

“More!”

1 Kings 21:1-10, 15-21

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 7:38--8:3

June 12, 2016 Pentecost 4 C

I don't know about you, but I've been having fun exploring these stories about Elijah, Ahab and Jezebel from 1 Kings over these last 3 Sundays. When I hear these stories of clashing faiths and prophetic challenges to the people in power, I can almost imagine the cable news network talking heads, on-camera, in front of the castle, pontificating over the breaking stories about the conflict between a prophet and the royals.

Today's story was no exception—a political scandal with a greedy king, a conniving queen, and a prophet who acts like a special prosecutor. It starts in a time and place, not unlike our own in some ways, where the rich and powerful get their own way—well, usually. The laws of God and the customs of the land of Israel stated that people had a right to keep their land in their family, to hand on to their descendants. King Ahab ran up against that law whenever he looked over the palace walls and saw this beautiful, lush vineyard. Each year, the grapes would grow thick and plump. Was it the royal vineyard? It certainly looked like it could be. But no, it had been in the possession of Naboth's family for generations, long before Ahab's castle had ever been built. First, Ahab tried to bargain with the landowner. “I'll buy you a better vineyard! Or I'll give you top dollar! You can retire and buy a beautiful home anywhere you choose!”

But Naboth refused to part with his vineyard. His work and sweat, his agricultural skills, and his memories made him as much a part of that land as the soil, the rock fences, and the vines themselves; not to mention the work, sweat, and skills of his ancestors. So what did Ahab do? He knew that Naboth had the law and the right on his side. So Ahab sulked. He pouted. He went back into the palace and threw a royal tantrum. He lay down on his bed and faced the wall. He refused to eat. What good was it being a king if you couldn't get your own way?

Queen Jezebel was concerned when her hubbie didn't show up for dinner, so she went to find out why he was so depressed. Remember that Jezzie wasn't a local girl. She was a Phoenician princess, and an ardent believer in Baal, Ashtarte, and other Phoenician deities. The Hebrew laws and the Hebrew faith didn't mean anything to her. After all, what good is it to be queen if you can't get whatever you want?

What a royal wuss, Jezebel thought. “Hey, guy, aren't you the king? Get out of bed. Cheer up. Go get some dinner before it gets cold. I can do what you can't. I'll give you that vineyard for a present.”

So the queen went to work. But she had to be subtle, so as not to stir up the townspeople. She used the powers of state, using Ahab's name, to proclaim a fast. During a fast, people would stop eating for a while to pray for God's help for a national problem—like a national day of prayer. Then they would gather at an assembly to address the problem. She advised the elders to have Naboth preside at the assembly—seemingly a nice honor. But then she sent other letters, and arranged what was essentially a mob hit.

The time came. The people gathered. Two unsavory characters were seated near Naboth, up where everybody could see. As they were discussing the problems the community was facing, one of the scoundrels stood up. "Why are you in charge here, Naboth? I heard you curse both God and the king!" Naboth looked astonished. The other creep stood up. "I heard him, too. You have two witnesses. Naboth is the problem. We should kill him." The crowd grew angry and frightened. They dragged Naboth to the edge of town and stoned him to death. The hit men sent word back to Jezebel.

Smug as the cat who swallowed a canary, Jezebel said, "Go, take the vineyard. Naboth won't stand in your way. He's dead. It's yours for the taking." Ahab hadn't broken any laws. Jezebel had done his dirty work for him. Now he could have the prize—that beautiful vineyard was now his.

But as Ahab strolled through the vineyard, he heard a voice. The prophet Elijah met him among the grapevines. "Thus says the Lord: Have you killed and also taken possession of the dead man's vineyard? In the very place where the wild dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, the dogs will lick up your blood and Jezebel's, too." Elijah wasn't exactly a yes man, was he?

The king was troubled. "Have you found me, O my enemy?" And Elijah responded, "I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, I will bring disaster on you." Not too long after, there was a revolution. Ahab and Jezebel were killed, and their bodies left to the dogs.

Greed killed them. Greed kills today, too. It kills when big factories find ways to get around the laws and pollute the air, the water, or the land. Greed kills when productive workers have their jobs sent overseas and they can't support their families. The tobacco industry spends billions recruiting new young smokers to take the place of those they have killed, by aiming their marketing ads at teens and children, both here and around the world. Greed kills with armed robberies, carjacking, and muggings. Even when it doesn't kill physically, when it doesn't leave the Naboths of this world dead along the roadside, it kills spiritually and emotionally. We're programmed to always want more, to feel inadequate, incomplete, and unattractive if we don't buy the in brands. We buy the good news of new goods lock stock and barrel, and wonder why life doesn't feel good anymore. Greed kills.

But we heard another story this morning, the good news of Jesus Christ. The Gospel reading shows us some of that good news—when a woman pours out love and gratitude upon Jesus. She was so overwhelmed with her feelings that she poured precious ointment from an alabaster jar on Jesus' feet. She bathed his feet with tears and wiped them with her hair. She did all this in front of a Pharisee—what we would call a good, upright churchgoer. Simon, the Pharisee, was shocked and embarrassed. This wasn't a way for a woman to act. How shameless to barge in and put on such an exhibition. If Jesus were really a prophet, he would know that she was a sinner and act accordingly by condemning her.

Jesus told Simon a story. What if one person owed you five hundred dollars and another person owed you five thousand? And what if you wrote off both debts? Who would love you the more? Simon shrugged, "Why the one who was forgiven the larger debt, I suppose."

Jesus told Simon, "You didn't even give me a basin of water when I came, so I could wash the dust of the road off my feet. This woman has been washing my feet with her tears. You're right. She is a sinner. But her sins, which were many, are forgiven, because she has shown such great love. You don't have as many sins to forgive, but you don't have much love, either." Then Jesus forgave the woman's sins.

The story goes on to tell about Jesus spreading the good news in towns and countryside, taking the disciples with him, and also taking some women with him. They helped pay the bills. They cared enough for the work that Jesus was doing that they invested themselves in love. Like the woman who poured the expensive ointment on Jesus' feet, they knew that extravagant love is a mirror to the love of God. Greed kills. Love brings life.

Greed and love offer two different standards of measurement. Do we measure ourselves by what we have, or by the measure of God's love poured out so generously upon us? Are we more concerned about getting more, or giving more? God's in the giving business, and invites us to give to others the same kind of love that we have received. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon