

June 12, 2016

1 Kings 21:1-21

Luke 7:36-50

“Low and High Sinners”

The lesson from 1 Kings is a story of injustice. Ahab, who was King of Samaria, decided that he wanted to acquire the vineyard of a man named Naboth. The vineyard was right beside Ahab's castle, and he was king, so he called Naboth in and told him he wanted to buy it.

Naboth didn't want to sell, since his vineyard had been in his family for generations, so he refused the king's offer. This sent the king into a sulking session. Ahab's wife, Jezebel, was furious, so she plotted to have Naboth set up... She arranged for two “scoundrels” to bring false charges against Naboth so that he would be stoned to death. 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. High-powered sinners hurt the powerless.

This story is uncomfortably contemporary. This happens today, perhaps with more subtlety. As one person put it: “Them that has, takes and gets.” We've seen the headlines: those in positions of power near and far misuse it, offering preferential treatment to their friends, getting “perks” and benefits for themselves, and generally stepping on or ignoring the rights and needs of those without power.

So 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 (see 1 Kings 22:29ff). God did not let them continue forever in their stubborn, self-serving sin. God finally punished them.

We can read the story of Ahab and Jezebel and find their actions shocking. But in truth, all of us are faced with the same basic decision they were on a daily basis, and we probably have been since we were of pre-school age: will we try to grab what we want, or will we respect other people? Will we be ruled by selfishness and greed, or live as Jesus has asked us to live?

If you listened to the two scripture lessons read today, you probably noticed that each story 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. They could not see their own sin because of their infatuation with their own power and position.

In the Gospel lesson, some powerful folks, Jewish leaders, had invited Jesus to dinner. A woman, who was apparently NOT invited, and who was powerless – a “low” 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 seems too easy to focus on the faults of others, and very hard to even notice our own.

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 as we are so quick to condemn others.

One sad recent example: Former Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert was sentenced to prison time after it became known that for years he had paid a man blackmail money to keep him quiet about the sexual abuse he had afflicted on him when Hastert was a teacher and the young man his student. If you will remember when it became public that President Clinton had had sexual involvement with a young woman, Hastert was one of the most vocal critics of Clinton, leading a movement to have him impeached because of his sins. Secretly, Hastert was a child molester.

Jesus told his followers: "Love God, and love your neighbor as much as you do yourself" – that's what is important in life. We get so caught up in our desires to get stuff and to make ourselves happy that it can be easy to forget the "Love your neighbor" part. Especially in this world where there is a pervasive sense of anger among us. Everybody seems edgy, even mad. Maybe we're being sulky because life isn't going the way we want it to. Friday on the drive back from Long Island (Annual Conference) the cars on the road didn't seem to care anything about each other. Honking, trying to get ahead, exasperated over all the delays, impatient, really angry...the message: YOU ARE IN MY WAY. There did not seem to be much thought of Jesus' teaching by most of the folks behind the wheel.

All of this is to say, We need to watch out about the decisions and actions of our lives. ARE we loving God? Are we caring about the powerless people in our midst? Or are we too afraid or wrapped up in our own desires to even worry about it? We try to feed folks who need it around here, but then do we sit back and tell ourselves we're doing enough because of our pantry? That we don't have to worry about anything more? Are we Christians who "duck and cover" when we find ourselves overwhelmed by the needs of the world? I hear about all the people desperate for homes as they spend years in refugee camps or on the borders of overwhelmed nations, and I can come up with all kinds of reasons why I don't need to do anything more than send a little money here and there. And when I think of inviting someone into my own home, I get scared, because I am afraid that I would never be able to get rid of them. I might get stuck with the burden forever! Question: How "Christian" is enough Christian??

As I speak these words, the big question, for me and for each of us, is: Am I still loving God and loving neighbor, or have my eyes become too full of my own plans and delights to really care? We may not be as mean as Ahab and Jezebel, or as high-up and powerful, but we may not be any more attuned to the needs/pain of our neighbors than they were. High, powerful and low, "normal"

sinners are still sinners.

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 in panic, "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, addiction, fear. You name it. God wants us to look at our lives and to see and name what we are "yoked" to, what is that drags us down or through life and keeps 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!

If Ahab and Jezebel had heard the stories and teaching of Jesus, I doubt that it would have made any difference, for they were too caught up in their own power and greed, and they had no regard for God or for their neighbor.

But we have heard the Bible's (Old and New Testaments) witness to God's concern for the poor, the uninvited, the powerless, the widows and foreigners and children. We have read of Jesus' unsettling eagerness to welcome the sinner; and we have heard the words our Lord, telling us what is important in life. There is a solid warning here: Whether you are powerful or feeling low and powerless, do not put aside until later the important things in life: Love the Lord your God with all you are, and love your neighbor as yourself, NOW.

May we hear God's call to us, even in the midst of all of our plans, struggles, desires, and disappointments, and by God's grace may we have the strength to choose the way of Jesus Christ in our decisions and our doings. Amen.

