

## Belonging: An inalienable right

Leviticus 25:8-13

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“Everyone deserves a place to be from.”<sup>1</sup> With that simple statement, we enter into the heart of the theology of Jubilee. Jubilee envisions a community where every person belongs. The means of belonging for the people of Israel, as spelled out in Leviticus 25, was their possession of the land. The land had been given to Israel by God. God had given each tribe, each clan, and each family, possession of a piece of land. Because everyone had possession of a piece of land, everyone had a place to be from. Because everyone had possession of a piece of land, everyone had the gift of belonging. To insure that no one would lose the place they were from, to insure that no one would lose that gift of belonging, to insure that the belonging would be an inalienable right, Leviticus 25 spells out the year of Jubilee, a year when anyone who had lost their land, who had lost their place in the society, could be welcomed back, could return to their land, and could be restored. Why? Because everyone deserves a place to be from.

Our reading from Leviticus 25 has these words: “In the year of Jubilee everyone is to return to their own property.” (Leviticus 25:13) If people were to return to the land in the year of Jubilee, that raises the question, “Where did they go that they needed to return?” Where had they been? The simple explanation is that through one adverse circumstance or another they had been displaced. They had lost their place. They no longer had access to the land. They had sold the land to make ends meet. They had drawn on loans to get by. They might even have sold themselves as servants in a desperate effort to survive. These series of losses had added up to a devastating result. They were displaced. They had lost their land. They had lost their sense of belonging. They had no place to be from. And then...after seven sabbath years—seven times seven—so that the seven sabbath years amount to a period of forty-nine years...and then...have the trumpet

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<sup>1</sup> Ucko, Hans, ed., “The Jubilee as a Challenge.” *The Jubilee Challenge: Utopia or Possibility* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 2.

sounded. Call people to return. Call people to come home. Call people to be restored. Call the land to be restored. On that day, on that great and glorious day when people return and are restored, rejoice! Jubilee is a celebration.

Even though we cannot transport ourselves back to the time of the Jubilee, to a time when everyone had the gift of belonging through a piece of land, we can relate to the idea expressed in Jubilee that everyone deserves a place to be from. Jesus tells parables that tell that same story, that same theme that everyone deserves a place to be from. To tell those parables he imagines that someone or something has been lost. They have been displaced. They no longer have a place where they belong.

Luke 15 tells three parables about ones who have lost their place. One sheep has been separated and become lost. They have lost their place. But the shepherd searches until he finds the lost sheep. When that lost sheep is found, there is great rejoicing. One coin has been misplaced, separated from its owner. One coin has become lost. The owner searches until she finds that lost coin. When that lost coin is found, there is great rejoicing. A son has lost his place. A son has lost his way. A son has lost his inheritance. Worst of all, he has lost everything through his own selfish and callous choices. Nevertheless, when that son returns it is cause for great rejoicing, for a huge celebration. The rationale for all of these situations is that there is rejoicing in heaven when one who is lost becomes found. Why? Because apparently in the kingdom of heaven, as in the theology of Jubilee, everyone deserves a place to be from.

But what if people do not have a place to be from? Leviticus envisions everyone having a place to start with, and if they lose that place, they are restored. What if there are people who do not have a place to start with, who do not have a place they are from? The parables Jesus tells about the lost being found are not the only episodes where Jesus addressed those who had no place to belong. There is a real-life example in the gospels that is very helpful as we consider how we might seek to put Jubilee into practice in our own situation. Jesus met a tax collector. The tax collector was an outsider, a person of disdain. The tax collector definitely did not belong. By aligning

themselves in one way or another with the occupying force, the Romans, the tax collector had become identified as one who did not belong, one who was an outsider. What Jesus says in defense of the tax collector is telling. When the tax collector follows Jesus, Jesus affirms the tax collector by saying, “I have come to seek and to save the lost.” And it is not just the tax collector. After following Jesus, the tax collector invited a whole slew of friends to meet Jesus. His friends are described in turn as other tax collectors and sinners. They are all outsiders. They do not belong. They do not belong until they meet Jesus who came to seek and to save the lost. In the eyes of Jesus, tax collectors and sinners have a place to belong, and that place is with him, in a relationship with him.

I guess what I am hoping to point out is that in Leviticus, the starting point is that everyone belongs (the land), and if they lose their land, if they lose their sense of belonging, the Jubilee restores them. Our world today is very different. We have a whole slew of people who do not have a place where they belong. We have a whole slew of people who either feel or literally are displaced. We have far too many people who both feel and who live on the margins, who are excluded. Jubilee presents us with an opportunity to ask, “How can we be part of helping people experience a sense of belonging? How can we be part of helping people find their place?”

Years ago, I had an experience with someone who lost their place. The person who lost their place was a teenager, a middle school student, or, as we referred to such a student years ago, a junior higher. We were at summer camp. I was the counselor for a group of junior high boys. Christian was one of the boys in my cabin. We were out one day in the middle of the forest, 5,000 feet high in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California, following a leader who was talking to the kids about their faith in God. California forests have some towering trees. Christian, the young man at the center of this story, did not have the world’s longest attention span. We were gathered near some trees. The leader was talking to the boys. Christian got bored. In his boredom Christian decided to climb the tree next to where we were standing. It was a gigantic tree, hundreds of feet high. In no time at all Christian was 40 or 50 feet in the air. That was his

place, high above the rest of us. And I might add, high above the ground. Much higher than I felt comfortable about. I was just about ready to tell Christian to get down from that tree, when the need to tell him to get down from the tree disappeared. Vanished. You see, the branch Christian was standing on broke. Christian lost his place high above us on that branch when that branch broke.

How long does it take a junior high boy to fall from a branch 50 feet in the air? Well, from my own personal experience, the fall takes long enough for a youth pastor to watch his career flash before his eyes. I knew this was the end for me...and my fear was this was the end for Christian. Watching him fall, I realized what a disaster it is for someone to lose their place. Christian fell those 50 feet as my career as a youth pastor passed before my eyes. But interestingly enough, Christian had climbed those 50 feet by stepping on various branches on his way up. Now, on his way down, his junior high body hit each of those branches. Each branch in turn broke and his fall continued uninterrupted. With each branch breaking I was saying to myself, "This ...is ...the ...end ...of ...my ...career ...I ...am ...in ...so ...much ...trouble." Branch after branch, break after break, foot of fall after foot of fall, Christian descended from his loft place so high above us. Finally, he crashed into the ground. Amazingly, all of those branches he broke on the way down served to break his fall. When he hit the ground, he popped right up, looked at the leader whose lesson had been so dramatically interrupted, and asked, "Did I miss anything?"

I tell you that story because God fills Leviticus 25 and the surrounding chapters and verses in the larger Exodus narrative with branches to break the fall when someone loses their place. God gives safeguards, so that people do not lose their place. God instructs his people what to do when you see someone falling, when you see someone losing their place, when someone comes on hard times, when you see someone being pushed to the margins. Like the branches of the tree, all of these safeguards break the fall, so that a person and their life are not destroyed. All of these various safeguards preserve life for a displaced person until...until the great and glorious trumpet sound that signals the year of

Jubilee. When that trumpet sounds those who have lost their place are restored.

What I hope we can discover together in our journey through the Jubilee is how we can be part of developing practices and behaviors and actions that help people find their place, that help people experience a sense of belonging. Christian fell from his place, but the branches broke the fall. Can we establish some branches that help people climb step by step, little by little, experience by experience, on a journey of discovering they truly do have a place where they can belong? Our hope and our purpose in doing that is our longing and desire for all people to find that in the community of faith, people really do have a place of belonging.

An experience I had years ago with a man named Jim serves as an example of what the Jubilee might look like in our world today. Jim became involved with our church in Houston. Jim needed dialysis. Jim was from Indonesia. Jim had been in the United States a long time but never became a citizen. Because of that he did not qualify for medical assistance. Jim was not a member of the church, but he soon found a home among a group of men who met for a weekly bible study on Tuesday mornings. The men welcomed Jim. When Jim needed help getting back and forth from his dialysis, the men took turns giving him a ride. This usually involved a stop for a hamburger on the way back from treatment. Some special friendships were formed. And along the way the men and some others chipped in the money for Jim to get that dialysis. The dialysis cost about \$2,000 a month. Dollar by dollar, gift by gift, money was donated. Somehow God raised up the resources so that for four years Jim could get that dialysis. Checkbooks were opened, and more importantly, hearts were opened. There were four years of rides and over \$100,000 of medical help. Branch by branch by branch, these multitude of safeguards preserved Jim and his place of belonging.

It was really amazing to see how people worked together to preserve and protect this one life, to work as a larger group to assure

Jim's place in our community. Can you imagine then, how I felt, when a member of our Tuesday morning group pulled me aside one day. This man had stepped up to help coordinate our efforts with Jim. In a quiet voice this man said he had been talking with Jim. In their conversation Jim confided that he felt like he did not belong. I can still feel the pain I felt that day. It was like being punched in the gut. I don't know if I have ever felt more disappointed. I was devastated. Despite all the efforts Jim said he felt like he did not belong.

Well, this story has a happy ending. The man telling me Jim felt like he did not belong must have noticed the devastated look on my face because he immediately said, "No, no, it's not what you think." He proceeded to tell me that Jim felt like he did not belong because he was not a member of the church. Jim really wanted to belong, and he felt like until he became a member he did not really belong. I will forever treasure the memory of the day Jim stood before the congregation answering the questions of membership as he stood by the communion table. He knew he belonged because he had been welcomed. He had been welcomed warmly. He had been welcomed with open arms. Through countless acts of kindness, concern, compassion, and hospitality, acts that included rides to and from treatment and acts that included stopping for a hamburger on the way home, one man had found his place in the community of faith. One man had experienced the inalienable right of belonging.

In Leviticus 25, the sign and symbol of belonging is the land. The land secured a place for each person. The land gave each person a place to be from. What is our sign? What is our symbol? In many ways our sign and our symbol is this table, the communion table.

- At this table Jesus opens wide his arms and invites people to come from east and west, from north and south to sit with him. Come, because at this table you belong.
- At this table Jesus proclaims that he gave his body and his blood so that we might experience a right relationship with

God...and a right relationship with one another. Come, because at this table you belong.

- At this table Jesus gave his body and his blood so that we might belong to his family of faith, so that we might be part of his body, the Body of Christ. Come, because at this table you belong.
- At this table Jesus gave his body and his blood so that we might know we are loved by God, loved with an everlasting love, loved with an eternal love, loved with a love that will never let us go, loved with a love that will always hold us close. Come, because you belong.

Everyone deserves a place to be from. This table tells us we have a place to be from. This table tells us we have a place we can call home. This table tells us we have a place where we belong. This table is filled with the joy of Jubilee. “Friends, this is the joyful feast of the Lord.” Come. Come to this table. Come. Come dear friends. Come. Come and find your place in the Body of Christ. Come, because you belong.