

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I Kings 21:1-10, 15-21a; Psalm 5:1-8; Luke 7:36—8:3; Galatians 2:15-21

I Kings 21:1-10, 15-21a. To build the shalom community, God intends political systems to maintain a just order in society, with a primary purpose of resisting tyranny and oppression. In particular, this means protecting and defending the political, economic and religious rights of each person and of each family, no matter how wealthy or poor they might be. But to what purpose did the political systems of Israel and of the world actually give themselves that caused them to turn their back on God's vision for humanity and to go bad?

Yielding repeatedly to economic greed that becomes exploitive of the poor and powerless inevitably affects public life. An unjust economics will lead to a politics of the unilateral use of power that will result in the oppression of the people. A perfect example of this is found in the Old Testament lesson for the 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time – the story of Naboth and his vineyard.

One cannot fully appreciate the dynamics of this story without understanding the biblical concept of birthright. When Israel entered the Promised Land, that land was divided between the twelve tribes. The land assigned to each tribe was then divided between that tribe's clans and the clans divided their assigned portion of the land between each clan's families. The land assigned to each family, therefore, became its birthright – passed down from eldest son to eldest son, but belonging to the entire extended family (Joshua 13-21). That land became each family's "ancestral inheritance" or "birthright", an equitable assignment of land that guaranteed a fairly equal distribution of wealth. According to the Law of Moses, that birthright could not be sold by a family; it could be "loaned" to another for up to 49 years and that person could make maximum profit off that land for those 49 years, but it could not become the property of another in perpetuity. Rather, at the end of the 49 years, it had to be returned free of charge and with no encumbrances to the family whose "birthright" it was (Lev. 25:8-28). It was this law that was at stake in the conflict between Naboth and King Ahab.

Ahab covets Naboth's vineyard, and offers to buy it from him for a generous price or to trade him another vineyard. Naboth refuses, telling the king it is his "ancestral inheritance" (or birthright). He dare not relinquish the vineyard to Ahab because it is not his to sell; he holds it in trust from his ancestors who were (in essence) given it by Joshua, and it is Naboth's responsibility to pass it on to his descendants. When Ahab realizes this is jubilee land, he realizes that under Jewish law he has no recourse for getting it. So "he lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat" (21:4).

Queen Jezebel is utterly mystified at her husband's response. She had grown up in a pagan court and simply didn't understand Jewish "birthright" law. Frankly, Ahab's conduct was thoroughly incomprehensible to her. So she says, "Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheered. I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite" (21:7).

This is a most telling statement, for this indicates the driving force both behind Ahab's effort to substitute the worship of Ba'al for Yahweh as well as taking from Naboth his vineyard. The issue is "Are you king of this nation, or are you not?" In a world of absolute monarchies, where

the king owned all the land and all his subjects, could not the king then take whatever he chose? Why then (from Jezebel's perspective) should Ahab submit to this silly Hebrew law of birthright? From her perspective, Ahab's right was to exercise his privilege as king, and use the Hebrew law to eliminate Naboth and secure the land for himself!

That is exactly what is done. "Two scoundrels" (vs. 10) are set over against Naboth to publicly swear that they heard Naboth speak words that cursed God and the king. They bring testimony against him, Naboth is judged guilty, is taken outside the city and is stoned to death (vss. 11-14). Since he has no heirs, the vineyard is no longer birthright and can legally be claimed by the king.

Thus, Jezebel used the Jews' own law against them to circumvent the birthright regulation. The Law required the testimony of two witnesses for a charge to be substantiated (Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6). Likewise, the Law stated that an offense against the king was the same as blasphemy against God, because the king was God's anointed (Exod. 22:28; Lev. 24:14-16). Jezebel used both those laws to get a conviction against Naboth, and then got him stoned to death for blasphemy as required by that same Law (Lev. 24:13-16).

"Do you now govern Israel?" With her sophisticated use of power to turn the Law against the very people it was designed to protect, Jezebel had demonstrated to Ahab how to act like a despotic king! So Ahab "took possession of the vineyard".

But the king didn't get away with this abuse of power. Elijah the Tishbite met the king and exposed the entire subterfuge. "Have you killed and also taken possession?" Elijah declared to the king in public. "You have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord. Therefore, I the Lord God will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bound or free, in Israel" (vss. 19, 20-21). Ahab is exposed before the people for the tyrant he is. The evil and injustice he has committed is declared before everyone, so that all are witness to what he has done. And, in essence, the evil he has committed against Naboth will now be the evil committed against Ahab. As Naboth was deprived of descendants (the worse fate that could befall an Israelite) to whom to bequeath his birthright, so Ahab will be deprived of descendants to bequeath his birthright of a throne and dynasty. And as Ahab took Naboth's life, so God will take Ahab's life! "Eye for eye; tooth for tooth" (Lev. 24:20).

This story is a clear example of economic greed leading to political oppression. Ahab used the power at his disposal as king to engineer the situation and thus obtain the prize after which he lusted. But he did so at the cost of Naboth's life. Economic exploitation, driven by greed, inevitably leads to the abuse of political power resulting in the oppression of those so exploited!

Psalm 5:1-8 is the Psalter passage for this Sunday, but I will write a commentary on the entirety of Psalm 5, since it is only 12 verses long and is really of one piece.

The opening three verses are well known as a worship song sung by many churches. "Give ear to my words, O Lord; give heed to my sighing. Listen to the sound of my cry, my King and my God. For to you I pray. O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch" (5:1-3).

The psalm essentially describes a legal trial where the psalmist “draws up my case” or “pleads my case to you (Yahweh)” (vs. 3b).¹ Thus, both the psalmist and the “evil-doers” “stand before Yahweh” (vs. 5) in the law court, where the Psalmist both defends himself and presses charges against the other (the words “stand before you” is a legal term, meaning to argue one’s case before the judge). The Psalmist tells us that the Judge “hates all evildoers, destroys those who speak lies, abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful” (vss. 5b-6). It will be these standards upon which the Psalmist and the “evildoers” will be judged – whether they do evil, lie, kill and be deceitful toward others.

The Psalm itself presents the Psalmist’ argument. It begins with the setting of the grounds for the trial (verses 1-3), with the Psalmist petitioning the judge (God) to hear his case. In verses 4-6, he affirms that God will destroy lying, deceitful and murdering “evildoers”. Then, in verses 7-8, the Psalmist argues that God will treat himself and others seeking to be faithful to Yahweh and committed to justice quite differently than the “evildoers”, for they will have a future with God. Verses 9-10 point out that “evildoers” will act in ways that trample the rights of the poor, the powerless and marginalized, and so they will get trampled themselves, even to the extent of their being “cast out” (literally, “hurled down” into Sheol). Finally, the psalm ends with verses 11-12 calling on God to be a clement judge to God’s people, calling on God to bring justice to the “righteous” by becoming a full-frontal body “shield” to them.

It is intriguing that this Psalm is used in that lectionary lesson in which the Old Testament passage is the story of Naboth’s vineyard and the Gospel lesson is the woman who repentedly washes Jesus’ feet. King Ahab had lusted after building his own power, even at the expense of the legislation of Israel that protected the people and their “birthright” from the economic acquisitiveness of the king. And Elijah had been the “Psalmist”, defending the cause of the poor and needy while confronting the king for his abuse of power. Ahab had sought the change of Israel’s God from that of Yahweh to that of Ba’al, because Ba’al worship gave permission for the king to rule unilaterally and to build his own power at the expense of the people.

Likewise in the Gospel lesson, the religious aristocracy in Jerusalem is determined to both expose Jesus as a false prophet and this woman as a prostitute. To do so, they used religious law rather than kingly power to dominate and control the Jewish world. Intriguingly, in this story, they themselves broke Law at their convenience, but insisted upon the correct practice of the Law when it served their purposes. But Jesus would not let them get away with such a misuse of their power. These religious leaders might talk of worshipping Yahweh, but they really worshipped at the throne of unilateral power!

Intriguingly, this Psalm suggests the same thing as both the Old Testament and Gospel lessons. Verse 6, “You destroy those who speak lies; Yahweh abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful” can equally be translated “You destroy those who speak lies; Yahweh detests the man of idols and

¹ In the Hebrew legal system, as in the Roman system, one didn’t retain a lawyer to plead one’s case; rather, one would plead one’s own case; therefore the emphasis in the psalm is that of the Psalmist both in a defensive and prosecuting stance, arguing both for his faithfulness in following God and arguing against powerful “evildoers” or “enemies” who both worship “no-Gods” and act unjustly toward the vulnerable of that society.

figurines”.² This may, in fact, be an intentional play on words: that is, a man who worships Ba’al and other household gods will, inevitably be a man of “blood” and “deceit” -- even if he is a king like Ahab, or even a theologically-orthodox Pharisee whose true intention is domination and the exposure of what he perceived as wrong!

That the intention of this Psalmist is to marry Ba’al worship (or even orthodox worship) and social injustice is given even further voice in this Psalm besides the play on words in verse 6. In verse 9, this psalmist writes the rather strange words, “For there is no truth in their mouths; their hearts are destruction; their throats are open graves; they flatter with their tongues”. These words make little sense to us except they are clearly imprecatory. But for the Hebrews hearing this psalm, what is being suggested here is all too clear!

This is likely a reference to the Mot myth of Canaan, the land in which the Hebrews had taken possession. Everyone at that time would have known the Mot myth. Mot was the Canaanite god of death, and therefore an incarnation of Ba’al. The grave was, as it were, the gaping mouth of Mot, waiting to consume the deceased about to be lowered into it; the belly of Mot, below the mouth, waited in anticipation to receive and consume (digest) the body! This was the fate of every person, the Canaanites believed, no matter how they had lived their life. There was no hope of a life hereafter, no permanent redemption and no ultimate redress of injustice and oppression. Whoever you were, you would at one time be received into the gaping mouth of Mot.³

But the Psalmist suggests another alternative. Yes, for the “evildoer”, for the “Ba’al worshipper” (even if he is King Ahab or the Jerusalem religious aristocracy), their inevitable end will be Mot! But for those who embrace the worship of Yahweh, for those who work to do justice in all aspects of life, a different end awaits them. “But joy for all who take shelter in you, endless shouts of joy! Since you protect them, they exult in you, those who love your name. It is you who bless the just man, Yahweh; your favor is like a shield covering him” (vss. 11-12, Jerusalem Bible).

Luke 7:36—8:3 is the third action by Jesus in the seventh chapter of Luke that embodies the salvation Jesus is bringing to humanity through his commitment to the “outsider” of both Israel and of Rome.

The story of a woman who washes Jesus’ feet with her tears is unique to Luke, capturing his emphasis that the gospel is for the rejected and marginalized of society. She is both a woman and a “sinner” (i.e., likely, a prostitute), so that she is doubly marginalized (vss. 37, 39).

² The Hebrew “*is damim*” means both “a man of blood” and “a man of idols”, and is, in fact translated in that latter way in Ps. 26:9-10, Ps. 56:38, Ps. 89:19-20 and Hos. 4:2. Likewise, *mirmah* can equally be translated “deceit” and “figurine”, and is translated as “figurine” or “household god” in the Hebrew Bible in Job 31:5, Jer. 5:27, and Jer. 9:5. See Mitchell Dahood, *The Anchor Bible: Psalms 1 (1-50)*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 31-32 for a full discussion of this issue.

³ Dahood, *op.cit.*, pp. 34-35.

Jesus is having dinner at the home of one Simon, a Pharisee. This woman breaks into the dinner party, kneels before Jesus, and begins washing his feet with her tears. Simon is scandalized, saying to those around him, “If this man were truly a prophet, he would know what sort of woman this is who is touching him”. Jesus, knowing Simon’s thoughts, tells Simon a parable about the greater thankfulness a person would feel who had been forgiven much versus one forgiven only a little. He then says 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. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, 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” (vss. 44b-47).

Jesus then forgives the woman her sins. And Simon and the other Pharisees are scandalized at this apparent breach of the Law. Their offense bothers Jesus not at all. Rather, the story ends with Jesus’ words, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (v. 50b).

The richness of this story is not apparent unless one realizes the significant slights Simon (as the host) had intentionally done toward Jesus at this dinner. The Jewish Law required the performance of certain “entrance” rituals, welcoming an honored guest into your home for a meal or a sojourn. You were first to provide water so the guest could wash the dust from his or her feet that was accumulated by walking the dirt roads to your house (Gen. 18:4). Second, you were to give your guest a welcoming kiss signaling your bestowal of “shalom” upon him (Gen. 29:11). Finally, you were to anoint the visitor’s head with oil (Ps. 23:5; 45:7; 92:10; Eccl. 9:8). Jesus had been accorded none of these civilities, thus signaling that he was no guest but one who was there to be measured and criticized.

But the woman provided these symbols of welcoming, and did so far beyond expectation. She washed Jesus’ feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, kissed his feet repeatedly, and anointed his feet with ointment from an alabaster jar (thus indicating the ointment as being of great price). Jesus is welcomed by her generosity and love, but also by her repentance and her desperate need to be forgiven. Therefore, despite the shock of his host, Jesus forgives her.

Further, the treatment that Jesus received before the woman entered the room indicated to him the nature of this meal. He was to be no guest (although he would be served food and they would all eat together), but rather he was to be on trial. Given Simon’s status in Jewish society (a Pharisee) and the nature of the venue, Jesus would have known before he arrived at the meal that this meal was occurring in order to attack, embarrass and perhaps even undermine him. Yet it is significant to note that Jesus does not shun this confrontation. Rather, he welcomes it. This is evident in the way he confronts Simon at Simon’s reaction to the “invasion” of this party by this woman. Jesus takes charge of the questioning, so that it is Simon who is put on the defensive and Jesus who is the inquisitor. Jesus did not shy from a fight!

Finally, Luke has written this story so that it is open-ended at both the beginning and at its end. At the beginning, we have no idea whether this woman previously knew Jesus or whether Jesus

had dealt with her in the past. Rather, she simply appears and begins her ministrations. At the end, we have no idea how Simon the Pharisee responds to Jesus' words. We do not know whether he is convicted by Jesus' words and actions and thus receives this woman, or whether he rejects both Jesus and the woman. For the point of this story is not Simon's response, but the woman's response. The message of Luke is that Jesus forgives the marginalized, the unwanted and rejected. And he holds the rich and powerful accountable for their uncaring response to the woman and their rejection of him.

The Gospel Lesson for the 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time then ends with a summary statement. But what a summary statement it is. "Soon afterwards Jesus went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Suzanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources" (8:1-3).

Galatians 2:15-21. As we reflected together in last Sunday's Epistle Lesson, the primary focus of the book of Galatians was Paul's argument that it was God's act of mercy through Christ that saves people, not obedience to the Law. Paul began the construction of that argument, not by an examination of scripture nor in theological debate, but by sharing his own story of how he was saved out of Jewish obedience to the Law and into faith in Christ. That personal testimony is contained in Galatians 1:11 through 2:14. But now, in today's Epistle Lesson, Paul moves into theological reflection and debate on this issue.

Paul asks, "How has God acted to redeem us and to draw us into a transforming relationship with Him?" Jews and some Christian Jews will argue that we are drawn into a saving relationship with God through our careful obedience to the Law of Moses. But think what you have asserted if you contend that it is our obedience of the Law that will save us. Paul points out, "No one will be justified by the works of the law. If, in our efforts to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?" (2:16b-17)

Paul is presenting a carefully honed argument here. You contend, he argues, that it is through obedience to the Law that you are made right with God ("justified"). But the fact is, and any sensible person will recognize, that no one will be totally obedient to the Law. The reality is that every one of us sin, and in that sinning, disobey the Law. Therefore, ipso facto, no one can be saved, for one disobedience of the Law makes salvation as invalid as if one chronically disobeyed the Law. And therefore that means that if we perceive salvation as earned by our obedience of the Law, that makes Christ complicit ("a servant of sin") in God's rejection of us because we disobeyed one particular of the Law.

There has to be a better way. And there is – the way that was created by God through Jesus' death and resurrection upon the cross. "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" (2:16). A person is made right with God not by his or her good deeds or obedience to the Law, but by God. It is God who makes us right with God's self, not we who do it for God (as if God didn't have the

capacity to save us). Christ has already died, already risen, and is already promised to come again. How we respond to what Christ has already done, doesn't in any way change what it is that Christ has done for us and for the whole world. It is already done. Salvation for humanity has already been provided. The only question is whether we can accept what Christ has already done for us, and embrace the God who has already embraced us.

Thus, our embrace of what God has already done for us through Christ is an act of faith on our part, in which we simply accept God's act that already chose us. That is why, Paul argues, I state that we are saved through God's grace that we appropriate through simply believing and accepting it (faith), and not by our acts of being good or of obeying the minutiae of the Mosaic Law.

Paul then concludes this magnificent but logically confusing passage with a great testimony of faith. "I have been crucified with Christ; and 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. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing" (2:19b-21).

The essence of Christianity is that it is a relational faith, not a legalistic faith, Paul here declares. To perceive salvation as being dependent upon the obedience to a law or doing good deeds reduces our religion to the obedience of rules and regulations. It perceives salvation as being achieved by obeying such rules. But Christianity is not legalism. It is a relationship – a dynamic, vital and loving relationship between God, Christ and all of us. And an authentic deep relationship is not built upon the obedience to regulations; it is built on trust, on faith in each other. If you don't have loving trust in each other, you don't have a relationship on which you can depend!

Our salvation comes about through our relationship with God that comes through God's love for us exhibited through the cross. When we respond to the embrace of God's love through Christ, then we give ourselves in love over to him so that we become "flesh of each other's flesh and bone of each other's bone". It is as if we are absorbed into Christ, so that in our very existence, we become Christ to the world. We become a living union with God, so that we become, in our actions and in our life together, an extension of Jesus alive in the world today. Our union with Christ becomes a spiritual relationship of the most intense intimacy. Because that is what Christianity is all about – not institutions, not structures, not laws, not regulations – but relationship with God, each other and the world because of our relationship with Jesus Christ.

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