

STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

One of the ways fortunes have been made—and lost too—is in the purchase of undervalued properties that are then renovated for resale or development. These are usually risky investments, but they are fundamental tool in the art of making money with money. The big questions in this kind of investment are these: Just how undervalued is the property? Is it low in value because of conditions that cannot be improved? Does the property deserve the investment?

The riskiest land purchase I know happened more than 500 years before Christ. It is a case study in the purchase of undervalued land that turns out good. The prophecies of Jeremiah are famous both for their judgement and for their hope. Though judgement fills most of the pages of this stern book, in the middle is a remarkable and even lyrical incident that occurs only a few weeks before Jerusalem is destroyed by the Babylonian armies and its citizens marched to Babylon as prisoners of war.

God instructed Jeremiah to buy a field in Anathoth from his uncle Shalum, who undoubtedly was more than eager to sell: for at the moment of sale, Anathoth—which was two and a half miles northeast of Jerusalem—was occupied by Babylonian soldiers preparing their siege mounds for the final attack upon Jerusalem. This was not merely undervalued property—it was worthless by traditional investment criteria. It was like buying a house in the French quarter of Shanghai in December, 1941. Yet Jeremiah followed

through with the purchase, complaining to the Lord in the meantime (a custom with this prophet). On the heels of this peculiar investment, however, came a word of prophecy from the Lord to share with all Judah; the word, in fact, became the greatest message of messianic hope that Jeremiah spoke throughout his whole career. His apparently ludicrous investment became an object lesson to the desperate city of Jerusalem of 586

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B.C., but also beyond it, to the whole human family. The lesson was that God would respect and heal a broken people by his own mighty act.

What was prophecy to Jeremiah and his contemporaries, of course, is history to us. Jeremiah looked forward to when God's righteous, fruitful branch would inexplicably sprout from parched ground; we remember that righteous branch, Jesus of Nazareth, the first fruits in our own lives of the fulfillment of Jeremiah's hope.

What we must not miss in Jeremiah's act of hope is its concrete, historical nature. Before witnesses the prophet

weighed out 17 shekels of silver and signed and sealed the deed. The tangibility of the object lesson is profoundly important because it points to the Incarnation, to the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us.

This is why youth ministries take so much time; this is why so many adults are needed in church or in Young Life or in Campus Life to make youth ministry happen. Each teenager needs to be personally known, be uniquely encountered, understood, and genuinely celebrated. One pastor trying to generalize the gospel and its meaning to a diverse group of young men and women is unrealistic. The highly charged and dangerous years of teenagers' growing up requires personal involvement and friendship between youth leaders and the young people themselves. Junior and senior—high youths need the full, palpable attention of at least one caring adult who is serious about investing time and love in that one young person.

Neither the enemy's armies of occupation nor our feelings of impotence are reasons to give up. The world is changed by people who refuse to give up hope, who keep on buying fields in hopeless Anathoth. For "just as I have brought upon this people all this great calamity," the Lord told Jeremiah, "so I will bring upon them all the good that I promise them... for I will restore their fortunes."

I am closer to Anathoth today than I realize. Where, in my generation, are Anathoth's fields? Where are the

undervalued properties? What do such sites look like these days?

Perhaps people are today's Anathoths, walking sites who are occupied by hostile forces—whether spiritual, psychological, political, or chemical—and who are written off most real-estate listings because of their supposed dismal investment values. These human fields need more than anything else to be reassessed both by themselves and by a few others who believe in their future. They need a sign of hope, an investment in their future. By the grace of God, we can become those others who will make a difference between the despair that discounts value and the hope that adds

value—although, like Jeremiah's field, the true value of the investment may take time to realize.

Our task in youth ministry is not to rename the field, not to imagine away the problems at Anathoth, not to treat Anathoth as if it were too hopelessly occupied to have a valuable future. Our task, by the transforming grace of Jesus Christ, is to make a long-term, careful, and optimistic investment in the future of that field. ♦



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