

INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

June 13, 2010

8:30 and 11 a.m.

(Third Sunday after Pentecost)



ST. PAUL'S

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Lectionary Texts: 1 Kings 21:1-21a, Psalm 5:1-8, Galatians 2:15-21; and Luke 76: 36-8:3

I Kings 21:1-21

Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. ²And Ahab said to Naboth, “Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money.”

³But Naboth said to Ahab, “The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.”

⁴Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, “I will not give you my ancestral inheritance.”

He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.

⁵His wife Jezebel came to him and said, “Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?”

⁶He said to her, “Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, ‘Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard for it’; but he answered, ‘I will not give you my vineyard.’”

⁷His wife Jezebel said to him, “Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.”

⁸So she wrote letters in Ahab’s name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city. ⁹She wrote in the letters, “Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; ¹⁰seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, ‘You have cursed God and the king.’ Then take him out, and stone him to death.”

¹¹The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. Just as it was written in the letters that she had sent to them, ¹²they proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the assembly. ¹³The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite him; and the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, “Naboth cursed God and the king.”

So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death. ¹⁴Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, “Naboth has been stoned; he is dead.”

¹⁵As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, “Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead.”

¹⁶As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

¹⁷Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: ¹⁸Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. ¹⁹You shall say to him, “Thus says the Lord: Have you killed, and also taken possession?”

You shall say to him, “Thus says the Lord: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.”

²⁰Ahab said to Elijah, “Have you found me, O my enemy?”

He answered, “I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, ²¹I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel;...”

Galatians 2:15-21

¹⁵We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. ¹⁷But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. ¹⁹For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; ²⁰and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Luke 7:36-50

³⁶One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner."

⁴⁰Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you."

"Teacher," he replied, "Speak."

⁴¹"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?"

⁴³Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt."

And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

⁴⁴Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

⁴⁸Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

⁴⁹But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

⁵⁰And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

We have two wonderful stories in our readings today. Both are about inappropriate behavior and the complexity of the human drama. Naboth is murdered and his vineyard taken by the king, simply because he could do it. And an unnamed,

unwanted woman shows up at the home of Simon the Pharisee, who has given a dinner party for Jesus. It doesn't get much better than these two stories to offer us reflections on the nature of humanity and the nature of God. And as if on cue, Paul talks about sin and grace in the Galatians letter.

My first thought when I read these two stories for this the third Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, was, "How unfair!" Why would those scholars who give us the Lectionary for each Sunday of the year put both of these stories on the same Sunday? There are lots of Sundays when I long for the text to have as much drama as these two texts. They could have at least given us one text for one Sunday and the other for another Sunday. But we have them both on this one Sunday, and I can't choose between them, so I am going to weave them together in a message that looks for common themes.

Now the fact of the matter is all texts have some elements of the gospel truth. It is just that the human condition and the nature of God jump right off the page and right in your face in these two texts. And maybe it is appropriate that it is not fair to have these texts on the same day because if these texts tell us anything, it begins with the message that life is not always fair. I mean, look around at the world we live in. Some of us have too much money, and some live in grinding poverty, accidents of birth largely. Some are healthy, and some struggle with disease or disability. Some are in the right place at the right time, and others are in the wrong place at the wrong time. Bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. Sometimes life can seem very unfair.

In our first lesson today, Naboth is an honorable man. He thinks it would be wrong to give up his ancestral home where he has a nice vineyard. He legitimately refuses the King's offer of greed for his land. What does it get him? He loses his life, and the king takes what he wants in the scenario that unfolds. And in the gospel story, the woman doesn't even have a name, just an outcast relegated to the margins of society.

I usually am skeptical about conspiracy theories. I don't know for instance if there was more than one person involved in the assassination of President Kennedy

or Martin Luther King, Jr., or if there was any funny business surrounding the death of Princess Diana. We perhaps will never know for sure about such things. But in our scriptures for today, we find full blown conspiracies. With Naboth, it is King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, the elders and the nobles, the two scoundrels, the judges, and everyone who threw a stone. Everyone knew. And with the woman, it took the whole village, a system of accepted behavior, to decide who got relegated to outcast status. There's lots of inappropriate behavior to go around.

But the scripture says, there is one who is just. God takes note of such inappropriate behavior. God sends Elijah the prophet to confront the king with the truth, and of course Jesus to expose the hypocrisy of the Pharisee. In the complexity of the human drama, there is one who is just and merciful at the same time. Fine, you say. But it's a little late. Naboth is dead. The king has his way. Where was Elijah when you needed him?

You know there is not much about life after death, eternal life, in the Old Testament. For the most part, life plays itself and that's it. But near the end of the Old Testament era, there is an evolution in thought. In the Old Testament Apocrypha, books not in our Old Testament, we find the story of the Jewish revolt against the oppressive Greek rule following the time of Alexander the Great. It is referred to as the Maccabean Revolt because it was led by the Maccabee brothers a century and a half before the time of Christ. In the revolt, the Jews were eventually defeated and suffered horribly. Innocent people were tortured and killed. The rabbis reflecting on these circumstances began to entertain the thought that there might be life after death, not just so good people could go to heaven, but in watching the innocent suffer, they concluded that God might need a little more time for justice to be rendered. In the face of horrible circumstances, what they continued to believe was that God is just. Ahab and Jezebel will pay with their life. Through the years in all kinds of circumstances, we affirm that God is just.

There is one who is just, and as Jesus demonstrates, merciful at the same time. At the dinner party, Jesus sees the woman differently than Simon sees her. Simon sees her with contempt; Jesus sees with compassion. After the woman embarrasses

herself by anointing and crying and kissing the feet of Jesus at the formal dinner, Simon has had enough and is ready to confront Jesus. If you really were a prophet, you would recognize this woman for what she is and send her away so that she stops making a fool out of all of us at this dinner. Big mistake, Simon.

Every act of hospitality that Simon neglected, the woman offered to Jesus. One of the wonderful teaching methods of Jesus is to ask questions. Such great questions. At first pass, I tended to overlook the question Jesus asks here as not one of his deeper ones: “Simon, do you see this woman?” Just a way to get to what he wanted to say. But if you think about it, it really is a powerful question. Simon didn’t really see the woman. He saw a thing, an object, a source of ridicule or embarrassment, not a human being precious to God. How many people do you and I see only as objects or labels or inconveniences rather than as a human being, precious to God?

In Luke’s gospel, when Jesus begins his ministry, he walks in from the wilderness and he attends his hometown synagogue in Nazareth and reads from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free.” In this one encounter with Simon and the woman, Jesus has done all of these things. Recovery of sight to the blind. Do you see this woman? Both Naboth and the woman in this story were non-persons, expendable. But God took notice.

At our session at Annual Conference this year, Bishop Janice Huie invited Tom Long to do some preaching and teaching for us. Dr. Long is the professor of preaching at Candler School of Theology at Emory University, one of our United Methodist seminaries. In one of the afternoon sessions, Dr. Long talked to us about radical hospitality, one of the marks of United Methodist Churches in the Texas Annual Conference that our bishop asks us to strive for. Dr. Long said that when you pull up into the parking lot of your church, or when you walk through the doors of the church, if you don’t see someone who makes you feel a little uncomfortable, someone who would not be a part of your circle of friends, then you are probably

not doing your job as a church. We like our churches to be friendly, and that's good. It is better than being unfriendly. But generally we are friendly to people like us. Radical hospitality takes on a much more inclusive nature that is a reflection of the vast array of the Kingdom of God.

There is one who notices and one who sees. What do you think happened to this woman after the encounter with Jesus? He said to her, your sins are forgiven, your faith has saved you. Go in peace. What kind of lifestyle or place in society did she have after this? Well, we don't know of course, but in the very next few verses following this story, reference is made to a number of women who were followers of Jesus. One of the women referenced is Mary Magdalene. The tradition is that the woman in our story today is Mary Magdalene, although there is certainly no direct connection.

Here's what we do know. One who is forgiven much loves much, and one who loves much is forgiven much. There is one who takes note. There is one who sees. There is one who is both just and compassionate. Jesus still needs followers along the way who can be both prophetic and compassionate. Won't you be one of those?