

To Steal A Vineyard
I Kings 21.1-10, 15-21
June 12, 2016
Pentecost +4
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
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Real estate is a headache for some, a fascinating hobby for others, and way of life for a few. Nathan and I closed on our house in Richmond the month that the housing market began to fall apart in 2007. We are now in the midst of long-distance repairs and minor upgrades to list the house for sale later this month after finally having reached a pre-crash value on the house some nine years later. We are looking forward to not being homeowners for a while, though I notice there's a 3 bedroom house for sale just down Broadway from the church. Unless the sellers are interested in some serious negotiations, I'm afraid I would have to take a cue from Ahab and Jezebel to secure that charming home as the site of next year's vegetable garden.

Of course, that's not quite a fair comparison, because Ahab could have paid the asking price many times over, and initially he offered Naboth well above asking because his offer came not just with a value for the land but the promise of an even better vineyard somewhere else. In our setting in today's market, that's a strong offer to be taken seriously. Your neighbor offers to buy your house at peak value or give you a better house to sweeten the deal. At the very least, we would ask to see the other house. Does it have a new roof? What's the square footage? What part of town are we talking? Have the appliances been updated recently? What's the condition of the vineyard? We would be curious. We would at least entertain the thought for a while or sleep on it overnight.

And so it is important for us to set aside our notions of property and real estate to get in the mind of a different time. We need to think about what land meant for Naboth to understand what Ahab was really proposing. Then we will figure out why Jezebel's wheeling and dealing is as despicable as we suspect it is. Though dated later than the I Kings text this morning, a strong example of the power of land is the parable found in Luke 15. It begins, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.'" While the father has no obligation to do so, he divides the property, even though he is still very much alive, and gives his youngest son a portion that does not yet belong to him. After the son loses everything, he comes home begging forgiveness.

We studied this text together in early March and explored the concept of a community *qetsatsah* response that allowed the neighbors to ceremonially cut the boy off forever from his community. Not his dad and brother. The neighbors. Beyond the property line. Because his actions were not just toward his father but toward all the people in his village—he harmed the community, he disrespected the tribe, he insulted his relationship with his God and with his people and their relationship with God. The forgiveness of his father is made more powerful against the real and present threat of permanent and irreparable cut-off by the community. Because land matters.

For Naboth, land was considered an inheritance from God and the place “within which people’s relationship to God is lived out.”¹ The land belonged to his family for generations and was to remain in their line as a loan from God. They were stewards of the earth, and he understood there was a sacred value to his home that Ahab had no right to take away because Naboth understood that his relationship to the land was a reflection of his relationship to God. For Naboth, staying put on the land God had given him was equal to being obedient to God.

Naboth was rich with obedience. The thing Naboth *didn’t* have was power. Or influence. Or connections. He simply had his land and his promise to God, and in the short run, that isn’t always enough against the powers of this world that don’t respect oaths or ancestral heritage or people without influence. While Ahab sulks over not getting more power and more land and his new, Egyptian-style vegetable garden that he might look more like his foreign neighbors, Jezebel schemes.²

She forges letters in the king’s name, she arranges for crooks to pose as false witnesses against Naboth, and she manipulates the law to have Naboth killed. This is high level power. This is dark twisting of the power available to her. The text doesn’t say if Ahab knew what she’d been up to, but he certainly perks up when she promises to get the vineyard for him and quickly understands what Jezebel means when she says, “Naboth is dead, and the land is yours.” He throws off the covers, hops out of bed, turns that frown upside down, and takes off for his soon to be vegetable garden. And while the text may not reveal a play-by-play conversation from Jezebel to Ahab, God’s response through Elijah makes me wonder if this isn’t even the first time the pair has wielded their power in such sulking and scheming ways.

¹ *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, “Land”*, pp. 487-488

² In his *Interpretation* commentary in I Kings, Richard Nelson explores the significance of Ahab’s desire to plant a vegetable garden as a sign of looking to other culture’s for identity rather than God.

The Lord knows Ahab is now in the vineyard that was given to Naboth because that land really belongs to God. And the Lord instructs Elijah to ask, "Have you killed and also taken possession?" The death is on Ahab's hands because he has taken advantage of a weaker person. In the Lord's imagining of how the world should be, the powerful care for the weak and the rich are always mindful of the poor. It's bad enough for the rich to get richer on the backs of the poor, but to steal land Divinely given and to take life Divinely breathed is to break covenant with the Lord.

Ahab knows that he is culpable when Elijah arrives at the vineyard and Ahab immediately responds, "Have you found me?" Elijah was like a shadow, always behind Ahab reminding him of his true identity and holding an image of his best self before him. But now Ahab has gone too far, and he knows Elijah sees him in the place where he has found him. The Lord's response to Ahab is about more than this piece of land when Elijah speaks, "You have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord." Ahab has lost his identity as one made in the image of God because he no longer sees those around him as people shaped by God's breath. He has sold his own inheritance to make himself appear more powerful in the eyes of foreign neighbors, and God promises his choice of evil will beget more evil in his own life. The ways of light bring more light into the world. The ways of darkness bring more darkness. God is promising him that his actions will birth terrible consequences.

It's not a rosy story, this third tale in our Elijah series. We look at the characters and wonder how to read ourselves into this one. There are certainly personal applications for this text that can be softened to lessons on contentment, generosity, love of neighbor, and stewardship of the world God has given us. Those are important ways of being in the world that we very much need to weave into our days. The problem is that we hear those words and still think of our individual lives rather than our interconnected life together. "I need to be more content," I think to myself. "I need to be more generous," you might bemoan. We somehow turn these biblical mandates into individual character flaws and shortcomings rather than the foundational elements that make up the path of God.

That's why I'm drawn to the broader impact of what happens in collective forgetfulness when the crowd is not content, and the masses are not generous, and the nation does not love, and the people have forgotten that the world is a gift from God. In this collective forgetfulness, the powerful conspire together against those who are not invited to the table to speak for themselves. In Luke's story of the son who asks for his inheritance and squanders it, the risk from the community is immediate and total cut-off. His direct action toward his father is a broad action against God and neighbor.

The tale of Naboth's vineyard is one of inheritance being stolen and community ignored. Ahab does not want to look to God and does not want to lead in God's ways. Ahab wants to make himself more prominent in the ways of the nations beyond his and does not care about the impact his choices will have on everyone under his care because he is focused on his own desires of national wealth and political success.

We see this in our time in poor countries with a natural resource that wealthy countries want to access. That's how Haiti ends up deforested and vulnerable to natural disaster. We see this in our cities when a less influential part of town stands in the way of progress. That's how we get an interstate running through the city where trees and neighborhood gathering places used to be. We see this in our gun culture with too few restrictions and limits with the impact of mass shootings growing ever larger. The story of Ahab and Naboth is a story of systemic injustice borne of collective forgetting, and that injustice is directly linked to the people's connection to God. And justice matters to God more than land does.

Roger Nam writes, "Social injustice is not merely a horizontal violation of our fellow human. It is primarily a vertical violation of God by wronging his creation, made in his image. In other words, we tend to interpret this narrative of Naboth's vineyard as social gospel, but really, the passage shows us that we cannot separate the social and the spiritual. Our relationship with God is reflected in the way we treat our fellow human who is made in God's image."³

That's why Bishop Desmond Tutu famously said, "I don't preach a social gospel; I preach the Gospel, period. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is concerned for the whole person. When people were hungry, Jesus didn't say, 'Now is that political or social?' He said, 'I feed you.' Because the good news to a hungry person is bread."

And when we forget this truth, we need an Elijah who finds us and sees us where we are. Someone who immediately brings it all to mind again. "Oh, you found me." And if we tell his story anything like right,⁴ then we realize he is not our enemy but our true friend because he comes to draw us—all of us, the great big lot of us—away from evil and back into the story of God. To forget we are called to care for the weak, advocate for the powerless, reject our desire for self-importance, and love our neighbors as ourselves, is to sell ourselves to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord.

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1713

⁴ "My story is important not because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours..." Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*

And all of this starts, somehow, from a king looking across the way and seeing an unimportant pest who is an obstacle instead of a good man, a devout person of God, and a faithful neighbor. All of this starts with seeing property to be acquired and converted rather than land that is a gift and sign from the Lord. All of this starts with forgetting.

May we not forget. May Elijah's words ring true in us when we begin to sell ourselves to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord. May we not forget that everything and everyone around us is a gift from God. May we not forget that we are birthing grace and light or pain and darkness with the words and actions of our days. May we not forget that we are linked together as a collective people. May we not forget who breathed us into being, who shapes us even now, who finds us when we are hiding, and who calls us back onto the path. Amen.