THE GARDENER’S CHILDREN

Thieves, Renters or Heirs?

Picture a farmer who decides to plant a vineyard. He begins with a great investment of time, energy and money; he selects the best varieties of grapes, he propagates the young vines, plants them and tends them. He builds a fence around the vineyard, he engages craftsmen to build a fine winepress in it, he builds a watch tower to watch over the vineyard, one that will look beautiful pictured on the label of the wine he will eventually create. When his work is done and the vineyard begins to be productive, the farmer stands back to admire what he has built. With satisfaction he says, “It is good”. Now he needs to hand it over to managers, what kind of people will he prefer to entrust with his vineyard? Obviously there are plenty of thieves who would love to dig up and make off with the best of what is on the property, that’s what the fence has been built for. But there are other thieves too, ones that will pretend to manage the vineyard for the master, but will really become parasites who will rapidly deplete the assets they have been entrusted with. Other tenants will have the attitude of renters, they will do the minimum needed to maintain the property but with no attitude of investment in the thing that the farmer has been building. The master’s own children, however, feel that this beautiful garden is their own inheritance, and they will continue to make improvements and investments in it.

In agriculture, the connection a family feels toward their ancestral land is rich. Generations are aware of their role of heirs and stewards of the family land. Inheriting land is not simply an economic transaction from one generation to the next, for many farm families it’s to receive a sacred trust; it carries the weight of the hopes, plans and work of generations. These issues of ownership and stewardship are reflected in an old farmer’s saying; “Give a man an acre and he will create a garden, rent a man an acre, and he will create a desert.” Owners feel responsibility for, and the desire to improve and invest in a property, a renter, or hired hand, feels no such responsibility and, in fact, expects others to keep up the property.
The popular, secular environmental movement, with the impression that humans are the “virus infecting the planet”¹, have unconsciously accepted the “thief” as the definitive human relationship with creation. The creator of nature is out of the picture and nature is viewed as “yet unclaimed”. Unless they build an adequate fence around nature, thieves are able to break in and steal. The issue for environmentalists seems to be “how much shall we permit people to steal and how much will we be able to take control of for the sake of nature?”

For some reason, many Christians have chosen the word “stewardship” to refer to their relationship with creation. While better than the thief, the steward, or hired manager, is not the model that the Bible promotes for us. The Christian model of human’s engagement with creation ought to be that of heirs.

**Heirs of Creation**

In the book of Genesis, God has gave to human beings the responsibility of ownership and even heirship over the earth. The book of Genesis tells us that God created the earth and it’s creatures, He blessed the animals he had made, the birds, sea animals, livestock, microbes², and wildlife. He called these things “good”. And he entrusted these things into the hands³ of Adam. God assigned Adam to the task of naming all the animals of the earth⁴ giving him. God also gave to Adam “every green plant on the face of the earth”. In laying out the humans’ responsibility for the earth God used very strong language of dominion and lordship, not of stewardship, yet in context this cannot be understood as endorsing man’s destruction of creation which God calls “good” and blesses. Adam and Eve, and by extension ourselves, are to be seen as the ‘owners’ or ‘rulers’ of the earth and it’s animal and plant communities. Just as the owner of a house cares for and invests in his or her property, we are to care for and invest in that which God has himself loved, invested in and has given to us. A father could give his son a beautiful house as a gift, and the son would perhaps be within his rights to burn down his new house, but that child would undoubtedly be a fool and his actions not commendable. In the same way we have despised our

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¹ Expressed by Agent Smith in the film “The Matrix”
² “Creeping” or “swarming” things: reh’mes.
³ Literally “under the feet” of man
⁴ This is in contrast to the Islamic account of the creation, in which Allah teaches Adam the names of each animal. Sūrah al-Baqarah: 31
inheritance and treated the earth more as if we were renters than owners.

**Jacob and Esau**

Esau was a hunter, his younger brother Jacob was a herdsman. A hunter lives by subtracting from the wild herds that form the base of his living, a hunter neither owns nor looks after the animals on which he relies. He simply preys on them and depends on natural processes to replenish that which he has taken. Hunters, as they naturally kill first what is closest to them, must continually go farther and farther to find what they need. They must be crafty and deceptive to entrap the animals they seek, they become the adversary of their environment, of both the prey and the other predators, as well as the little birds and animals which might give away their hiding positions. The hunter lives by taking, not by building. A herdsman, by contrast, multiplies the base of his living. He cares for and looks after each animal, of the females he keeps all those that have acceptable qualities and raises them to the best of his ability so that they will become productive mothers. Of the males he selects those with exceptional qualities as breeding animals and the rest he raises for his own food and to bring to market. The herdsman succeeds by careful planning and by leading his herds constantly to fresh pastures - waiting long enough between grazings for the vegetation to fully recover and for the worms and parasites in the environment to have declined since the last grazing. The hunter is a thief, a herdsman is a builder, a hunter kills with relish, a herdsman harvests reluctantly. The hunter’s investment is only in the taking, the herdsman has invested greatly over a long period of time. The hunter despises his inheritance, he depletes it over time, the herdsman builds upon his inheritance, adding to it year after year. Esau, the hunter, traded his inheritance for a bowl of stew. Jacob treasured and went to extraordinary efforts to secure and protect his inheritance.

Our human society has become an Esau society. We have despised our beautiful birthright and traded it for a quick meal. We have become enamored with extractive industries, pulling oil out of the ground at alarming rates to produce energy and materials. We are surrounded by these products, we use so much plastic that we dress in it, move by it and even put it in our food. We confuse ‘taking’ with ‘producing’ (is there truly any oil producing company on earth?) We push aside mountains and forests to get at the small percentage of copper, steel or gold that is underneath. Our fisheries are using
technologies, cheap energy and persistence to hunt the last wild foods available to us, even our agriculture has become an Esau agriculture, we use our petroleum to deplete the soils and try to make up for it by becoming ever more addicted to synthetic fertilizers and poisons derived from cheap energy and petroleum products. Having already treated our animal and plant inheritance with contempt, we now rush to complete the exploitation and destruction of our soils and microbial communities. Just as Esau’s country became a wasteland and a desert\(^5\), our earth is suffering from our mismanagement.

Jacob, in contrast to Esau, is a planner and a husband of animals, he cares for the land and for the animals, and not just his own animals but even those that do not belong to him. When he sees the three flocks of sheep gathered, waiting, around the well in the heat of the day (recorded in Genesis 29) he feels urgency for the sheep. The pastures nearest the well are always grazed first are in danger of being overgrazed. The good shepherd who cares for the sheep rises early to get the flock to water so that they can then walk far out in the cool of the day to the untouched pastures where the grazing is best. They will then spend the day grazing before they come back for the evening water and protection for the night. These animals that Jacob sees are lying down when they should be grazing, not only are they thirsty, they are hungry too, but lacking water they cannot go far away from the well to graze – this is no way to raise animals, it bothers Jacob deeply that the sheep are uncomfortable and it bothers him that they will not gain weight with this type of management. What does he do? In a Christ-like way Jacob runs to the well and rolls the stone away. He waters the three flocks of sheep. Even though these animals do not belong to him, he acts as if they do (and eventually some of these flocks do become his). Jacob is a good-shepherd, he knows how to care for animals and to bring an increase. He has observed nature, watching the seasons and the growth patterns and life of the animals and plants in his area, he has discovered what makes them succeed, he applies his observations tirelessly and over the long-run. He perseveres, observes and improves his flock and that of his father-in-law and he improves the land as well. The Jacob is the one who brings an increase by diligence and obedience.

\(^5\) Malachi 1:3
The Parable of The Two Lost Sons

Jesus tied the themes of inheritance, heirship and servanthood together in the parable often called The Prodigal Son. In this parable we have the same issues of inheritance and birthright. A father has two sons, both of them, however, fail to be good stewards of what their father has given them. The younger son despises his father and the work of his hands in building and maintaining the family estate, he asks his father to give his inheritance to him immediately. He then proceeds to squander his inheritance and disburse his father’s estate. Lands, which may have been in the family for generations, are sold, livestock is liquidated all in the greed for gold. The younger son becomes alienated not only from his father and from his ancestral land, he becomes alienated from his brother and even from his culture as he goes into a foreign country and trades his inheritance for a short period of pleasure. Finally, in abasement and need he decides to return to his father in hopes that he will be allowed at least an honest job, not as a son this time, but as a servant. The older son too, has despised his father’s inheritance and experienced alienation. “I have slaved for you these many years” he says, as if he were doing his father a favor and ignoring the fact that he is an heir and not a servant. When he says “You never even gave me a young goat from your flock to enjoy with my friends” he reveals that not only does he not consider the flock his own, with the attitude of an heir or an owner he also wishes to enjoy himself in the absence of his father. He considers his father, therefore, to be an obstacle to his personal enjoyment, rather than living in loving fellowship with his father. Both brothers have profoundly rejected their father and their inheritance, they have chosen to see themselves as slaves, and have treated their inheritance contemptuously. They have ignored the legacy of their father and forgotten their roles as his agents and offspring. The father, however, does not condemn them. For the younger brother the father, leaving his dignity at the door of the house, runs to the younger son while he is still far off he “falls upon his

6 In every middle eastern society, as Dr. Kenneth Bailey has observed in the book Poet and Peasant this is seen as a “wish for his father to die.”

7 In the middle east, a respectable man is never to be seen running. Imagine this wealthy man hiking up his robes to run out to his son. Surely the neighbors must have thought this disgraceful.
neck\(^8\)” and offers him gifts; the robe\(^9\) and ring, and restoration at least to the position of son, even if he will not restore the inheritance that has been lost. The older son’s rebellion is different. He refuses to come into the party in solidarity with his father. We are told he has been “in the fields” but how could he have been so far and so deeply disengaged from the life of the farm that they would have butchered a calf and begun a party without his knowledge, surely they would have sent someone to call him, yet he was absent. Now he refuses to enter into the house, a deep and public insult to the father, yet the father does not denounce him, he comes out to him instead and intreats him to join in the celebration of the one who has returned. “Son, you are always with me and all that I have is yours” the father says, emphasizing the fact of the elder son’s heirship and ownership, “It was fitting to celebrate and be glad because this, your brother was dead and is alive, was lost and is found.”

We are heirs of the earth, it is our inheritance, yet we behave less like owners and more like thieves. Rather than seeing the environment as a resource to be exploited, what would happen if we saw the environment as an investment to be nurtured? What kind of an investor would buy a building and begin stripping out all the wiring, nails, wood and stones to sell as building materials? Isn’t the sum more valuable than the parts?

The problem in the way we interact with nature is that we take too little ownership, not too much. We must become good shepherds of creation, In John 10:12-13 Jesus spoke about the value of ownership “The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.” It’s time for us to recognize our position as children of God and owners and heirs of the earth.

**Repentance and Grace**

We cannot leave the parable of the Two Lost Sons without a discussion of repentance. For hundreds of years the Latin tradition has called this parable

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8 Jacob and Esau have the same moment of reconciliation in Genesis 34:4 “[Jacob] himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother. But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he fell upon his neck and kissed him. And they wept

9 The robe is an echo of the garments of skin with which God clothes Adam and Eve to cover their shame. This garment restores honor to the son whose garments do not befit the son of the master of a great house.
Evangelium in Evangelio (the gospel within the gospel) and so it is. The important point here is that although the younger son made a decision to return to his Father’s house, his was a decision motivated by need and unwilling to contemplate the ultimate grace of the father. The son rehearses a speech on his way home, he says to himself “I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.” Yet the grace and love of the father is so great that it overwhelms and cuts short the prepared speech of the younger son.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.” Overcome by emotion and father’s love the son is only able to complete the first part of the speech. This is the true moment of repentance; the son abandons his own plan and surrenders himself to being found by the father. In looking at the natural environment we have the sense that God has imprinted it with the pattern of his grace, that although we may not come with the purest of intentions we must simply surrender our plans and turn back from our destruction and God’s nature will begin the work of restoration through us on its own. The important thing is that we “turn around” and decide to go back to the father. Even if the inheritance has already been depleted, the degradation needs to end for the restoration to begin.

**Cain and Abel**

In Genesis Cain and Abel are the sons of Adam and Eve, Cain “worked the earth” and was a farmer of plants and Abel was a herder of livestock. Although it remains a mystery exactly why Cain’s sacrifice was rejected by God, we can see how the conflict between these two brothers over their preferred method of making a living from the earth is emblematic of the conflict that has always existed between the grazers; ranchers and nomadic pastoralists and the farmers who cultivate plants in the soil. From the Mongol herdsmen who overran the settled farming societies across Eurasia to the wars between Bantu farmers and Nilotic nomads in Eastern Africa, or the conflict
between the Arabs who glorified a Bedouin nomadic ideal and their settled Jewish neighbors\(^\text{10}\) with their Kibbutzim farming communities, and between ranchers and the poor farmers whom they derisively called “sod busters” in the American West. Tensions between the two groups have occasionally erupted in wider conflicts. Although both schools of agriculture have value and important advantages they also both carry the possibility of great destruction if they are practiced carelessly.

The tiller of the earth uses inherently destructive methods to protect and nourish his plants. Tilling the earth oxidizes and disrupts the microbial communities that thrive there, the oxidization of soil carbon and slaughter of millions of microbes that happens with every strike of the hoe or turn of the shovel or plow is what creates the conditions for crops to thrive, but only in the short term. Plowing can be understood as allowing a large withdrawal to be made on the bank account that is the soil, and unless even larger deposits are also made into that soil bank, and time is given for interest to accumulate, the account will be depleted over time. Cultivation has another purpose as well, to kill the weeds. These thorns and thistles with which the ground was cursed in Genesis 3:18 can easily choke and destroy a crop if constant vigilance and diligent effort is not expended. A farmer cannot simply plant and walk away till harvest, one could not find the crop! The weeds must be destroyed, for Cain that meant returning time and again to chop away at the ground until the weeds are killed. The experienced farmer learns to deal with the weeds when they are still very small, and this means frequent and persistent effort, the “lazy young farmer who wouldn’t hoe his corn” from an American folk song procrastinated until the weeds reached his eye level and when he finally entered his field he found the weeds were too strong for him and he abandoned the crop. He truly understood the meaning of the words “Cursed is the ground because of you, in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life, and you shall eat the plants of the field by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread\(^\text{11}\)” The successful farmer, therefore, lives by the destruction of the plant and microbial communities in his of the body of Christ to give us life. The farmer and the herdsman both require death to create life-giving food.

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\(^{10}\) The same word lechem, (as in Bethlehem) means ‘bread’ in Hebrew and ‘meat’ in Arabic.

\(^{11}\) This is the first use of “bread” in the Bible. As a symbol of the Lord, bread represents the death
field, as well as the destruction of the birds and animals who come to eat the crop. This constant destruction in order to achieve a yield has an eventual consequence: the fields become barren over time. In traditional agriculture systems shifting cultivation – abandoning worn out fields to clear new ones – always remained the norm until land became so scarce in that area that farmers are forced to make great extra efforts to begin to feed the soil and make deposits as well as withdrawals. Nevertheless, the herdsman traditionally sees the farmer as a destroyer of nature.

The herdsman lives in close communion with nature. He sees the birds and small animals and does not think of destroying them, he walks beside streams and onto hillsides, he observes the native plants and the insects that the farmer thinks of as pests and has no animosity with them. His only adversaries are the predators that threaten his animals. But the herdsman does not commit to the land, he passes over it and takes what he wants. Although his animals are leaving “deposits” all over the soil, the herdsman does little to improve and invest in the land, at best he digs wells for his animals to water but he requires large areas of land and does little with it. The farmer is the precursor to urban society, the herdsman is a ruralist. Cain’s jealousy for his younger brother Abel may have many causes; Abel’s perception of the higher value of meat over vegetables, an envy over the freedom from back breaking tilling and weeding that Cain might have had. Perhaps a judgment of Abel as a nomad who refuses to settle down or as a butcher of God’s creatures. Whatever the case God’s admonition to Cain applies to us “Why has your face fallen? if you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door…”

There are many ways of finding oneself in error, but perfection is elusive. In agriculture, we do not have the luxury of prevarication, we must act. Our actions will be imperfect and our mistakes eventually have a way of asserting themselves. This ought to cause humility to grow in us, yet farmers, as human beings, struggle against humility. We wish to deny the reality of our own flaws and our own insufficiency as much as anyone else. Cain’s fundamental sin stemmed from his inability to take correction from God, from his own pride and refusal to admit wrongdoing.
In our society we have developed ways to persist in error despite evidence that what we are doing is wrong. In agriculture we have learned to use chemicals and energy to mask the symptoms of our errors on a massive scale. What we are doing, however, is merely delaying the inevitable consequences of our wrong actions, worse still, we are adding to our folly fresh errors, worse than the first. God’s warned Cain saying “sin is crouching at the door. It’s desire is for you, but you must rule over it.” Sin requires our active resistance, it is not enough to simply avoid it, we must expend our own energy to oppose it.

At the end of this story the Lord said to Cain “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened it’s mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longe[r] yield to you it’s strength.”

We find that Man’s sin had resulted in the suffering of the earth and that degradation in turn impacts human communities. Yet in Cain’s cry we hear an anguished sorrow “Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is more than I can bear.

Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence.”

The loss of his inheritance through his own sin is at the root of his anguish.

**Restoration and Regeneration**

It is up to us to be obedient to the wishes of our father, God, with our earthly inheritance, yet this is a difficult and painful work. Even to reclaim a single field from degradation to fruitfulness is a project of years of hard work and diligence, stress and difficulty. We cannot escape the curse brought upon the earth by the multitude of sins that we humans have wrought on it. The prodigal son squandered half of his father’s estate, even though he was ultimately restored to his father, the damage to his inheritance had been done. We are dealing with great destruction done to the earth. It is always easier to destroy than to build. In order not to lose heart we must not forget that our ultimate inheritance is being prepared for us in heaven as we are reminded by Psalm 17:6-8 ”The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance...I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

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12 Here in Hebrew we have an alliterative word play between the words ‘the blood’ ad-dam and ‘earth’ or ‘ground’ adama'h
As we take up the work of being the rightful owners of a damaged property we must recognize that we are not alone in this project. John 1:3 reminds us that all things were made through Christ. If we look to his creation as a model we can become restorative managers of creation. Jesus, who is able to absorb the sins of the world, has provided, in nature, the principles of restorative agriculture which we can apply to begin to heal the things that have been broken.

The techniques and principles of restorative agriculture are derived from a recognition of the high value, complexity and design of natural systems and an attempt to mimic them in a human agriculture system. In my personal experience I have seen that land can be restored and desertification can be reversed with many of these techniques by the grace of God and through the actions of his people when they are attuned to the creation of God and it’s workings. This “reversal of the curse” is attested to by the promise found in Isaiah 35:

*Your God will come... to save you. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground*

*bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.*

The Risen Christ, the one who Mary Magdalene identified as “the gardener”, his blood has covered the blood of Cain. Christ offers the redemption and restoration of the creation that he loves.

Psalm 96:10-13:

“The Lord reigns.... Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy. Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.