

Hearts, minds, and possession

John 12:20-33

Mark Schloneger

March 21, 2021

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. (John 12:20-33, NRSV)

This dirt is mine.

Well, it's my wife Sarah's too, and yes, it's mostly the bank's. But let's not get distracted by the details. Under the law, this dirt is mine because I paid for the exclusive right to call it mine, and what that means is that no one else can call it theirs. I have the right to control it, to develop it, to exploit it, to do almost anything I want with it -- at least, that is, until I sell it or otherwise give up my right. You see, this dirt came from the half acre of land that I have purchased as my property, and my property includes everything that is found on it: my house, my driveway, my trees, my flowers, and my ferns that are threatening to overtake my yard.

Mine, mine, mine, mine, mine (and Sarah's and the bank's).

For many centuries and until relatively recently, the common law rule was that a person's property rights extended all the way up to heaven and descended all the way down to hell. Take a moment and think about that -- it's ridiculous, isn't it? Though you had no legal claim on heaven and hell, you could, in theory at least, own a spot on the earth's molten core or a part of a cloud floating across the sky. We human beings think very highly about ourselves, don't we?

Over the years, as technological capabilities like space and air travel advanced -- courts and legislatures limited this doctrine to make some restrictions on the breadth of property rights. Still, have you ever paused to consider how we've come to think about the air above our heads, the soil underneath our feet, the things we hold in our hands, and even the lives we live, as ours alone, ours to control, ours to develop, ours to exploit -- possessions of ours, our *private, personal* possessions?

How do these ideas about property shape how we understand ourselves, how we think of others, how we care for the environment? How do they shape how we understand God?

After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and called him out of the tomb, people followed him into Jerusalem and others came out to meet him. When the religious leaders who were plotting to kill him saw the large crowds around Jesus, they said, Look, there's nothing that can be done, the whole world has gone after him." The whole world.

And sure enough, the way John tells it, a group of Greeks go up to Philip immediately after that, and they make the request of all would-be disciples --"Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Now, there's some debate among scholars about who these Greeks actually were, but I think we're to understand them as representing Gentiles, showing that, yes, the whole world was being drawn to Jesus.

You see, there's a couple details here that we can easily miss. First, John reminds us that Philip is from Bethsaida of Galilee – Galilee "of the Gentiles", as the prophet Isaiah labeled it (Isaiah 9:1); and, second, Philip and Andrew are the only two disciples with Greek names. This signals something important about the earliest community of Jesus' followers, something that they as individuals did not know when they were called together by Jesus. And that is together, as a community, they were formed by Jesus to welcome and include the whole world.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote a bit angrily to a church that had missed this point. "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith", he wrote. In baptism, "you have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:27-28)

This is not merely a theory or a nice sentiment. It's a reality into which all who profess to follow Christ are called to live. Whose church? Whose property? The way we approach the church's worship, mission, vision, and resolutions at conventions is often fueled by an assumption that it's ours -- as in ours to possess, as in ours to control, as in ours to defend, ours to reclaim, ours to purify, ours to define *our* identity. The thing is, "ours" is rarely explicitly defined but is always intuitively known and felt by those not included in the definition. It's sad, because the church is not a possession of ours - the church is God's possession, and we, together, are possessed by God through Christ. What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.

Given this point, it's surprising, at least at first, that Jesus doesn't immediately go out to meet those Greeks asking to see him. I mean, Jesus greeted the first disciples, saying "Come and see," and Philip called Nathanael with that same invitation, "Come and see." And so, why does Jesus not go to those Greeks who actually came to see?

Given the way that Jesus responded, I think it has something to do with what those Greeks -- as well as others in the crowds who were praising his name as Israel's liberator -- were looking for. Ancient Greek philosophy and culture put an emphasis on personal effort to achieve the human ideal, and the human ideal was a life of enjoyment and happiness. That ideal was achieved by carrying to fruition one's deepest desires, avoiding the sacrifice of those desire while developing one's own personality.¹

And so listen again to what Jesus said to Philip and Andrew when the Greeks asked to see him: "Unless a kernel of wheat falls in the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but, if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world for Jesus' sake will find eternal life." (John 12:24-25, NRSV)

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2012), 725.

You want to see me, you want to serve me? Jesus asks. Then follow me, “for wherever I am, there my servant will be.”

In other words, your life is not entirely your own. The church is not a possession of yours. No, you have been claimed by God, and together, we are God’s possession. Our lives are meant to be lived within that relationship, and it is defined by service. And to emphasize this point, Jesus goes on to talk about his death, the *kind* of death that he would die. He says, “When I am lifted up from this earth, I will draw all people to myself.” (v. 32)

All people. Through the cross. Claimed by Christ. We are not our own.
But the question is, how will we honor Christ’s claim upon our lives?

A couple weeks ago, I participated in a webinar produced by the Keenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. I was drawn to this particular webinar because Willie James Jennings was being interviewed. Jennings is an ordained Baptist minister, a theology professor at Yale Divinity School, and the author of several books, including *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* and his most recent *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*.

Jennings asks, “Why has Christianity, a religion premised upon neighborly love, failed in its attempts to heal social divisions,” particularly in the United States?²

I’d add to that question: How do churches in the United States
form people (or, at least, fail to transform people)
who carry the cross while they storm the Capitol,
people who refuse to listen to, speak about, or do anything tangible to change the experiences
of people of color both on our streets and in our churches,
people who fail to speak the name of Jesus and act in the way of Jesus
for those in search of healing and wholeness and justice?
How does a church form – or fail to transform – a person who picks up a gun
to kill Asian women working in spas?
How does a church, a congregation, wind up almost exclusively white and middle class --
in a racially, culturally, economically, diverse community.

These questions – all of them – are linked, and they require a lot of soul-searching by people just like us, beginning with lament.

In the webinar, Jennings focused on how our understandings of property perpetuate injustice and oppression and limit both our vision of what God is doing in the world and our imagination of our role, the church’s role, in it.³

We hardly stop to think about property. It just is.

This land, this dirt, everything in this world, is either mine, yours, someone else’s, the government’s, or, if it’s unclaimed, it’s owned by the first one who gains the right to control it. Under the law, a rabbit hopping across your property belongs to no one -- unless, that is, you trap it, wound it, or kill it. Then, it’s yours -- you’ve gained the legal right to possess it. There’s violence and coercion that lie at the foundation of how we understand property.

² Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).

³ Willie James Jennings & Norman Wirzba (March 11, 2021). *Facing the Anthropocene: Willie Jennings* [Webinar], The Keenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University; <https://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/facing-the-anthropocene/>.

Under the law, property ownership is defined by the one who has the right to possess it, to develop it, to exploit it. It's all about exercising exclusive control over something, enclosing it. This is a philosophy that was proposed and developed by John Locke, and, mixed with Christianity, it was one that was expanded upon and brought to this land by European settlers.

To the colonial settlers, the indigenous peoples didn't know how to properly cultivate the land or simply neglected to do so. And so, to the settlers, those native tribes couldn't really claim to possess something that they didn't use or control. You see where that leads, don't you? It leads to the shrinking and shrinking of native lands until their forced removal.

The indigenous peoples those settlers encountered, at least initially, had a much different understanding of property. To them, Jennings says, possession was not so much a question of "possession of" but "possession by." It's the difference between thinking of land an object -- a possession of ours -- and recognizing that the land also makes it claims on us -- a partner that also holds and possesses us. And so, instead of someone exercising exclusive control over it, enclosing it, there was an openness, a recognition of the overlapping claims of individuals, the community, ancestors, animals, plants and seasons. The land, the soil, the sky, the waters, were not merely things that we hold or possess, but they were partners that also hold and possess us. There's reciprocity in possession.⁴

Now, to be clear, I don't want to romanticize the entirety indigenous culture or to condemn the entirety of Western culture. When it comes to culture, doing either of those things dehumanizes people and dehumanizing people always leads to oppression.

But at least in respect to the indigenous people's way of understanding the land and property, I think that we get closer to how God how Jesus taught and lived.

Jesus was not teaching those disciples to hate their life – of course not. He was turning the Greek ideal on its head. Loving a life that considers one's personal interests and rights the highest good and to put one's own reputation above God's leads to destruction. Our desire for that type of life *should* be hated, for it refuses to recognize God's claim on our lives and it breaks what Jesus identified as the Law's greatest commandment: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,' and "love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-38)

To all those who want to see Jesus, your wish will be granted through Jesus' passion.

To all those who want to serve Jesus, your desire will be shown by following him in a life of service to God and others.

Service – true service – recognizes that we are not autonomous actors asserting personal rights over those of others. True service recognizes the overlapping claims upon our lives and possessions -- the claim of God and those of others. That's the life that glorifies God. That's the life that God glorifies. And that's the life that finds its fullest expression in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who draws all people – all people – to himself. Jesus saves us from a life of self-sufficiency and saves us for a life loving our neighbors.

"My mother was a gardener," Willie Jennings says. Each spring, as she got her garden ready in Grand Rapids, Michigan, she would spray water on the dirt, and tell him to plunge his hands deep into the wet

⁴ Ibid.

soil. And she would turn to him and say, 'You feel that? You feel that son? That's life. Dirt is what joins us in a place. We may have differences, but we have the land in common.'⁵

No, this dirt is not merely my dirt (and the bank's, and Sarah's). It's hubris to think that we are the exclusive owners of soil and sky and water and trees. This is the soil that we hold for people, plants, and animals who will come long after us, and this is the soil that holds us, too. We hold this soil in covenant with all those who have gone before us and after us. We hold this soil in covenant with the land, the plants, the animals, and all that is on it. We hold this soil in covenant with our neighbors.

We hold this soil in covenant with God through Jesus, the kernel of wheat that fell to the ground, to the dirt, and produces much fruit. If we want to grow, that's where we fall, too. For where Jesus is, there his servants will be also.

Hearts, mind, possession.

⁵ Dustin Dwyer. "Look about you. What ideas do you see inscribed on the land of Michigan?" *Michigan Radio* (transcript of radio broadcast, October 15, 2018); <https://www.michiganradio.org/post/look-about-you-what-ideas-do-you-see-inscribed-land-michigan>.