

## OWNERSHIP AND RELATIONSHIP

Psalm 24.1-6

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### **Psalm 24**

Of David. A Psalm.

- <sup>1</sup> The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;
- <sup>2</sup> for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.
- <sup>3</sup> Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?
- <sup>4</sup> Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,  
and do not swear deceitfully.
- <sup>5</sup> They will receive blessing from the LORD,  
and vindication from the God of their salvation.
- <sup>6</sup> Such is the company of those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

### **Psalm 24** *adapted by Barbara Gibson*

The earth is one and all that is in it  
the world and those who live in it are one.

For the earth rests on the great oceans  
and the water of life flows in every river and stream.

Who shall ascend to the holy hills?  
And who shall stand in the sacred forests?

All who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not worship the marketplace or the bank,

who do not give their souls to profit and war,  
and who refuse to believe the social lies.

All will receive the blessings of earth  
as long as they seek the truth with every breath.

Such is the company of those who honor the earth,  
who honor the sacred face of creation.

## Sermon: Ownership and Relationship

*We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord.*

Sad to say, I guess we cannot – if we ever could – assume that people will know we are Christians by our love.

I was reading a statistic yesterday from a study done with sixteen to twenty-nine year olds, “a majority [of whom] strongly agree that Christianity is antihomosexual, judgmental, and hypocritical” and “only 16 percent would strongly agree that Christianity is a faith they respect or that Christians consistently show love for other people.”

As I said last week, optics matter. And if we love people, we better look like it – not the pretense of loving people but the practice of it, no matter how incomplete and imperfect it may be.

“We are one in the Spirit,” we sing this morning and we are echoing Barbara Gibson’s version of Psalm 24: “The earth is one and all that live in it are one.”

If you were here on one of the evenings of Shabbat when the Bet Alef Meditative Synagogue is worshipping in this place, you would probably hear Rabbi Olivier refer to God as the “Oneness of Being” – which makes sense given that the central tenet of Judaism is “**Sh'ma** Yis-ra-eil, A-do-nai E-lo-hei-nu, A-do-nai E-chad:” Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One.

And our sisters and brothers at Bet Alef understand that Oneness as the essential connection we share with each other and the world in the Oneness that is God.

That’s basically the meaning we get from Barbara Gibson’s adaptation of the psalm – “the earth is one and all that live in it are one.”

The standard version of Psalm 24 is: “The earth is the Lord’s and all who dwell in it.” The earth belongs to God. As one writer says, this is “God’s *ultimate ownership* of all things.”

You may remember that story about Jesus being ambushed by the religious leaders of his day with a question [Matthew 22.15-22]: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?” The trap is that, if Jesus says “yes” it is lawful, then he aligns himself with those in power who are complicit with the oppression of Rome. If he says “no” he aligns himself with those who advocate the violent overthrow of the government.

Instead, Jesus asks for a coin and identifies that the coin bears the image of Caesar – which is already a problem because the Ten Commandments say: “you shall make no graven images.”

And then Jesus says that famous line: “Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s.”

Now everyone standing in that crowd knows Psalm 24: “The earth is the Lord’s and all who live in it.” Everything belongs to God.

So, this model of God as the ultimate owner of the world serves an important purpose. Jesus is saying: “Caesar may think he owns the world but he does not.”

We may think we own the world, but we do not.

The Native ancestors of this place knew better. The speech attributed to Chief Seattle says: “How can one sell the air?” We can’t own it.

So that model of something or someone greater than us owning the world serves an important purpose.

But Gibson's adaptation shifts the language of ownership to *relationship* – from “the earth belongs to God” to “we belong to the earth and each other in this oneness of being.”

Now maybe you have noticed that belonging straddles both meanings – both ownership – we have “belongings” - and relationship – “we belong.”

And in case you are guessing that this is the point in the sermon where I say, of course, possessions are bad, I'll simply say that sometimes it's hard to tell if we own our possessions or if our possessions own us.

I do want to recognize that our belongings can sometimes be an expression of belonging.

I was reading a very heart-felt article by Mark Liebenow called “Artifacts.” It's about the sudden death of his wife at age 40 and the comfort and the struggle of seeing the things that belonged to her all around him. Those things aren't about ownership. “Everywhere I look, there is something else that stabs me with a happy memory,” he writes, “Then, when we can no longer bear the memories, we throw their possessions out, and our dead die again.”

Evelyn's belongings were more than possessions. They were artifacts of their relationship - their belonging.

Perhaps the lesson here is that the things we presume to own derive whatever meaning and value they have from the relationship – the belonging – they represent.

This building, for instance, is beautiful and useful but its meaning and its value is as an artifact of the belonging we are working to acknowledge and to create. It's a tribute to the relationship we have with our ancestors and with each other.

And if belonging can straddle ownership and relationship we should be clear that, however meaningful belongings can be, they are not people. We do not own one another. We belong to each other. I used to hear kids say, when asked to do something they didn't want to do, "you don't own me!"

Well, that's right. And there has been a lot of damage that has been done when people get confused about belongings and belonging – when they mix up ownership and relationship.

I have started reading a book that follows up on Dorothy Butler Bass' reordering of the traditional pattern of "church." The old model was believing-behaving-belonging: believe the right thing; behave the right way; and then you can belong. Bass says that order doesn't help us very much. And the better order of things is belonging-behaving-believing: first, we commit to belong and then we figure out how we do that and, in the process, we discover what it is we believe.

Here's the problem. I believe this. I think it is true instinctively. But that's different than knowing how to do it intentionally.

So I am reading *A Church Beyond Belief* by William Sachs and Michael Bos about how it is that we learn to belong.

And for those of you who are fans of Brene Brown from her TED talks, you will be interested to know that she is often quoted in this book. In fact, in the book she says, "We are psychologically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually hard-wired for connection, love, and belonging ... it's why we are here, and it is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives."

So how do we do it?

The first thing we have to do, she says, is to figure out the difference between fitting in and belonging.

Fitting in is trying to become who you think you have to be in order to be accepted.

Belonging is two things: (1) longing to be seen for who you really are and (2) longing to be part of something larger than yourself.

In order to do the first thing, we have to open ourselves to our human vulnerability. Those of you who know Brene Brown's work will know how important that is to her view of the world.

I have heard it said, that it is not a real sermon until Tim – until I – cry. And I have talked about this before. I hate that. I resist it with all my being. And it just happens.

I used to think this was about me. But I'm beginning to wonder if it's as much about *you* as it is about me; that is, the belonging work we are doing in our life together makes tears possible. It's ok here to be vulnerable. And I know I'm not alone when I'm up here crying.

So the first part of this belonging is the longing to be seen just as we are – the work of being vulnerable with each other.

The second part is about longing to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

You probably know that there are all kinds of ways that belonging can go wrong – people become completely focused on themselves; their willingness to be vulnerable becomes scary and so they draw the circle of their connections ever tighter; they become insulated and exclusive.

But the adaptation of Psalm 24 reminds us this morning that the earth is one and all that is in it. We don't just belong to each other. We belong to the earth and all that lives in it.

The book reminded me of the story of William Wilberforce of the later 1700s. He belonged to a small group of Christians committed to justice and the abolition of slavery. In that group, Wilberforce had an “awakening” - or we might say “he got woke” - and “he felt confronted with a sense of common humanity.” And not just a recognition that, oh yes, we are all connected whether we are people of color or slave or free or privileged or poor. He got woke to a profound sense of responsibility to that relationship.

By the belonging he experienced in that *small* group, he woke up to that *larger* connection we have with all people. And he spent the rest of his life using his privilege and his resources to fight poverty and to abolish slavery. He galvanized the anti-slavery movement and The Slavery Abolition Act was passed by the British Parliament in 1833. Wilberforce died just three days later.

By the way, he also was one of the founders of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

In other words, the practice of belonging woke Wilberforce up to all the ways we are connected with each other and the world.

So when people ask me why they should join the church, I say it's not about joining this church or any church. It's about the practice of belonging. It's about learning to do the important work of being vulnerable with each other and waking up to that larger connection we all have with each other and the world.

Why do Native Americans show up at an immigration rally? Because they know what it is to be vulnerable and how things can get messed up when we confuse ownership with relationship.

Why do busy people show up at “families belong together” events?

Because they see just how vulnerable children and parents are in a system that cannot tell the difference between our common humanity and the borders we have constructed.

Why do we show up here on a Sunday morning? Sure, the building is beautiful and there are lots of good things that happen here. But this building is an artifact of something more. Its value and its meaning come from the work we do *in here* to belong to the world *out there*.

Sad to say, people may not assume that we are Christians by our love. But that shouldn't stop us. That shouldn't keep us from living the awareness that we are one in the Spirit and loving the world anyway.

“We cannot own the sunlit sky,” the song says, “for we are part of all that is.” It's not about ownership. It's about relationship. It's about learning how to belong to one another and the world.

And, beloved ones, belonging may be the most beautiful and the most difficult thing any of us will ever do.

So, today, if you hear that voice – if you hear that echo whispering in your soul, “we are one; we are one!” - if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

Barbara Gibson's adaptation of the Psalms is *Psalms for Troubled Times* (Crestline Press, 2003), p. 31. Writing about Psalm 24 as God's “ultimate ownership” is Joel M. LeMon in *Psalms for Preaching and Worship* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), pp.105-108. *How can we well the air? Chief Seattle's Vision* (the Book Publishing Company Summertown TN, no date). The book includes a history of the evolution of Chief Seattle's speech in public life. “Artifacts” by Mark Liebenow is available online at [www.hippocampusmagazine.com/2018/07/artifacts-by-mark-liebenow](http://www.hippocampusmagazine.com/2018/07/artifacts-by-mark-liebenow). *A Church Beyond Belief: The Search for Belonging and the Religious Future*, William L. Sachs and Michael S. Bos (Morehouse Publishing, 2014), pp. 6 & 80-97.