

Naboth's Vineyard – 1 Kings 21

Have you ever heard people say the church should stay out of politics? I wonder if people who say that ever read the Elijah stories. IN fact, I wonder if they've ever read any scripture at all. I would love to have been a fly on the wall when someone told Elijah that God's people should stick to spiritual things.

I love Elijah! – Read, sometime, in chapter.....about the time he was in a cave, burned out, discouraged and feeling alone. He had challenged the king and queen of Israel (Ahab and Jezebel) for their sell out of Israel's faith in worshipping other gods...and let's just say they didn't say "thanks for the advice" he had to flee for his life. A price on his head, running for his life for doing what God had asked; for speaking the truth to the centre of power....he runs into a cave. He complains....God I did what you said! I spoke the truth....and what's my reward? A price on my head? And they've killed all the other prophets and I'm the only one left and now they're trying to kill me..... and listens for God to speak.

Perhaps you remember this part: Elijah listens for God....

He listens to the wind. God was not in the wind.

He listens in an earthquake. God was not in the earthquake.

He listens in fire....God was not in the fire.

But after the fire.....a low, murmuring sound. And then came the voice of God, in the silence. And the message was not exactly comforting. God told him two things:

First, to go back and anoint a new king. Not only to criticize the government, but go right back to the scene of the danger and put a new government in place.

Second, God tells him he's not alone. In the cave, Elijah had felt abandoned. He had said he was the only one left...all the other prophets had been killed; they've all forsaken you, or been killed, he said. I'm the only one left. God said....your calculation is off by ...6999! There were actually 7000 in Israel who had remained faithful to God. Furthermore, God says, Furthermore I will provide another prophet....one who will carry on the work after you're done. You're not alone – not now, not ever.

Wise words to someone who is burned out from doing important and draining work.

- 1) You're not alone, no matter how you feel right now.
- 2) There will be people who continue it after you. God will provide them.
- 3) You're allowed to go into your cave once in a while...pout, regroup, whatever you have to do. But after that – you need to go back to the work. Back to the dangerous and vital business of doing God's will.

And Elijah, bless his heart – Elijah did. And here in this passage today, we see him challenging the government again. Back at it, full force. Ahab and Jezebel are still on the throne in Israel, and here we get a glimpse of what kind of people they are. And something of their relationship as well.

Read the text again

Does this story recall for you another one....a king who wanted something so badly and set up and innocent man, and sent him to his death? Remember the story of David – when he wanted Bathsheba and set up her husband Uriel? Read it, in _____ Who was the prophet who challenged the king that time?

Well...that had nothing whatsoever to do with this sermon, but I found the link interesting.

Notice her Naboth's answer to Ahab's original request for the vineyard. It was a reasonable request – the field was close to his palace, - he was willing to give him a better one – or the cash. Listen to Naboth's answer .”God forbid that I should give you land which has always been in my family”. Two different attitudes toward land. For Ahab – land was to use. It's a resource that can be traded, bought, sold, used for its resources....

For Naboth though, land was an inheritance. The fact that his family had been on that land for years was very important – it was not to be treated as real estate – it was part of who he was. A better piece of land, or the money were just not the point. It was an inheritance – part of himself. Do you understand that? Do you know people for whom land has that quality?

You can see that same clash of understanding or attitude about land in any negotiations between lumber companies or oil companies and native leaders or environmentalists...you can see it in families when wills have to be settled....

This is a very real difference of approach; neither can understand the other – it is just two different understandings about what land is.

And Biblically speaking, there is another understanding of land. Land as gift – as part of the covenant; part of the promise originally made to Sarah and Abraham. To be respected and cared for but which finally and ultimately belongs to God.

Remember the Jubilee year? You can read about it in Leviticus. Basically, the concepts is this: In Israel, every 50 years all land was turned back to its original owners and everyone started over again. It was meant to make it clear that the land is never, ever ours finally – it is always God's. We tend it, we care for it, not because it's ours, because it belongs to God.

Well....Ahab and Naboth had a different approach to the land – but what happens after that, gets to what I think the story is really about. Power. We see Ahab going home and sulking and then Jezebel says something very revealing.

“Are you or are you not, King of Israel?”

What does she mean by that? “You're the KING – you can do whatever you like!” Ahab wanted the vineyard – but when Naboth said no, apparently he was going to accept that – abide by the law, even if

he did pout. But Jezebel says – “Are you or are you not the King of Israel? You are the king you can have whatever you want – laws are for other people – but YOU? YOU’RE the KING!”

Quite a different idea of kingship than Israel was used to. For them, the king was God’s instrument – a human being, a human ruler, but always God is the real king....and God’s law is to be obeyed by everyone, kings included.

Here – an idolatrous notion that there is no higher law for the one who has power over others’ lives. That the king is a law unto himself. And the word of God through Elijah comes to shatter that once more.

These are very contemporary issues. Today, people in governments have to struggle with whether or not to use their power to uphold the social good, or to step outside the law for personal gain. Are those in power able to break the rules? Certainly they are able. But is it right? It’s a constant temptation. And what happens to them when they do? When someone in power...a politician, or a church leader, or someone else in power breaks the law for personal gain – what is the attitude of society? Are you outraged – do you say “too bad they got caught” – are they doing something you’d do yourself if you had access to the power? Should they be punished in the same way as anyone else? More severely? Less?

These are important questions in our life together as a society. As a church. There is a huge crisis in authority, people are cynical and rightly so about those who are in power...there is very little respect for people who take on roles that have power associated with them, and people seem to accept or expect that anyone who would take on such a role is doing that for the power and the possibility of abusing it for personal gain. And too often those in power have done so. These things are at least partly responsible for the decline in not only church attendance but the respect that the church once was given and now most certainly is not.

The questions ultimately are questions of faith. They are in fact the very stuff of faith. Whose law prevails? That’s the question. Who has ultimate power?

Questions of power affect us more personally than at the level of society as well. WE all have power over other people. And we need to look long and hard at the way we use it. To say you don’t have power over others is to be blind. I don’t know what kind of power is specific to you, but here are a few that might apply: If you are an adult, you have power over children. How do you use it? To make them feel loved, wanted, capable,or do you make them feel insignificant? It’s so easy to do that to a child....you have that power.

If you are a parent, even more so. No matter how old your kids are, you have power over them emotionally. Do you use it to elicit guilt, for example, for your own satisfaction, or do you use it for them?

Just by the fact that you live in Canada, you have power. No matter how little you may think you have, you live like a king or queen compared to most of the world. The fact that you were born here is sheer

luck on your part, but it's given you power. You can use what you've been given to help other people, or you can join the ranks of Ahab and Jezebel. I'm sure that as they were plotting to kill Naboth and take that vineyard, they were saying "Charity begins at home". How do you use your power?

In personal relationships, close friendships, romantic relationships....there are times when you have emotional power over the other person. Maybe that person is ill, maybe going through some other bad time....or perhaps that person by nature is insecure and needs to be reassured. How do you use that power? And it IS power, don't ever kid yourself about that. Do you use it to reassure, to free, to let the other person know that they are worthwhile and loved – or not?

Well – we certainly could go on and on.

Because you can speak, you have power – to thank people, to say "I like you" or not.

To pass on the gossip you hear – or not.

The word of God from Elijah to Ahab and Jezebel is the Word of God for us too.

God's law stands. YOU are not an end in yourself. You are not free to use your power for your own selfish agenda. There is power beyond you that will call you to account. No matter who you are – king, queen, no matter who.....you may not step outside God's law,

Which is wholeness and freedom for everyone. EVERYONE.

Not just you – and certainly not you at the expense of others, but you too are included in the powerful sweep of the will of God for the world.

Go to use your power justly, creatively, and in love.