

Unsellables

[Luke 16:19-31, Jeremiah 32:1-15](#)

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I was born and raised in Greater Vancouver, and for my entire life, the housing market here has been heading steadily in one direction, up and up and up. I remember when I was finishing up at seminary and starting to think about our next steps, I started looking around at real estate listings close to vacant churches, and they'd have pictures of a rat-infested decaying death trap with no roof or functional plumbing listed as a 'charming fixer-upper' for almost a million dollars, and suddenly moving to Ontario didn't seem so bad. There's the old saying that in this world nothing is certain except death and taxes, but you can probably add 'unaffordable Vancouver housing' to that list. It sure feels like the market is going to just keep going up and up and up, and nothing will ever slow it down.

Of course, things don't always work out that way. If you look at today's reading from Jeremiah, you'll see what happens when things go wrong, and the good times are over. For centuries, the people of Jerusalem have been acting like everything in their world is there to make them rich – their land, their homes, their lives, even their fellow Israelites, everything is for sale, everything is fair game in trying to make more and more money. The wealthy leaders of Israel had trampled on the poor, they

had crushed the vulnerable members of their society in their greed and obsession for more and more wealth. Prophet after prophet had warned the people of God that they had to care about the people around them, they had to act justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with their God, but no one listened, they just worked harder and harder at taking and profiting. Even after the northern ten tribes of Israel were defeated and conquered by their enemies as punishment for their greed and disobedience, the southern tribe of Judah ignored this warning and continued down the same path of unrestricted greed. The prophet Jeremiah has spent his entire life telling the people of Judah that God is going to punish them, that foreign armies are coming to conquer Judah and destroy its capital city of Jerusalem, that there was no way for them to avoid the coming catastrophe, because they had angered God by caring more for possessions than for people. For years the people had ignored Jeremiah's warnings, they hated him and turned on him and threw him in prison, and still he continued to announce the people's doom. And now at last the moment of judgment has come: the armies of Babylon and Chaldea have marched against Judah, they have defeated their armies and laid siege to Jerusalem, they're about to destroy the city and enslave its inhabitants, and there is no hope for their rescue. God's punishment is about to be visited on Judah, and there's nothing they can do about it. It's hopeless.

And at this moment, the bleakest, darkest moment in the history of Israel, Cousin Hanamel decides to do some business with

Jeremiah. At first glance, this seems absolutely ridiculous. After all those years of living the good life, Hanamel should know that right now is a bad time. No-one in their right mind is going to buy property in Jerusalem when Jerusalem is about to be overrun by the enemy troops right on the other side of the city wall. And even if anyone is crazy enough to buy that land, it's not going to be Jeremiah of all people, the man who's been speaking out against the greed and profiteering of the people and their crooked deals, the man who's been warning anyone who'll listen that Jerusalem is doomed. And if you know a little bit about Jerusalem, then this idea is even more ludicrous. Hanamel's property is in Anathoth, and Anathoth was located right OUTSIDE Jerusalem's city walls, Anathoth is located on the side of the city walls where thousands of Chaldean soldiers are waiting to kill or enslave every citizen of Jerusalem and burn that city to the ground, Anathoth is in fact the very field where the armies of Babylon are camping at that very moment. They say in Real Estate the three most important things are Location, Location, Location – well, Anathoth has some problems: it is inaccessible, unattractive, and crawling with murderous soldiers intent on destruction. All in all, you have to think that Jeremiah is wondering what Hanamel could be thinking, coming to him at this moment asking to Make a Deal.

However, if you know a little bit about ancient business practices, Hanamel's actions start making sense. In Ancient Israel, Land was a precious gift from God given to one family, a gift that was meant to

belong to them forever and ever; it was their birthright, and it was never meant to leave that family's control. In order to ensure that property stayed in a family as much as possible, you couldn't sell your property to just anyone; you first needed to offer it to the person who you were most closely related to, and that person had what was called the right of redemption; it was their right to redeem the land and ensure that it stayed in the family. Only if they refused to buy could the owner then seek a buyer outside the family.

So when Hanamel comes to Jeremiah offering him the field of Anathoth, he isn't crazy, he's just following the law – before Hanamel is legally allowed to publicly offer the property for sale, he has to give his closest relative, Jeremiah, an opportunity to buy it. Doubtless Hanamel sees this as a mere formality – he knows as well as everyone else that the property is unsellable, that Jeremiah will never, never in a million years waste money on that dump. Maybe once Jeremiah refuses to buy it, he can sell it to a Babylonian soldier looking to settle down in the newly conquered territory of the Babylonian empire. Hanamel carries out his legal responsibilities, offering the property to Jeremiah to buy, giving his cousin the right of redemption to keep the property in the family, knowing that there is No Way that Jeremiah would ever, ever, ever accept.

And yet Jeremiah, to the shock of everyone in Jerusalem, including himself, Jeremiah buys the land. He redeems that land, he keeps it in the family, despite it being utterly worthless, Jeremiah buys the land.

He does everything by the book, he counts out the right price and he writes up the transaction and signs it and seals it up in a jar so that the deed has a chance of surviving the burning of Jerusalem, and in front of all the witnesses in the city, Jeremiah buys the land. And he does it for one simple reason: God told him to. The word of the Lord came to him before he even heard Hanamel's offer, telling him to take what little money he had and to throw it away on a worthless piece of land.

But if you keep reading in this chapter, you'll see that Jeremiah's not really happy about it. In the next verse, after his bold actions in the eyes of the people, Jeremiah privately turns to God and asks, "Why? For years I've been prophesying that Jerusalem will be destroyed because of their greed in buying and selling everything that moves, and now when it's all happening, now you want me to start investing in real estate? What's going on?" All his life Jeremiah has been speaking God's word, and it's always been that everything is over, that everything is hopeless, and now God is telling him something new, and he's confused.

And God Responds to Jeremiah's prayer, "Don't worry Jeremiah. It's all part of my plan, because the people need to know that the disaster and the hardship and the pain they are about to go through is not the end of the story. There's more to come." God wants Jeremiah to buy the land as a sign to everyone who sees him that one day, life will go back to normal, one day their enemies will be vanquished, one day they will live in freedom and plenty and safety, because God says that the people will be

his people, and he will bring them back to him. God wants Jeremiah to buy the land so that even in the darkest moment of their lives, the people will know that there is still hope, even if none of them, not even Jeremiah himself can see it. At the very moment that everyone believes that nothing can be done to save them, God promises that he has not abandoned his people, that he will do the impossible to save them.

And now let's move forward six hundred years, to the Judean countryside on the road to Jerusalem, the road to the city that had been destroyed just as God had warned, the city that had been rebuilt, just as God had promised. There Jesus tells a parable to his disciples, to the crowds gathered around him, to the Pharisees who mock him. He tells a story about a rich man, a man guilty of the same greed and selfishness that had once plagued Jerusalem, a man who is finally punished for his treatment of the poor just as Jerusalem was. And you'll notice that even in his agony, in his darkest moment, this rich man is still only focused on himself; he still only sees Lazarus as someone who can bring him a drink of water. Only when Abraham tells him that this is impossible does he begin to realize that there is a world beyond him, and he thinks of his brothers on earth, and he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn them, to shake them out of their complacency so that they will avoid the same punishment. Now, seeing as how the rich man spent his whole life with Lazarus lying at his gate and he never noticed him, it's unlikely his brothers will recognize him if he rises from the dead to warn them, and so

Abraham dismisses the rich man's request – they have the law of Moses, they have the testimony of the prophets – prophets like Jeremiah – they should be able to figure out that they need to act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with their God without needing Lazarus to remind them. But the rich man persists, and Abraham again refuses. If they haven't listened to thousands of years of God speaking, then someone rising from the dead isn't going to make any difference. Abraham tells the rich man that he and his brothers are doomed to eternal punishment, that everything is hopeless. And that's the end of the parable.

Or is it? Can anyone read this parable and possibly think it ends there? Can you read the gospel of Luke and can you know the rest of the story, know what is about to happen in Jerusalem, know what is going to happen on Easter morning and possibly think that the parable ends there? Yes, we have one of the greatest men of faith who ever lived, Abraham himself, declaring that it is over, that there is no hope, that even someone rising from the dead will not make any difference, but just as God wouldn't let Jeremiah's word of judgement be the last word to Jerusalem, God won't let Abraham's word of judgement be the last word to the lost. Even if no one will listen, even if there is no hope left, God refuses to let his people think they are abandoned, he insists that disaster and hardship and pain and even death itself are not the end of the story. There is more to come – someone is going to rise from the dead. Jeremiah thought that buying that land was useless, but God knew that it was a sign

that one day all his people would live in peace and prosperity and freedom. Abraham said that raising someone from the dead would be pointless, but God knew that it was a sign that one day all his people would be raised from the darkness of their sins into new life through the power of the one who had died for them, and so he gave up his only son to die, and then he raised him again, so that the entire universe would know that God has not abandoned his people, that he will do the impossible to save them. We were once unsellable, useless, worthless property, fields filled with sin and rebellion, and yet in our darkest moment, Jesus Christ redeemed us, when we were still occupied by the armies of sin and rebellion he bought us with his life, he kept us in the family of God by paying the highest price, and God raised him from the dead to prove to us that there is still hope, to prove that the power of God's love for us cannot be defeated by the armies of Hell or the bonds of death, so that we will know that one day our enemies will be vanquished, one day we will live in freedom and plenty and safety, because our God has promised that we will be his people, and he will bring us back to him. When things are at their darkest, when it looks like there is absolutely no hope, when through our own sin and selfishness we have brought the world to the brink of ruin and destruction and we can't see any way back, any road home, that's when our redeemer arrives. That's when God reveals the way out of death into life, out of darkness into light, out of despair into hope.

We look around at a world that is so broken, paralyzed by fear and selfishness and despair, and if we're being honest, so much of the brokenness we see is our own fault. For so many centuries, God's representatives on earth have lived for ourselves, we have consumed the world around us, we have treated creation, the land and the people who live in it, as enemies to be subjugated and exploited for our own gain. With every crusade, every inquisition, every residential school, every act of cruelty and cowardice and covetousness, the church has built this broken world in our own fallen image, instead of reflecting the image of God. And yet even though we have failed so completely, even though the damage seems irreversible, God is not finished with us yet. Abraham's word of judgment, Jeremiah's word of judgment, these are not God's final word to us. Our redeemer is still at work in this world, in this church, in each one of us, and Jesus Christ refuses to let our sin define us, he refuses to leave us to the consequences of our fallen selves. As long as Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, as long as his Holy Spirit is among us here, there is still hope, there is always hope, for God's light to shine here, for God's life to break through here, for God's transforming power to bring renewal and revival here in the church and all around the world. Today, may we live in hope, and trust that God is still at work among us, that now and forever, our redeemer lives. Amen.