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# Matthew 5:5, Justice and Grace in Fracked Earth

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“**T**he people have a right to clean air, pure water, and to the preservation of the natural, scenic, historic and aesthetic values of the environment,” states the First Article of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.<sup>1</sup> Other states and the federal government have similar principles embedded in statutes if not constitutions. The Pennsylvania Constitution further stipulates that “Pennsylvania’s public natural resources are the common property of all the people, including generations yet to come.” Nevertheless, that inheritance has been, and is being, carted off.

“Slick water hydraulic fracturing,” the industry calls it, but most people say “fracking.” After drilling over a mile down, and then horizontally, drillers crack rock with explosives, force down four or five million gallons of water laced with toxic chemicals, and collect gas dis-embedded from the shale. In the last twelve years, Pennsylvania and West Virginia have become ground zero for a fracking boom, while New York, Maryland, and five Canadian provinces banned it altogether. A growing literature describes a new kind of disinheritance caused by fracking.

“Unconventional” drilling, as the industry calls it, has devastating consequences for residents, farm animals, water supplies, and wild habitat. Since it began in Pennsylvania in 2007, doctors have treated sores, rashes, and even organ failure among the people living near fracking. The industry claims no linkage to its operations, but Pennsylvania imposed a “gag rule” on doctors in exchange for a slight tax on drilling. One scientist from Johns Hopkins mines digital health data at Geisinger Medical Center in Pennsylvania to show illness linked to unconventional natural gas drilling. Industry arranged a special exemption from the federal Clean Water Act. The state departments of environmental protection are overwhelmed. Forestry and wildlife experts explain the devastation to habitats and ecosystems. Up close, one hears the noise, smell, and taste of air and water contamination, and sees the ribald ugliness of it all.

Thousands of fracked wells await pipelines that newly splice the forests and farms of the Mid-Atlantic to send gas to overseas markets. Meanwhile, new “cracker plants” along the Ohio River will turn gas into raw plastic for a wide range of manufacturing

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1. Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, *Article 1, Section 27*.

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at a time when the oceans and landfills are overloaded. Previous plastic and chemical industry in the Ohio Valley poisoned people and the land—one notable example was a settlement of \$670 million and 3,500 lawsuits pending for water contamination from one plant on the Ohio River.<sup>2</sup>

Author Eliza Griswold won a Pulitzer Prize for writing a story of Americans living with fracking. She wrote that they have “wrestled with the price their communities have long paid so the rest of us can plug in our phones.” Griswold observes, “Some feel that price was worth paying; others don’t.”<sup>3</sup> Lives at risk, homes at risk, habitats at risk, and the land at risk drop into conventional cost-benefit analysis. Swindled inheritances end up on the cutting room floor of conventional ethics. Many people seem comfortable inside a familiar impasse of “cost versus benefit.” Spoon fed and plugged into the dogmas of utilitarianism and capitalism’s “bottom line,” many settle for what billionaire oil man, J. Paul Getty (1892–1976) reputedly quipped: “The meek shall inherit the earth, but not its mineral rights.”

Matthew 5:5—quite contrary to the Getty quip—is a strong voice for people and places who face drilling and pipelines, who

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2. James Bruggers, “Plastics: The New Coal in Appalachia?” *Inside Climate News*, Feb 25, 2019; Mariah Blake, “Welcome to Beautiful Parkersburg, West Virginia: Home to one of the most brazen, deadly corporate gambits in U.S. history.” *Huff Post*, Sept 1, 2015

3. Eliza Griswold, *Amity and Prosperity: One Family and the Fracturing of America* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018)

find themselves downstream from cracker plants, who are downwind from toxic emissions, or who resist any sort of “gag rule” when people and places suffer. Matthew 5:5, that the meek shall inherit the earth, is not a fairy-tale future to be ignored by powerful exploiters who profit from fracture of God’s creation. Matthew 5:5 belongs to pervasive scriptural witness to the sovereign ownership of God Almighty over all that God creatively makes and sustains. Matthew 5:5 signals redemption and renewal of creation that begins in the turnaround work God did in Christ.

The first section of this article explores the scriptural background of Matthew 5:5 to show that the meek and their inheritance are deeply rooted in God’s sovereign ownership of land and all creation, and that the cross of Christ is the pivot point of God’s reordering of creation. The second part of the paper turns to the power of Matthew 5:5 to unlock theology of justification by grace for social and environmental justice, linking justification to meek inheritance. The third section of this article will indicate some things church people are doing and can do to stand for the inheritance of the meek and the land in the fracked places of Northern Appalachia. Overall, our aim is to amplify the vision and voice of Matthew 5:5 for justice and grace, and to show its power for a contemporary environmental and social justice struggle.

## Roots of Matthew 5:5

In the article “To Whom Does the Land Belong?” Walter Brueggemann highlighted Matthew 5:5 among scriptural affirmations that God is the sovereign, sole owner of the land.<sup>4</sup> Right ordering of the land, which means justice for the meek and vulnerable against the exploitation of the powerful, is the lived shape and expression of God’s ownership. Since Brueggemann’s article provides a portrait of the depth of biblical vision under Matthew 5:5, and a biblical exegesis of “inheritance,” we will tap Brueggemann’s guidance for most of this section.

Matthew 5:5 quoted Psalm 37:11, “the meek shall inherit the land.” Walter Brueggemann wrote that Psalm 37 is “a sapiential meditation on the future of the land.” He noted that “inheriting the land” occurs five times in the psalm, each about “maintenance of land through practice of neighborliness.” The “meek” (v11) are also “those who wait for Yahweh” (v9), “The blessed by Yahweh” (v22), “the righteous” (v39), and those who “keep to [God’s] way” (v34). They contrast to “the wicked” who “advance themselves at the expense of the neighbor.” The psalm “attests that there are inviolate ‘givens’ ordained in creation that cannot be safely transgressed,” Brueggemann wrote.

Scripture forbade moving a “neighbor’s boundary marker,” removing “an ancient landmark,” or encroaching “the field of orphans” (Deut 19:14; Prov 22:28 and 23:10–11). The Lord not only gives the land but is the “redeemer” of the orphans and would “plead their cause against you” if you invaded their fields. Brueggemann writes that “a violation of the entitlement of the

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vulnerable, by any violent practice, legal or military, violates creation and brings death.” The “will of the awesome Creator” is for “the well-being of the most vulnerable.” The inheritance of the poor is to have a place in Yahweh’s land, and their role in the land is constitutive of God’s good-ordering of creation.

When the Decalogue “curbs acquisitiveness” by commanding “Thou shalt not covet” (Exod 20:17 and Deut 5:21), it declares “in the context of land management,” that “all that is possible is not permissible” (75). Brueggemann points out that it is the same word in Micah 2:2: “They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance.” It is the same word in Gen 3:6 when a tree was coveted and subsequently violated. As compared to “petty envy,” Brueggemann clarified, empires and the powerful covet through “policies and practices of economic acquisitiveness that are, in a commodity-driven society, uncurbed.” Empires and the powerful covet by confiscation, usurpation, eminent domain and arrogant autonomy, practices of ancient kings that the law of God and the prophets condemned on behalf of the vulnerable.

God’s sovereign ownership of the land underlies Matthew 5:5, Psalm 37 and their analogues throughout scripture. Psalm 24:1, Brueggemann indicated, is foundational: “The earth is Yahweh’s and all that is therein.” Earth means: “the land.” (64) Brueggemann turns to Hosea 9:3 for a relevant warning that “disobedient Israel will be expelled from ‘the land of Yahweh’” (65). Human claims upon the land are always penultimate, and “utilization and human enjoyment of the land—the use of its resources—comes under the rubric of ‘love of God.’” The command to love God with all one’s heart, soul and might” (Deut 6:5) came upon entry into a land. The charge to the people was to make their life in the land “congruent with Yahweh’s character,” which is (67) “the proper ordering of land in such covenantal ways” (67–68). Brueggemann summarizes that such living would be “marked by mercy, graciousness, steadfast love, compassion, fidelity, generosity and forgiveness” (68).

The contrasting attitude, Brueggemann points out, was voiced by Abner in 2 Sam 3:12 when he “puts a defiant chiding rhetorical question to David” by asking “to whom does the land belong?” Brueggemann highlights that “Abner reckons only that the land belongs to David or the land belongs to Saul.” Abner is far off the land hermeneutic of Psalm 24 and Hosea 9. Brueggemann writes: “When the question is posed in that cynical way—as it most often is posed in ‘the real world’—the claim of Yahweh and the derivative claim of proper governance are readily and easily driven

4. Walter Brueggemann, “To Whom Does the Land Belong?” in *Remember You Are Dust* (Cascade, 2012), 64–76.

from the horizon” (65). Such leads to “a crass sense of entitlement” and indulgence in “shameless power” cloaked in “well-sounding cadences of legitimacy” (66). In Modern thought, Brueggemann noted, land became “absolute possession and property.” In turn, “the land has been readily handed over to human possession and exploitation” (69). Yahweh’s sovereign ownership has been forgotten, and the inheritance of the meek has been violated.

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants, and the reaction it caused (Matt 21:33–45), surely fit the paradigm Brueggemann drew. After serial abuse of servants sent by the master of the vineyard, wicked tenants plot to kill the son of the master in order to steal “his inheritance.” The tenants exhibit covetousness as craven desire put into practice. They somehow imagine that if the son were dead the vineyard would be theirs. But Jesus asks the crystal-clear question: “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” The parable ends with the death of the wicked tenants and transfer of the vineyard into hands of those who would work for the master. Jesus then quotes Ps 118:22, that the rejected building block becomes the cornerstone in the amazing work of God (Matt 21:42). The Pharisees react to the parable’s applicability, and then ironically set to plotting like the wicked tenants.

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants and its attribution to the work of Jesus in Matthew 21 does two things for our understanding of justice in Matthew 5:5. First, the parable dramatizes the Old Testament sense of God’s ownership, God’s demand for right ordering of creation, and the content of “inheritance” according to the scriptures, just as Brueggemann described. Second, the attribution of the parable to the work of Jesus, his rejection like the building block of Psalm 118, but God’s turnaround action to make him cornerstone, adds a connection between the justice promised in Matthew 5:5 and the justifying work of Christ. There is a relationship between Jesus and the inheritance of the meek. To that relationship we now turn.

### Matthew 5:5: Justification and justice

The wicked in the vineyard plot and kill first the stewards and then the son. They came to set the vineyard to right order, but the wicked tenants are intent to move from their disorderliness to insurrection against the master. At the end of the parable Jesus suggests that the master will not tolerate the disobedience forever. One implication is that the son’s death will be vindicated when the master renders judgment upon the tenants. Another implication is that the vineyard will be saved from the hands of the wicked and put into the hands of trustworthy servants. A third implication, signaled by the quote of Ps 118:22 by Jesus, is that the son is the pivot point at which wickedness will fail and justice will be done.

That the master would vindicate the son: this is an image of the process by which Matthew 5:5 would come true, that the meek would inherit the earth. The meek are the stewards whose inheritance is to work the vineyard in fulfillment of their master’s ordering of the land. The inheritance of the meek in the land is saved from the rapacious domination of the empires and the

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powerful, just as the vineyard is taken from the wicked tenants. The building block that was rejected is the cornerstone for the restored, right ordering of the vineyard.

The slain son was murdered, but God did not let him go to waste. The wicked tenants were able to kill the son, but they were not able to defeat him. Likewise, God has not abandoned the meek, and God has not abandoned creation, even though injustice and damage have been done. The earth is continually robbed from the meek, and truly dis-ordered by the powerful, but that does not make the promise of Matthew 5:5 and Psalm 37:11 into a fairy tale. The turnaround from Ps 118:22 is at the center of a redemptive drama by which the land will be restored to the meek, who will care for it as they were created and called to do, in fulfillment of their inheritance. The Slain Son is resurrected and already roaming the vineyard of the world. The cornerstone is set, and the transformation of the vineyard is under way.

The restoration of the meek into their inheritance, and the restoration of the vineyard, are *justification*. What was unjust is being turned to justice. What was dis-ordered is being re-ordered rightly. The inheritance in Matthew 5:5 and in Matthew 21 are linked to what becomes of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew—that is, that God gives Jesus an inheritance that death could not take from him. Inheritance of the meek is a promise that may still face denial under injustice and unjust damage, but the inheritance turns the meek from rejection to restoration, like the turn God made in Christ.

Human hands cannot retrieve the rejected building block and set it as cornerstone of a restored creation. Only God can do that. God did that in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and now the Slain Son is also the Justice-working Son loose in the vineyard of all creation. The very unfinishedness of justice work unmoors it from human accomplishment and hurls it into dependency upon God. To resist wickedness and stand for justice is a stark commitment to the promised inheritance, dependent wholly upon God’s turnaround of the building block. Action for justice is a powerful way to preach because it enacts images of promise, posing scenes of grace in the face of disgrace. To stand up for inheritance of the land by the meek depends upon Ps 118:22 coming true in a rejected one becoming cornerstone of a rightly ordered creation.

Among many post-Reformation Lutherans, it became typical to suppress works for justice, settling instead for supposed ap-

proximations of justice in the world. The history and reasons for that tendency are lengthy, disputed, and beyond the scope of this article. One thing is true, however. Matthew 5:5 in its long scriptural roots would disrupt any type of quietism. Matthew 5:5 signals that justice for the land, which entails inheritance for the meek, is not separate from justification. Salvation of creation and salvation of people both turn on the building block that God moves from rejection to cornerstone.

Lutherans have long taught that means of grace instituted by Christ provide assurance of justification and renewal to live toward alignment with God's will. Martin Luther recommended that whenever one felt fear that comes from misalignment with the righteousness of God, one should run to the means of grace—baptism, holy supper and word—to imbibe again the promise that Christ's turnaround work was and is for you. Increasingly, Christians in an ecologically damaged world, surrounded by injustices on all sides, are turning to the means of grace for reassurance that the world would not be abandoned by God, but that "the world is about to turn." As human efforts to save ourselves from environmental peril falter, many seek renewal to continue to try to make things better despite a obvious tide of human destruction of creation.

The means of grace provide glimpses of a restored world. Every means of grace proclaims and enacts scenes of grace. Baptism forgives sin and ignites righteousness within a person through Christ. Therefore, a haughty and wicked abuser of the vineyard could be turned around to become a good steward. A wicked tenant could stop plotting destruction and start working to support the inheritance of the meek. Such turnaround in the lives of people, and in society, mirrors the turnaround of the rejected building block into cornerstone. In that way, baptism as a means of grace releases many scenes of grace in action. Similarly, with the other means of grace: they exhibit and unlock scenes of grace here and now.

Since God did not abandon the Slain Son, but turned the rejected one into the cornerstone, that one can be active wherever and whenever. Scenes of grace break out in the here and now. Christians should watch, identify, and abet scenes of grace. Just as Christ promised to meet us on the road ahead, and to surprise us that he would be present when we would not notice, so, too, Christians may have confidence to celebrate scenes of grace wherever they see them.<sup>5</sup>

In troubled territories such as Northern Appalachia amid an onslaught of fracking, it will be difficult and contentious to stand up for scenes of grace, and to advocate for meek inheritance of the earth. There are examples, however, of the church obstinately insisting that God is the true owner of creation, and has bequeathed the land to the meek. To some examples we turn.

5. Gilson Waldkoenig, "Scenes and Means of Grace," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* (Winter, 2011); "From Commodity to Community: Churches and the Land They Own," *The Cresset* LXXVII: 5, 2013; "Ecological Restoration and Scenes of Grace," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 15:2 February 2015.

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### Doing justice by Matthew 5:5

This section offers three examples from fracking country for the church to speak and act for God's cornerstone turnaround, for justice: (a) to speak and show solidarity with the meek; (b) to teach and enact inheritance; and (c) to treat earth as sacred. Witness and advocacy are going to look different in different settings, and there is no assumption here that suggestions from Northern Appalachia would be automatically translatable to other settings. However, with respect that others in various situations would contribute their own approaches out of their own integrities, we offer here examples from fracking country of solidarity by the church with the meek, the earth and the inheritance that unites them.

#### *Solidarity with the meek*

Fracking displaces many people, mars many home places, and invades local habitat and waterways. Many people who do not hold title to land, but rent, have no standing to appeal when drillers come onto their home place. Some people own surface rights but not mineral rights and suffer invasion on their land. When streams and wells are contaminated by fracking fluid, the air polluted and noise elevated, swaths of the near-by population suffer. It has also been documented that small towns in fracking territory experience a rise in homelessness when available housing goes to the bidding of the industry. Prostitution, violence, and substance abuse rise in rural areas when fracking comes. Short-lived economic boom from drilling nevertheless leaves infrastructure costs and damages in its wake. One of the loopholes inserted into Pennsylvania statutes was that communities surrendered local jurisdiction over placement of fracking operations when they accepted their portion of tax revenue gathered from drilling. All these practices of fracking are modern-day analogues to displacement and exploitation of the meek in the scriptures. They fall under what the scriptures identify to be assault against God's sovereign ownership of the land, and God's blessing upon the meek who inherit the land.

The people near fracking hear a message from industry, government, and the legal system that they are in the way of an important and valuable resource that must be extracted for the sake of more important people elsewhere. Locals are mere surface dwellers who



happen to be over top of a resource the worth of which far exceeds their personal needs and value, far exceeds the needs of local community, and far exceeds the needs of local ecosystems, waterways and atmosphere. Like countless generations of common people whose territory was confiscated by empires and the powerful, the local people facing fracking are told to either endure or leave.

Application of the long scriptural roots behind Matthew 5:5 means that in fracking country there is no such thing as a mere surface dweller. Those who are in the way of the drilling industry have legitimate voices to speak for justice and for the care of the land. They have a special vantage to see the difference between right-ordering of God's creation and the disorder unleashed by fracking. In that regard, the people are like the stewards of the vineyard, and they speak for the true owner. There is no excuse to displace them. No one has a right to conquest and hoarding. Congregations and Christian people side with the meek of Matthew 5:5 when they recognize and amplify the voices of people who cry out against the onslaught of fracking in their neighborhoods and homes.

The Lutheran Advocacy Ministry of Pennsylvania includes the health of the land with its obstinate preference for the poor and needy in public policy. When congregations and Christians show up and stand for the inheritance of the meek, they also make a quality witness that God is turning the world around, starting with the rejected building block that becomes the cornerstone of new creation. One of the ELCA synods in Pennsylvania called a task force to examine the plight of people and the land in the territory of their synod, which included both acute fracking zones and communities impacted downstream. The synod memorialized the ELCA to study and respond, but the memorial did not make the floor of the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. The Corporate Social Responsibility Office of the ELCA had held a conference on fracking as early as 2007 when the onslaught was new. Such efforts in advocacy are encouraging to people being pressured by fracking in their backyards and neighborhoods.

### ***Teach and enact inheritance***

The scriptures counter today's "cost-benefit" thinking with a precautionary principle. Inheritance is rooted in God's ownership and becomes manifest in the right ordering of creation. The true stewards of the land are those who want to preserve it, not those who would damage it for profit. In fracking country, inheritance means that God owns all the mineral rights and all the surface rights. The monied capitalist economy is provisional at best. The damage in the land and displacement of the meek are evidence that some people and powers do not respect God's sovereign ownership. Their behavior resembles the Wicked Tenants. The church should aggressively pursue advocacy for the inheritance of the meek, which is also the health of the land, because the church's distinctive task is to amplify the building block that God turns around to be the cornerstone.

There are practical examples of churches claiming and enacting the Cornerstone in the face of injustice. In Parkersburg, West

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Virginia, First Lutheran Church weekly fills a farm stand with produce from their church gardens. They built a bus stop to encourage access to the food. First Lutheran looks and acts in stark difference to ecological damage and economic inequality in the Ohio River industrial corridor. In other places, churches, outdoor ministry organizations, and social ministry organizations are also growing food or aiding and abetting those who grow locally and sustainably. Wittel Farm in Pennsylvania enacts a "gift economy" when it grows and gives away pounds and pounds of food for people experiencing food insecurity and economic marginalization. They are also key to public alliances to protect waterways and forests, to advocate for clean air, and to hope and act for restoration of the climate.

### ***Treat the earth as sacred***

In fracking country, Matthew 5:5 prompts the church to proclaim justification of the earth through the cross of Christ. In the face of industrial damage, the cross of Christ says that God has not and will not abandon God's creation. Just as God would not allow Jesus to go to waste, to be erased by the Roman Empire through crucifixion, so, too, God will not allow God's good vineyard of creation to be destroyed. The promised restoration of creation will be justice for the earth and the meek. God's turnaround of the rejected one, to be cornerstone of the restored vineyard, means that in fracking country the Slain Son returns and the land is already the inheritance of the meek, not the wicked tenants.

In the fields of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, a community of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ protested a pipeline for fracked gas aimed under the land of their convent.<sup>6</sup> The sisters stood up against eminent domain and appealed their case to the Supreme Court. They built an outdoor chapel directly over the pipeline. SCOTUS refused their case, and gas flows in a pipeline under their land. Nevertheless, the sisters were glad to make a witness, and they still honor the land as sacred. "As students of Earth," their Land Ethic adopted in 2005 reads, "we listen intently to Earth's wisdom; we respect our interconnectedness and oneness

6. Eliza Griswold, "The Renegade Nuns Who Took On a Pipeline." *The New Yorker*, April 10, 2019

with creation and learn what Earth needs to support life.” The statement goes on: “As prophets, we reverence Earth as a sanctuary where all life is protected; we strive to establish justice and right relationships so that all creation might thrive.” In their view the land belongs to God, and it is the inheritance of the meek. As “Adorers of the Blood of Christ,” the sisters confess in their Land Ethic, that they “believe creation is a revelation of God,” and they “proclaim that: As Adorers, we honor the sacredness of all creation; we cultivate a mystical consciousness that connects us to the Holy in all of life.”

The sisters claimed and defended a scene of God’s grace, the land, against disgrace that disfigures Northern Appalachia above ground and below. The means of grace and scenes of grace are intimately interconnected; and greater scenes of grace are unfolding despite disgraces. The Adorers conclude: “we treasure land as a gift of beauty and sustenance; we see it as a legacy for future generations;” and thereby they give contemporary expression to Matthew 5:5, that the meek shall inherit the earth.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

If sentimentalized and softened, Matthew 5:5 seems far from the ugly battle over land, water, and health in the fracking fields of Northern Appalachia. But Matthew 5:5 in its long scriptural roots stands starkly against an industrial invasion across the woods and waterways of Pennsylvania. Against displacement of local dwellers, whose value has been deemed to be less than the profits of the powerful, who are demoted before the cavernous energy appetites of the modern world, Matthew 5:5 resonates with the stark ethics of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. Turnaround justification means God’s justice will be done on earth as in heaven. God turns the rejected one into the cornerstone of a new creation. Matthew 5:5 speaks the same promise as the cross of Christ and signals just restoration of God’s creation coming for fracked land and the long-suffering meek who will receive their inheritance from God, just as God did not let the Slain Son go to waste.

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7. Adorers of the Blood of Christ, *Land Ethic*, 2005.