

ELIJAH AND NABOTH'S VINEYARD

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Dean Feldmeyer

THE STORY

Power corrupts. And absolute power corrupts...absolutely.¹

The story is simple and familiar.

An ol' boy named Naboth owns a vineyard right next to the king's palace in a place that would be perfect for the king's vegetable garden.

So the king, Ahab, goes down there and tells ol' Naboth that he can name his price. Reasonable, unreasonable, it doesn't matter. He'll give him whatever he wants for the vineyard. He's rich and powerful, after all. He can do that.

But that vineyard has been in Naboth's family for a long time, since the days when they first came to the Promised Land, so it has historic and symbolic, not to mention sentimental value to Naboth and he isn't about to let it go at any price.

Apparently, no one has ever said "no" to Ahab because he is so mad and depressed about not getting that little vineyard that he goes back to the palace and throws himself on his bed, turns his face to the wall, and refuses to eat.

The staff gets a little worried about him so they go to his wife, Jezebel, and she comes up to the room and looks at him and says, "What's the matter with you? Is this about that little vineyard you've got your eye on?"

Ahab allows that it is and he tells her how that old coot, Naboth, won't even talk to him. "I told him he could name his price and he said there wasn't one, that he wasn't interested in selling at any price." And then he flops back down on his bed and turns his face to the wall.

Here, we can imagine Jezebel rolling her eyes at the childishness of men. How shallow they were. How silly. How short sighted.

"Uh, excuse me, Ahab, dear. Remind me: Who is the king, here?"

"Me."

"And, who is the most powerful man in the country?"

"Me?"

And then she gives him a little tutorial in that old saw: power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

She orchestrates a frame-up of Naboth. She arranges an event to honor him for something or other and then pays some "worthless men" to make unfounded and untrue accusations about him – sort of an early version of what, today, has become known as "swift boating." And, predictably, the people gathered at this little shindig are so incensed, so offended by whatever it is that Naboth is accused of, that they drag him out into the street and beat him to death with stones right there on the spot.

Upon hearing the news, Jezebel prances into Ahab's room carrying the newspaper and says, "Oh, look here, seems that Naboth guy that upset you so bad has died. Stoned to death in the street, it says. Also says he died intestate – no heirs – so I guess that little vineyard of his goes to the first person to make a bid for it. And I bet that if the king was to make a bid all the other bidders would probably back away."

At that, Ahab leaps from his bed and dashes down to the vineyard only to be met there by his old nemesis, Elijah. The king's joy, it turns out, is going to be short lived.

"Hello, AY-hab," Elijah snarls.

"Hello, e-LIE-jah! I guess you've come here to torture me."

"No, it is the Lord who is going to torture you because you have sold yourself like an indentured servant to idols and false gods. Is there no end to the darkness and evil that rules your heart?"

Ahab puts on a great show of not knowing what Elijah is talking about but, finally, he admits that he knew what Jezebel had done and he rushes to put on sackcloth and ashes and promises to repent because he really, really, really is sorry.

And surprise! Elijah buys it. He says that God will forgive Elijah although even God cannot stop the natural course of consequences. And the consequences of this act will fall not upon Ahab but upon his son.

As for Jezebel? Well, this is it. She's wrung the last drop she's going to get out of her corrupt and evil ways. She's going to die a terrible death and the dogs will lick her blood off the street in the very spot where Naboth died.

THOU SHALT NOT COVET

It's the tenth commandment -- one of the foundational laws of western civilization without which human beings cannot live together in community.

And this is what it says: "*You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*" Its purpose is to set limits on our

¹ Lord Acton in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887, thought by some to be paraphrasing Pitt the Younger, Earl of Chatham who, in 1770 said, "Absolute power tends to corrupt the minds of those who possess it."

desire. There's nothing wrong with desiring, per se, so long as we desire things that are appropriate. The problem comes when we desire inappropriate things. And the things at the top of that list are the things that belong to our neighbor.

When the commandment was originally written, the word "neighbor" meant another member of the community, specifically, another Israelite. Jesus, however, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, expands our understanding of "neighbor" to include everyone.

As Christians, we are not to desire anything that belongs to anyone else.

Period.

As the People of God, we have values that are arranged in a hierarchy. At the top of that hierarchy is God, and right below God is our neighbor. (Matthew 22: 36-40) When we covet something that belongs to another, we place the objects of our desire at the top of that hierarchy, above the neighbor it belongs to and above the God who forbids us from desiring it.

That is why, when Elijah confronts Ahab he doesn't accuse him of theft and murder, which he could easily and justly do, but of idolatry. Ahab, he says, has sold himself like an indentured servant to another, lesser God. And in this case, that lesser God, that idol, is a vineyard or, more accurately, the King's own desire for that vineyard. He has become a slave, not of the Lord God, but of his own desire.

It is not YHWH but his own desire which has become his Final Reality and his Ground of Being.

TRUTH TO POWER

When those in power (physical, political or economic power) sell themselves to the lesser gods of greed and desire...

When those who wield influence and authority decide that the only law they answer to is the law of the jungle and the only authority they bow to is the bottom line...

When those who lead from strength decide that they need have no regard for the weak, that they are responsible only to their own desires and those of their stockholders, that they the only power they will recognize is the power of the marketplace...

That's when the prophet appears.

That's when Elijah steps out of the shadows to confront Ahab with brutal honesty.

That's when God sends his messenger to speak truth to power.

And that is as true today as it was 2800 years ago when these stories were first written down.

As the People of God, we have a prophetic responsibility to speak truth to power and not just political power, because Washington is so far away and such an easy target, but to economic power as well.

As people of God we have a message to bring to the economic powers of this world, the Bear Stearns, and Goldman Sachs, and Morgan Stanley, and Merrill Lynch and Lehman Brothers... and DHL... and every other power that controls or influences jobs and interest rates and cash flow and stock prices and the economic lives of God's people.

We, the People of God, have a responsibility to remind them that, as far as we are concerned, as far as God is concerned, they have a moral accountability that extends beyond themselves and their stockholders, one that encompasses their employees, their customers, their neighbors, their competitors and every human being they touch. They have an ethical responsibility to more than just their bottom line, a responsibility that reaches beyond their profit margin.

We, the People of God, are called to speak the truth to those powers that being "too big to fail" brings them perilously close to that absolute power which corrupts absolutely and that the God who created the universe and judges all that is in it is judging their choices, their decisions, their actions as well.

That is the prophetic role to which we are, as the People of God, called. And it is the prophetic message that we are called to deliver to those who stand in the halls of power, especially, as we see in today's text, the halls of economic power.

And there is one further message we have been given to deliver, one that is also found in today's story.

A FORGIVING GOD

You will recall that, when Elijah delivers his condemnation to Ahab, the king immediately repents. Is he sincere? Who knows! But it is God's nature to forgive God's children at even the slightest sign of repentance.

That is our other message, our pastoral message.

God judges, yes, but God also forgives. All the hymns and offerings and rituals and stained glass windows and high steeples are as pocket change to God when compared to the value of one repentant sinful soul. "You have no delight in sacrifices," says the psalmist in the 51st Psalm. "If I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased." What does God want? "A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

Or, again, in the words of the prophet Micah (6:8) "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Yes, our God judges. You can't read the Bible without that being clear. But our God also forgives. Our god's love and forgiveness is extravagant, indeed, perhaps even wasteful. Does our God not kill the fatted calf for the prodigal who has returned? Does our God not leave the ninety and nine in the field to search for the one who is lost? Does our Lord not embrace lepers, and forgive adulterers, and heal gentiles, and eat with prostitutes and tax collectors?

Our God is nothing if not forgiving if we will but turn to him, if we will only re-pent (turn again).

Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

That is written in the nature of sinful, broken human beings and we need look no further than the headlines to see it played out in our lives -- in Libya, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Sudan, but not just far away, among people of dark skin and strangely accented speech. We can see it here, in Washington, in Columbus, on Wall Street.

Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Except where the Lord our God is concerned. God's power is not corrupt, neither is it corruptible. It is absolute, yet it is pure and clean and without even the slightest blemish. God's power is the power of judgment, yes, but it is the power of forgiveness, also.

God's power is the great un-corruptor.

And it is the plumb line by which we measure our use of the power that is given to us -- the power of our prophetic message of judgment and our pastoral message of forgiveness.

AMEN