

“Naboth’s Vineyard”

1 Kings 21:1-19

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How many of you remember the television show, “Kids Say the Darndest Things”?- it was quite popular during the 1950s and early 60s with both children AND adults. The host--Art Linkletter--would interview various boys and girls and they’d come up with the most honest and often most humorous explanations for things. Well several years ago, there was an AT&T commercial with an adult sitting on the floor surrounded by a group of children and it reminded me a lot of that program. He began by asking them a very simple question: “Who thinks more is better than less?” Well one little girl raises her hand and the man says, “OK, why?” Between breaths, she says, “More is better than less because if stuff is not, if there’s more less stuff than you might, you might want to have some more and your parents don’t let you because there’s only a little bit. “We want more! We want more!” Like you really like it, “We want more!” Pretending to understand, the adult responds, “I follow you.” Then the announcer says, “It’s not complicated- more IS better. And AT&T has the nation’s largest 4G network.” Well this morning, we’re going to discover how the query, “Is more better than less” is actually FAR from a simple question. According to GOD’S economy, the answer is that more is NOT necessarily better, that our insatiable need to possess, dominate and control can often lead to the most disastrous consequences for everyone involved.

You can’t listen to our Old Testament text without feeling SOME disgust, SOME outrage over what involves the deception and murder of an innocent person. Naboth is a righteous man and a good farmer whose land also happens to adjoin the palace of Ahab, king of Samaria. The king, who wants to plant a garden, owns hundreds of thousands of acres from which to make his garden nevertheless he wants Naboth's vineyard. He speaks to him about buying it, even offering him a BETTER piece of property or its equivalent in money but Naboth is not interested. He tells him, "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my father." Not used to being told "no," The king returns to his castle and, like a spoiled child, he has a tantrum- throwing himself down on the bed and refusing to eat.

You see, what we have here are two very different views of land ownership. Naboth sees his property as a gift from God. It is as an inalienable inheritance that had been passed down to him which will in turn be passed on to his OWN children. It was NOT merely a possession or an investment to be freely bought or sold at whim. He sees himself as a steward over it and his duty is to hold it in trust for God that future generations may ALSO benefit from it.

In a previous pastorate, one of my member’s was an Iowa farmer whose philosophy of land management was an extension of his own faith. Jim and Ann Sage are descended from a long line of farmers and I don’t know of anyone who understands the meaning of land stewardship better than he does. If I heard it once, I heard it a dozen times a quote he learned from his father, “Live as though you’re going to die today; farm as though you’re going to farm forever.” Jim believes that when you farm, you don’t do it merely for short-term profit which can often deplete the nutrients in the soil but you do so with an eye to the future and preserving it

for subsequent generations. He told me he could easily substitute his present crop for another and generate a higher yield and profit for himself but in the interests of what he feels is a more RESPONSIBLE land management policy, he has steadfastly REFUSED to do so. I regard Jim Sage as a "modern-day Naboth." AHAB, on the other hand, sees the land as just another acquisition that may be bought or sold at will. Because he regards the land as an object and not a gift, a commodity and not an inheritance, he cannot understand Naboth's refusal to sell or trade the land. It is with great reluctance that he accepts Naboth's decision.

However, Jezebel--Ahab's wife--does NOT. She has no respect for people like Naboth or for his tradition or for the laws of God. She believes that since Ahab is king and represents the supreme authority over the land, he can do whatever he wants. She treats PEOPLE, just as she does other people's property, as objects that can be seized or disposed of at will. Therefore, Jezebel concocts a scheme to acquire the vineyard. She orders the elders to proclaim a day of mourning and fasting. This was often done in times of disaster such as drought, plague, or foreign attack in order to give the people an opportunity to confess their guilt and ask God to relieve the punishment which had been inflicted on them. Naturally, the people would want to know whose sins were responsible for the calamity brought upon them. With the help of two false witnesses, she manages to convince the assembly that NABOTH was the guilty one responsible for bringing the evil on their city. Convicted of cursing God and the king, he is stoned to death and since the property of treasonous individuals reverted to the crown, Ahab was now free to seize the vineyard.

Despite manipulating the law in order to accomplish their own wicked ends, Ahab and Jezebel could not escape a HIGHER law- the judgment of God. The prophet Elijah confronted them and announced that for their terrible sin, they would die in the same place that Naboth did and the dogs shall lick their blood. God would ultimately vindicate Naboth's death with their own, which was in fact how their miserable lives finally DID end.

I had a dear professor and friend in Dr. Don Jones who I came to know while working towards my doctorate. Back in the early 60's, Don was Hillary Clinton's youth minister at the large Methodist church she attended while growing up just outside Chicago. The former First Lady claimed in her autobiography that he, more than anyone else, was the one most responsible for her staunch commitment to social justice and aiding the poor. She was inspired by him and the trips he took their youth group on to the slums and food kitchens of Chicago's inner city. She especially remembers Don taking them to hear Dr. Martin Luther King when he spoke there. It was a foreign and disturbing reality for most of them- one that she and so many of her peers growing up were carefully shielded from by the comfortable and secure environment in which they were raised. The sad irony was that Don was fired from his job as youth pastor when parents complained he was much too radical for their church. You see, they didn't want their children to hear about the church's responsibility towards the poor and the importance of achieving civil rights in our society.

During my years of inner-city ministry in New Jersey, New York, and then in Iowa, I didn't just observe poverty and hunger as a spectator or program participant might- rather, it was a regular part of my LIFE. A case in point: One warm Saturday afternoon in Syracuse, New York, I was painting my house when the phone rang. I ran inside and picked up the receiver to

hear a woman crying on the other end. She asked if I was Rev. Wood, the pastor of the Presbyterian Church. "That's me," I replied. She went on to tell me that she lived in a small apartment on the south side with six small children and that she didn't have any food or money to take care of them over the weekend. She had contacted several OTHER churches and either nobody was there or she had been told there was nothing they could do to help her. My first impulse was, "Oh no! This was the LAST thing I want to hear, especially on my day off and when I'm all covered in paint." Besides, I thought, it was probably just another person trying to get money out of me as was USUALLY the case with these phone calls. Yet, as she continued to plead her cause, something told me that her tears and sense of urgency were real, and so I jotted down her name and address and promised to see if I could do something about her situation.

I drove downtown to the church where we had a well-stocked food pantry, filled up a large bag of assorted food items, and then headed out toward the valley where she lived. Eventually locating her residence--a ramshackled apartment building--I walked up the stairs and down the graffiti-covered corridors. As I stood before her door preparing to knock, I could hear the mother still crying inside along with the voices of her little children. Now I KNEW she had not put on an act for me over the phone. The door opened and in that cramped apartment with only the barest of furniture, she was seated on the floor, surrounded by six of her little ones. She looked up, tried to dry her eyes, and asked if I was Rev. Wood. With a nod of my head, I presented her with the groceries, explaining that I really couldn't do much more for her- that we didn't give out money and that she would have to contact a food bank in her area if she needed more food during the week. With a look of deep gratitude, she said, "Thank you, Rev. Wood, thank you SO much. I had nowhere to go, no one to turn to. You were my last hope."

As I drove back home, I couldn't help but feel thankful to God that I never had to live in such a situation as that. Of course, the truth is that I've had certain benefits over the years which she and so many others in SIMILAR straights have NEVER enjoyed. You see, many of the inner-city poor are disadvantaged from the start- having grown up in the projects, raised by a single parent or grandparent, forced to share their clothing and toys with their other brothers and sisters. They had to walk through crime-ridden neighborhoods to attend broken down schools with over-worked teachers using outdated school books. And when they DID graduate and then tried to find work, they confronted still ANOTHER brick wall called job and housing discrimination. Many of these persons never had much of a chance so in despair, they eventually fell back into the same dysfunctional patterns they learned growing up.

I, on the other hand, had grown up WHITE in a SAFE, CLEAN NEIGHBORHOOD. Mine was a stable middle-class home presided over by a mother and father who made sure that there was always hot food on the table and new clothes on our backs. I had the added benefit of a first-class education and a coterie of friends and family members whom I could always depend on for help whenever I needed them. These were benefits which I had INHERITED, not earned, and therefore I had no reason to feel SUPERIOR or in any way CONTEMPTUOUS of her situation- only grateful to God that I never had to face the struggles SHE did. As the old saying goes, "But for the grace of God go I."

What I did that afternoon was just a very SMALL gesture- it was nothing more than a quick fix to her problems. The fact is that there are hundreds of thousands of mothers

throughout the U.S. just like that one I brought food to- a woman with young children having no money, no husband, no work, and no family members able to assist her. If she'd heard it once, she'd heard it a THOUSAND times- ESPECIALLY from good church people: "Well where is your husband or aren't you married?" " Why did you have so many kids when you couldn't afford them in the first place?" " How come you can't get a job?" " You need to be independent and self-supporting. If I were to help you, I'd only be CONTRIBUTING to your problem!" The reality is that the reasons for hunger and poverty in our country are much more COMPLEX than someone being "promiscuous" or "lazy." There are numerous social and political and economic factors at work which not only LOCK persons into a permanent sub-class, but which also ROB them of all hope and ambition and personal initiative. We can deliver all the sermons and motivational speeches we want but unless those larger systemic and institutional factors are ALSO recognized and addressed, we'd only be wasting our breath. Hungry people at home and around the world are often unable to affect their circumstances due to illiteracy, political oppression, or lack of access to land, credit, education, and political decision-making, and if they are women, children or ethnic minorities, they are even MORE vulnerable.

What our scripture text this morning teaches us is that we serve a God who is as vitally and equally concerned with SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE as he is for our physical and spiritual well-being. When Ahab and Jezebel thought nothing of taking an innocent man's life to steal his property, they showed contempt, not just towards Naboth but towards GOD as well. As a result, they would die THEMSELVES and the dogs would lick their blood- a sad ending to two terribly evil persons. The truth is that our God feels the injustice of every policy, every system that fosters poverty and hunger, and as surely as he vindicated NABOTH, so will he vindicate US. As Jesus demonstrated so clearly through his OWN life, God has a special concern for the poor and hungry in our world, for everyone who remains victimized and oppressed because of their social situation, and so should WE.

With this in mind, YOU CAN'T HELP BUT WONDER whether God is pleased when companies and corporations lay off older workers and then hire YOUNGER ones so they don't have to provide health and pension benefits for them; when they shut down factories which once sustained entire communities only to outsource the work overseas because the work can be done there for HALF the wage; when the MAXIMIZATION OF PROFIT becomes their chief goal to the exclusion of how it affects the health and welfare and security of their workers or the consumer. YOU HAVE TO WONDER if God is pleased when politicians--under pressure from lobbyists--seek to eliminate a program that covers pre-existing medical conditions because it will mean fewer profit out of the BILLIONS made by insurance companies each year, or when these same representatives talk about cutting back or even dismantling our nation's social safety net including Social Security and Medicare, Medicaid and food stamps ALL IN THE NAME OF "FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY" at a time when the needs in this country have been the highest since the Great Depression. YOU HAVE TO WONDER, my friends, you have to wonder!

I realize that this is only a drop in the bucket, but the kingdom of God consists of people helping people and though it may not be the TOTAL solution, such cooperative efforts still make a difference and help bring Christ's kingdom one step closer to being realized here on earth. May this morning's lesson help us to reflect on how each of US may serve as agents of God's love and of his justice in a world where the needs remain so great and yet, due to our fears and

sometimes our complacency, the resolve to help seems to grow weaker and more self-interested all the time. The heart of the problem of poverty and hunger are human systems which ignore, mistreat, and exploit human beings, and unless we realize that our systems and institutions ALSO need to be converted every bit as much as our SOULS, then WE will always remain part of the problem and NEVER the solution. Amen and amen.