsonage for a couple of years in MA and then here in Blue Hill for a year and two months. It was delightful. The pastors of this church have lived in the parsonage for the past hundred years because of the generous gift of the Hinckley Family. And, as you know, we sold the parsonage; we sold the parsonage because as a historic building it has been in great need of work and would continue to be in great need of a great deal of work in the years ahead. So, the trustees, attending to the stewardship of all our resources, the gifts of this congregation over the past 250 years, wondered what we do to preserve the work of this church; the ministry of the Holy Spirit in and through us, not only now but also in future. And so I’ve been thinking a lot about housing. I’ve been thinking a lot about housing because I was able to buy my home, and it occurred to me in conversation Tuesday night that what one man sad about a friend was true of me. He said, “I know a friend who was sold a home at a reasonable price and has committed to selling the home at a reasonable price in future, not waiting for it to be sold to the highest bidder, to folks who will rent it out, temporarily, to folks who will live in it for weeks at a time.

I know that what I’m talking about is what some would call controversial, but I also would say that it is at the heart of the Gospel. It is at the heart of scripture I the Hebrew Bible and now. I want to read for you quite a bit from “A Theology of Housing: Land, Limits and Jubilee Hospitality,” an essay by Dr. Jill Suzanne Shook. I am pasting the link [here](https://makinghousinghappen.net/2020/02/04/what-does-the-bible-say-about-land-and-housing-good-news-for-todays-housing-crisis/#:~:text=This%20oft%20repeated%20biblical%20text,a%20place%20to%20call%20home) so that you may read all of it. I hope that you all will read it and then will think about ways we might solve the housing crisis and then, I think, let’s start right here.

"Isaiah gives of a glimpse into God’s intention for the land, what Dr. Ray Bakke refers to as a blueprint for an ideal city, where all are housed, and there is no gentrification or displacement:

They will build houses and inhabit them; they will also plant vineyards and eat their fruit. “They will not build and another inhabit, they will not plant and another eat. (Is.65: 21-22) . . .

Homes must be built on land, so we can’t discuss homes without discussing land and its use. How we view the land, how we steward it and honor God’s laws that govern it, have everything to do with God’s overall message to save humankind to live not only in a heavenly home, but also to bring a bit of heaven on earth—an earthly home where we can safely experience God’s abundance and joy. . . .

Sabbath was the key organizing principle of Israel. Duet 15: 4 provides us with the purpose of these Sabbath laws: “there should be no poor among you.” Leviticus outlines God’s rhythm of Sabbath practices to alleviate poverty. . . .”

I am skipping through parts of the essay, which is worth reading in its entirety.

“The concept of a Community Land Trust, where ownership of a home is separated from land ownership, was conceived from the practice of Jubilee. Today over 225 CLTs exist in US jurisdictions providing affordable homeownership. This model takes land off the speculative market and places a wise and needed limit by making homes in the trust permanently affordable. This model recognizes that ultimately “the land is Mine, thus sayeth the Lord.” (Lev. 25:23)

“If there are any poor in your towns when you arrive in the land….do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Instead be generous and lend them whatever they need. Do not be mean spirited and refuse a loan because the year of release is close at hand”. (Deut.15:7-9)

Continuing in the words of Dr. Jill Shook, “The stated mission of one church in Pasadena was to provide affordable housing. After thirty years, they resurrected their original intent and today have over 500 units of Section 8 housing. Many churches own a few affordable units but rarely 500! Yet if churches help to pass good policy, they can multiply their efforts to create thousands of units. In the 1980s sixty churches in New York used their people power to organize, resulting in building 5,000 two- family homes—all for homeownership, all for low-income families.

This dramatically lowered crime, school-drop-out rates, and transformed congregations. These Nehemiah homes became the tool to infuse hope and serve as the economic engine that transformed Brooklyn and South Bronx. Twenty churches in Montgomery County, Maryland, were able to work with their county council to make 2.5 percent of all property taxes allocated into an affordable housing trust fund, enabling developers to make a significant step toward building enough affordable housing.

With a biblical foundation, love and the power of the Holy Spirit providing the motivation, courage and inspiration, the Church can set the pace and be an example of how to bring about housing justice. In this way, “Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid” (Micah 4:4).

So, what does this have to do with Pentecost? I love the final line of Wendell Berry’s “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” in which we are told to “practice resurrection.” What might practicing resurrection look like? Well, in our lifetimes it might look a lot like a year of jubilee. It might look a lot like feeding the hungry and housing the poor. It might look a lot like loving our neighbors . . . like family, and maybe even a little better than we love our family.

So, who are we going to be as the church, birthed anew again and again? Practicing resurrection . . . How will we let the poor be among us in ways that ease poverty while we focus on love over fear and generosity over even safety? I look forward to the conversations we will have in the months ahead about how we will—I would say, *spend*, but I think I mean more like *spread* the tithing from our sale of the parsonage. For starters, we have $71,000, 10% of our overall receipts. In my family, we would talk about playing with our giving, but how will we serve with our giving, to meet the needs of the least among us?

Let us pray: Oh God, be in our mouths, be in our understanding, be in our whole beings as we live out our purpose for this, your world. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.