

A Sense of All Our Places.

The first event that inspired this sermon, happened as we were going home from church last Sunday. I watched two, not one but two, cars tailgating, speeding, passing on double solid lines. Now, it's true. I am getting old and grumpy. For quite a while now I have reflected on the increasing number of reckless and dangerous drivers. I don't know if they were always there and it's my age that makes me notice them more but I have been tempted to see if citizen's arrests are a real possibility as I watch people zoom through red lights and stop signs, weave in and out of traffic, and do what I think is described as "shooting the gap." A common phrase of those of us at a certain age is "Humph. He (or she) acts like he (or she) owns the road." This is an interesting phrase. It implies that people should see the road as common, not individual, property. We do not think of many pieces of real estate as common property. We are accustomed to thinking of places as belonging to one person or another. When we have something, like a road, that is clearly not individual property, we think of it as government property, not as something we all share. And yet we clearly share the road. The Social Justice Committee cleans a section of the road here, acknowledging our civic responsibility toward our shared road.

At one time, some people did own roads. They built them and maintained them and charged for them. Hence the name 'turnpike' because you literally had to pay a person turn a pike that opened a gate in order to use the road. Of course, people found ways around it but the point is that roads were sometimes private property.

We generally don't think of this as a transportation option. We pay tolls on roads as we know, the Thruway in our back door and all, but to see roads as private property, roads as subject to the whims and efforts of one person, is pretty foreign to us.

What is private and what is public is not as fixed as we might think, but the way things are now is often seen as the only way to do things, the only way that could possibly exist. It is hard to see things that are off the well beaten path. The category of shared things, things owned in common and the category of private things, things owned by only one person or by one family, are categories that people create and recreate. They are not obvious and they are not immutable.

In addition to roads, many things used to be held in common that we would now consign to the bin marked 'private property'. Just as there are things that we assume are there to be shared that were once privately held. Let's start with game animals. We might assume that game animals, wild creatures, belong to themselves

but at one time in Europe game animals were the property of the king or of nobles. Deer, pheasants, rabbits, etc. belonged to the person who owned the land on which they lived and since that was almost all the land, that was all the animals. The aristocracy hired gamekeepers to catch poachers and those caught were subject to hanging or transportation. Seems a little harsh? It certainly is more drastic than paying a fine to the DEC. But at the time, it seemed normal, like the way the world was supposed to work.

Conversely, it was land that was sometimes held in common. That's where the term 'the commons' comes from, land that was used by peasants to pasture their cattle or sheep. When agriculture changed and the aristocracy began to use new agricultural methods, methods that were considered more scientific, the commons and the small farms who depended on the commons were taken from the people who had farmed them for generations on generations and large areas were enclosed, to be used by the aristocracy who were, after all, their nominal owners. The losers in this change often came to the New World. Many were our ancestors who came not in a desire for adventure or riches or freedom but came because starvation in the burgeoning city slums was their other choice.

Once here, they found there was, literally, land for the taking and they could hunt anything they wanted. The right to both land and hunting were prized rights,

indeed. The commons changed to the frontier, to the limitless land. That view of things is with us still.

The idea of ‘the commons’, that some things, let’s say land or wildlife, are naturally part of each person’s portion, has been the subject over which much ink has been spilled, particularly recently, when the phrase ‘tragedy of the commons’ has resurfaced in the light of environmental concerns. Let me quote from Wikipedia about the origin and application of this phrase.

“The **tragedy of the commons** is an economic theory of a situation within a shared-resource system where individual users acting independently according to their own self-interest behave contrary to the common good of all users by depleting or spoiling that resource through their collective action. The concept and name originate in an essay written in 1833 by the Victorian economist [William Forster Lloyd](#), who used a hypothetical example of the effects of unregulated grazing on [common land](#) (then colloquially called "the commons") in the British Isles.^[1] The concept became widely known over a century later due to an article written by the ecologist [Garrett Hardin](#) in 1968.^[2] In this context, [commons](#) is taken to mean any shared and unregulated resource such as [atmosphere](#), [oceans](#), rivers, [fish stocks](#), or even an office refrigerator.”

Mike Davis' series of books on Los Angeles in part is directed to this concept. He charts Southern California's wild and fertile land through the devastation that occurred with unregulated building, beginning with the rejection of plans for setting aside large amounts of land for parks, public beaches, or the protection of wilderness and river front areas. The result has been the twin, if contradictory four horsemen of floods, droughts, pollution, and fire. Along with these natural disasters comes the animal/human interaction, often lethal and at least annoying, that have occurred as human homes are built on top of animal homes. As animals find themselves forced into unnatural closeness with people, their behavior deteriorates. I was reminded of the many bear/human interactions that have occurred in the Adirondacks, usually to the detriment of the bear. A few years ago a bear took the side off an Old Forge candy store, kind of like opening a difficult bag of Skittles, and had a wonderful feast. Ultimately, of course, bears that discover such wonders end up having to be destroyed. There are limits to our desire to share, either with bears or our fellow humans.

Despite the number of times that toddlers are told, 'It's nice to share', sharing is a hard thing to learn. Or perhaps that's why children are given this command so often. It's counterintuitive. Our inner child wants to scoop up all the toys, even those toys that are just like the toys we already have.

Unfortunately, the desire to possess is not just confined to dolls and toy trucks or their adult equivalents. It extends to pieces of land as well. We dream of rolling acres, of seaside homes, of mountain views all to ourselves. This desire for privacy and beauty is defended by many, including those who will never have the resources to have even a modest home for themselves.

Now, true confession time. We have a small camp in the Adirondacks. We enjoy our exclusive right to a bit of paradise, so I do understand where this impulse comes from. Of course, like everyone else, I'm good at rationalizing our possession. It was my in-laws; it's been in the family; my children and grandchild love it; it's pretty small, doesn't take up much space; we use it to relax. But the brute fact is that I have one more dwelling than I need and that dwelling is on land that was once not occupied by anything but wilderness.

I was even more acutely aware of my undeserved good fortune when we spent much of the past year grappling with issues of homelessness, both within the church and within our own family. The words of Matthew 9:58 kept running through my head. "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." And now the foxes and the birds aren't doing so well, either.

And time has not improved the prospects for the sons and daughters of man, either. By any measure, homelessness has increased, with a real peak after the great recession. While Central Square doesn't have people sleeping on subway grates, that doesn't mean all people are housed. The rural homeless are difficult to count. People squat in abandoned trailers, live in their cars, move from place to place quickly, before the rent comes due. Many double and triple up with relatives and friends, a precarious situation, one that often quickly unravels.

People slide quickly into homelessness. A few months, maybe a few weeks, without a job and they are on the street. Or in their parent's basement or cousin's spare bedroom. For poor families, doubling up creates friction as already inadequate resources are stretched further. People start with good intentions and end up at each other's throats. Human nature becomes distorted. When the stress and worry get too much, the relief often comes in the form of alcohol, drugs and violence. Meanwhile, houses are foreclosed, abandoned, fall to pieces. At the same time new developments overrun the countryside. Contradictory? Abandoning older homes, people without homes, building larger homes that devour more land and despoil animal homes. Try to explain that to a visiting Martian.

These are the conditions we face but the solutions are far from easy and far from obvious. More development means more jobs. Companies grow or they die.

Unemployment means more poor people, more homelessness. We have a tiger by the tail and we can't let go.

We know that we cannot go on as we have been, but what tipping point, what great insight, will lead us to a saner way to manage the earth we call home. At some point in history highways became public rather than private. We accepted the need for more rules, for more control, over those who used them in order to protect all of us. And yet it is the very overgrowth of human need that has created vast highways which also destroy the environment through which they slash. The automobile itself, that symbol of individual freedom, has been one of the biggest factors in creating more desolate places. We need a new way to see things. We need a new way to do things.

How shall we help the earth? The current hurricane damage and the probably sums of money to restore areas reminds us again that we all pay for our lack of care. Much of the coastline is owned privately. So are mountain tops with their spectacular views. Should homes be built anywhere people choose? Should the ability to afford such things be the only consideration? Should people expect others to pay for their choices when things go wrong? Does the earth, literal pieces of the earth, rightfully belong only to those whose wealth lets them possess it? Is there any role for sharing some of the natural beauty of coastlines, forests, deserts?

What about the air? Water? Who owns that? Should that be sold as well? And, if it is not for sale, if we all need it, who should pay for its use and maintenance?

Earth was given as a garden, is the title of one of our hymns. Shall it end as a burnt over, water logged slum?

There are ways to improve the situation. We can have different zoning restrictions, including hazard zoning that prevent people from building in vulnerable areas. We can have more subsidized housing. We can require more low cost housing to be created. We can set aside more arable land to be set aside for the food supply of the future. We can set aside wetlands, coast areas and forests to help wildlife. There are things we can do but first we have to want to do them.

We need to fall in love with the earth again, which means to fall in love with life itself, life in all its myriad forms and variety. We need to fall in love with life even if it is not always convenient or even if it does not serve human need. We need to reject this culture's fascination with death and with the artificial, the managed and the machined.

Earth was given as a garden, a garden of infinite riches. Let us go from here and tend our beloved garden together.