



October 18, 2015

Larry DeLong

MINE! – Job 1:21

When I was in Junior High, strangely enough I played basketball (tried to). Back then, leather basketball shoes were the rage – especially Pumas. I wheedled and bugged my poor parents until they (well, my Mom, she easier) until they ponyed up the twenty-five dollars (this is around 1970, mind you) to buy me a pair of Pumas.

They were so beautiful, I couldn't bear to write my name in them: It would have spoiled the look. And man, they looked great.

I think it was after the first practice, in the locker room. I got in the shower, and when I got out, my Pumas were gone. Then, I noticed that one of the Baker boys had a new pair of Pumas, too. But they had no name in them; couldn't prove a thing. The Bakers' had no Dad for my Dad to have a chat with, and so Ronnie Baker had a new pair of sneakers – that were mine. Hadn't thought of that in over forty years, but when I did, I remembered feeling loss. They were mine. They meant something to me. It wasn't fair at all.

Today, we're talking about the problem of possession. In other words, how we view everything that we call ours. And I'm sorry, but to deal with this topic, we really do have to talk about language, because language itself is part of the problem.

It all comes down to a pretty simple point. When I say that something is *mine*, I can mean two concepts which are not the same. One example, of course, is those sneakers which were mine, but weren't. That's possession.

Another? My college. Ok, it's my college, I don't own it, I have absolutely no control over how it does its work or its curriculum or how it chooses to present itself to others.

It's *my* college because I *belong* to a group of people who went there for an education (whether we got one or not is another matter). In this example, *my* and *mine* refer to my relationship to that institution. Are you still with me? It's *my* college, but *I don't own it*. It is not my possession. "My" means I belong to it.

Now, this book is *mine*. It does belong to me. I bought it. It does not belong to anyone else, though the author could legitimately say that it's her book, since she wrote the content; but this particular copy of that content belongs to me.

That the author of this book (and the editor and others who worked on it) can also call it *mine* (well, *theirs*) complicates things even further.

Is your head a bit fuzzy right now? That's ok. English, especially the language we use in conversation which passes for English, isn't always precise. I'm not slamming English; most languages have subtleties like this: Latin, a very precise language, has no simple word for "yes," for example – you have to reaffirm what you're agreeing to when you agree with something.

But the problem with possession – whether something is ours or we are its - is just made that much worse by our language. At root, though, possession is a human problem that starts very early on, as those of you who've raised children know all too well.

It doesn't stop with childhood. It continues right through life, and becomes more subtle and difficult.

What got me thinking about this is the election cycle we're slogging our way through right now. At a rally a month or so back, someone asked what I call a raw-meat question, you know, the kind that a candidate can really use to get the audience wound up and screaming.

But it wasn't the question that got my attention; it was the tag comment at the end: "I want my country back." Now, I know you've heard this; you may well have said something like it yourself, and I'm not trying to scold you – I want to draw out an important point.

This country, this state, this community, this church, none of these are any one person's *possession*. Possession brings with it the sense of ownership, the ability to do with it what you want no matter what someone else may think, and without their consent or ability to change the outcome.

I can take this book and write in it. (I have.) I could take it and rip it apart (I won't). I could toss it in the book exchange pile or the patio sale box or give it to the library or even throw it in the garbage. It is my property, and so long as I don't harm anyone in the process, I am free to do with it as I choose.

But I am a citizen of this country. I belong to it, not it to me. When I say I want my country back, what do I mean? That I wish it to be just the way I wish it was? Want it to be, for me?

This is important to put in your thinking cap as you consider what those who are seeking election are proposing. Are you – are we – considering this great nation to be our personal property

(surely without reflection, because we all know better)? Is this how you view Valley Presbyterian Church?

So what *is* ours? We possess, from a human perspective, some things on a worldly plane, sure. We own (or ought to own) our actions and responses to personal actions and interaction.

Everything else belongs to God. “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” The words are Job’s, but this is the core of Jesus’s parable of the laborers in the vineyard, who get the same wage no matter how long or hard they worked. When some grumbled, Jesus has the boss say, “Hey, it’s my money, and I do with it as I wish. If I wish to be generous, what is that to you?”

But the key for us is the same as for Job. Despite the heavenly brouhaha that is the cause of his distress, his thinking, attitude, and actions are spot on. If we were able to interview Job, I suspect his summary would go something like this: “I am just the path through which God passes his blessings: things, thoughts, and grace.”

Have you ever thought whether you’re what they call now an “end-user,” the terminus of the blessings rail line, or simply a whistle stop, a place along a line that never stops?

An end-user is the one for whom everything was done. When whatever it is arrives in that person's hands, it's complete, meant just for that one.

That's often how we act, especially when we start to think that things belong to us, and not we to them: my country, my town, my church. None of those belong to any one of us: they belong to us all, and ultimately, to God.

Norman MacLean, who wrote the semi-autobiographical "A River Runs Through It," was the son of a Presbyterian minister, and he and his brother both seem to have done their level best to live up to the worst stereotypes of preacher's kids. In the book, they get into a world of trouble, enough that MacLean's younger brother is murdered over his gambling debts.

But that doesn't stop MacLean from weaving theology – particularly theology carrying the stream of God's Spirit's symbolic connection with water – throughout his book. He grew up near some of the great rivers of Montana, and they flow through his narrative and his life like the Spirit flows through ours and Job's.

First, the river is life-giving: water, of course, but spiritually feeding through the grandeur of its power and fertility, making a

home for fish and sustaining wildlife. And then, as the brothers and the father come and go, live their lives, the river is always there in the background. It continues to flow whether they pay attention or not – but it keeps calling them back to fish the waters, drawing strength and renewal from them. MacLean’s words echo Psalm 46 “There is a river whose streams gladden God’s city (Jerusalem)” and “the river of life-giving water, shining like crystal, flowing from the throne of God flowing through the middle of the main street” of the heavenly city of God in Revelation, and from where, incidentally, MacLean’s title is drawn.

In the end, as an old man, MacLean cannot resist the pull of the river, which by now is dangerous for a man of his age to be fishing alone – but, as he concludes, “I am haunted by waters.” God’s spirit flowing through that won’t leave him alone.

The waters do not stop; they have flowed forever, they flow through. They do not stop in you or me, we are not end users, they flow through, leaving with us what we need to pass on, and taking more to the next person downstream. The waters of God’s blessings – and those things which we call “possessions,” never stop.

I recall forty years that some of us were recognizing this possession problem. As we recognized the infinite worth of each person, we became more reluctant to use that possessive sense: not my spouse, but the person I'm married to. Not my church, but the church I serve. Not my Jesus, but the Jesus who loves me. Not even my country, but the nation to which I am grateful and honored to belong.

At a worship service last summer, a choir from the Tucson African Refugee Fellowship (many of them orphans of war), sang a song that stirred the depths of my soul. They sang with passion, with commitment, with the very voice of God resonating in their voices.

After they finished, the pastor translated the piece. "You were not born for yourself. God made *you* for *others*."

"In the Holy Land are two ancient bodies of water. Both are fed by the Jordan River. In one, fish play and roots find sustenance. In the other, there is no splash of fish, no sound of bird, no leaf around. The difference is not in the Jordan, for it empties into both, but in the Sea of Galilee: for every drop taken in one goes out. It gives and lives. The other gives nothing. And it is called the Dead Sea." (William Sloane Coffin, Jr.)

So, will God flow through you? Or will you be a dead end?