

If you listened to the two scripture lessons read today, perhaps you noticed that each had people who seemed to have a lot of power and someone who did not. The ones who thought that they were powerful, though, ended up missing out.

1 Kings 21 tells the story of King Ahab and his domineering wife, Jezebel, who end up taking possession of the field of their neighbor, Naboth. Reminds me of a few years ago in New London, where homeowners did not want to give up their homes to eminent domain... But in the Bible’s story, Jezebel did not go to court against Naboth. When Naboth refused King Ahab’s offer to swap or buy the land, saying that he would never sell the land God gave his family, King Ahab sulked, “turning his head to the wall.” And this set Jezebel into action.

There were interesting and sad dynamics between Jezebel and her husband. Whenever he sulked, she sprang into action. Apparently without telling Ahab her plan, Jezebel plotted to have Naboth killed. Today she’d probably use a drone, but in her day she used two false witnesses who lied, saying that Naboth had cursed God and the king, which led to Naboth being stoned to death, to get him out of the way. Several of the Ten Commandments were broken in this story:

Thou shall not covet, which means to want something belonging to someone else so badly that it makes you hurt the person .... Thou shall not bear false witness against someone... Thou shall not kill... Thou shall not steal...

In this story those with power stooped really low to get what they wanted. Innocent Naboth was killed, making the field available for the king’s taking....

But God called on the prophet Elijah to go and confront King Ahab and his wife, to tell them that just as they had caused the shedding of Naboth’s blood, so GOD would make sure that *their* blood would be shed... They had misused their power. They did not see or did not care about the wrong they had done... Later, delayed for a while because Ahab repented, the judgment did come, just as Elijah had warned them. God did not let them continue forever in their stubborn, self-serving sin. God finally punished them.

In the Gospel lesson, from Luke 7, some powerful folks, Jewish leaders, had invited Jesus to dinner. Towards the end of the dinner, a woman who was powerless – a sinner – came in and put oil on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet dry with her hair. The Jewish leader Simon was hugely troubled over the fact that Jesus allowed her to do this, questioning in his heart, “If Jesus really WERE a prophet, he would know how sinful this woman is and would not let her touch him.” But that’s where the tables turned, as so often happened with Jesus.

The ones who thought they were okay with God, who prided themselves in keeping the law and doing all the proper religious stuff, could not see their OWN sin and need for forgiveness. They could only see the woman’s sin and Jesus’ failure to do what they thought he should do.

It’s so easy to notice someone else’s faults! Examples: That man picked his nose at the traffic

light! – The woman was tailgating me even though I was going ten miles over the speed limit, and she was talking on her cell phone as she drove!! – That person used improper grammar. – That one needs a bath. – His shoes are worn out. – She always has something bad to say about others. – He cheats and never quite tells the truth.... We all have our lists.

But Jesus warned about being so obsessed with the splinters in other people's eyes that we cannot notice the huge planks in our own eyes! (Luke 6:42, Matthew 7:3-5) Or, in today's lesson, perhaps it's easy to forget how much God has forgiven us in our lives...

So what are we talking about here? Probably nobody here has murdered somebody in order to get the person's property. But some of you who are here *have* stolen things. Some have served time for crimes. Most of us, even if we've not been charged with theft or some other crime, have probably envied somebody for something they possess. We may not consider ourselves "big-time" sinners....But if we don't, it may be that we're sitting in the same seat as the Jewish leader Simon, thinking that Jesus must not be as good as we thought because he's not doing what we think he should. Why doesn't he punish those who go against his ways? Why do so many innocent folks suffer or have it so hard? Why does it seem that God lets mean people get away with being mean?

The woman was apparently a big-time sinner. She knew that she needed forgiveness.... And through this, she became so thankful that she was able to do for Jesus what none of the "respectable," "low-sin" authorities had bothered to do: She gave him care and love and true gratitude and hospitality.

If we think we're "low-sin," then we may not think that we need God all that much. In fact, we may not give God much care and love and true gratitude and hospitality. If this the way we are, we may not be able to receive very much from God.

Ahab and Jezebel used their power to grab what they wanted. Like spoiled children, they never even saw their need to change their ways and be obedient to God until after Elijah proclaimed God's judgment on them.

Simon the Jewish official was blind to his own sinfulness. He thought he was a good man, a religiously upright person, so he missed out on what God was really doing, right at his own table.

How about us? We come to church. We try to be nice to people, most of the time. Most of us have enough to eat even if we're not what most people would call wealthy. But are we like Simon, self-satisfied, complacent, not really willing to let God do much with us?? Are we even sometimes like Ahab, sulking when we don't get what we want, and Jezebel, who would step on anybody to accomplish her own agenda?

So many of us have heavy burdens and serious concerns. Have we missed out on the joy, the times when we can give God our love and our thankfulness, because we're too wrapped up in ourselves?

Many of you are bearing heavy burdens right now. There is much in life that's making you all too aware of your powerlessness. Family members, health issues, financial struggles....

For all of us, and even for those for whom life seems to be going smoothly right now, I hold up Jesus' incredible invitation to life-changing hospitality: "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. Take MY yoke upon you..." (Matthew 11:28)

Many times throughout the years and perhaps even here in Winsted, I have shared Clarence Cranford's wonderful story of a little boy who found an old ox-yoke in a barn. He wanted some fun, so he put one side of the yoke over the neck of a calf and the other side of the yoke over his own head. The calf didn't see the fun of it, so the calf bolted, dragging the little boy across the barnyard. The boy screamed, "Help, somebody, we're running away!" (From *Cups of Light*, Clarence Cranford)

It's easy to get yoked to things that run away with us. Greed. Envy. Self-sufficiency. Anger, resentment, anxiety, fear. You name it. God wants us to look at our lives and see and name what we are "yoked" to, what is dragging us down or through life and keeping us from letting GOD be our Heavenly Father, our Shepherd, the One we are asked to trust to lead and take care of us. God's yoke is easy: It will fit perfectly, it will be lined with forgiveness, and it will lead to joy!

The Good News is this: God has perfect vision when it comes to looking into the human heart and seeing what is going on inside of us. God sees our sins, God understands our shame, God knows our deepest hurts, our worst failures, and our best strengths, even the things we won't admit to ourselves. In spite of the ugly stuff that hides within each of us, God claims us as his children and declares his love for us. No matter what you have done or have neglected to do, no matter whether you know that the Lord is with you or feel that somehow you missed out because you aren't so sure about God at all, God is right here, breathing life and hope your way and asking you to dare to say, "Okay, God, I need you. Please help me to know you, please help me to love you." By doing this every day, we unlock the doors to our hearts and claim God as our Heavenly Father. Amen.

Dear God, I need you. Please help me to see that you are right here with me. Please help me to open my heart in new ways to your forgiveness and to what YOU want me to do with and in my life. May I love you, trust you, and serve you; in Jesus' name. Amen.