

**“The Vegetable Garden”**  
**Summer Sermon Series on Elijah and Elisha**  
**Text: I Kings 21:1-10; 15-21a; Galatians 5:13-15**  
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*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence...” Galatians 5:13a*

Ordinarily, you would think that wanting to plant a vegetable garden would be the most desirable thing imaginable. Who could object to a fellow’s wanting to grow a few cucumbers, tomatoes and pole beans? In today’s passage from I Kings, the would-be gardener is anything but a regular fellow. He was the infamous King Ahab of Samaria, and the One who objected to his horticultural plans was none other than the Lord God Almighty. What happened was this: Ahab and his equally infamous bride Jezebel had a summer place they liked to go to when the weather was hot and they needed an escape from the city for a little R&R. The summer palace was adjacent to a piece of property owned by a man named Naboth, who happened to have a vineyard in his back yard. The king decided that he wanted to plant a vegetable garden in the exact place where the vineyard grew. He called his neighbor over and said, “Let’s make a deal. You give me your vineyard and I’ll give you one of my vineyards somewhere else, or, if you prefer I’ll just pay you cash for your vineyard.”

At this point he sounds as genial as old Bob Barker. “Just come on down”... give me your vineyard, I’ll give you mine, and everything will be fine.

To the king’s astonishment, his neighbor replied, “God forbid that I give away my ancestral inheritance.” It seems that in ancient Israel, high value was placed on keeping land within the extended family. For a faithful man like Naboth to let the king have his vineyard would be the moral equivalent of selling the king his first-born child. An honorable person wouldn’t consider it. Naboth said no, and the king didn’t like it. He did not understand the distinction between what he wanted and what he was entitled to. (This is a Walter Bruggemann idea.) - I have two grandchildren. One is six and one is three. The three year old feels entitled often to things that the six year old has possession of.

In today’s story, all the power rests with the king. If you are the little guy and the bigger guy decides that what you have is just what he ought to have, you are in trouble. The king was unaccustomed to having anyone ever saying no to him. The storyteller gives us an intimate look at the gloomy reaction that descended upon Ahab. We are told that he took to his bed, turned his face to the wall, and

refused to eat. I would have expected a temper tantrum, a royal rage of some kind, but there he was, sending his dinner tray back to the kitchen and moping around in the bed.

I am reminded of an old story about the mother who couldn't get her son out of bed to go to school. Morning after morning, she struggled with him trying to get him out of bed, and he was always reluctant. He would stay there until the last minute. One morning, when he absolutely refused to get up, she said, "You just have to, son."

"I don't want to."

She said, "You are the principal. You have to get up!"

The king moped around in bed. Isn't it interesting how public bullies often act like weak noodles in private? There are exceptions of course. Jezebel was an exception. She was a bully in public, and she was a bully in private. She wasn't about to let her husband lie there crying into his pillow. She said, "Why aren't you eating anything?" He told her about the conversation with Naboth. She said, "What's the matter with you? Aren't you the King? Get yourself up out of that bed. I'll get the vineyard for you." And she did.

She cooked up a scheme that involved sending letters in the king's name to the elders and nobles who lived nearby. She asked them to arrange a fast and invite Naboth. Now, I myself would turn down an invitation to a fast in a heartbeat. This is the only sign of poor judgment on Naboth's part in this whole story.

*You are cordially invited to come to a fast.*

"Oh honey, let's pick out our outfits. We're invited to a fast!"

At the fast, bad things happened. During the occasion, Naboth was falsely accused of cursing God and cursing the king. He was immediately yanked out of the assembly, taken to the outskirts of town, and stoned to death.

Jezebel told her husband about the successful outcome and that the vineyard that belonged to the neighbor was now the king's, since he could rightfully take possession of property owned by a condemned criminal. Ahab felt better after that. He could take nourishment. Whether Jezebel put a few seed catalogues on his dinner tray that night is not recorded.

I am reminded of those famous words of Lord Acton from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Here you see it plain and clear, tyranny at its bloodiest. Note that the one who plotted the bloodshed and the one who allowed the plot to go forward had no actual blood on their hands. When the stoning took place, they were miles away.

The way I see them, Ahab and Jezebel represent more than self-serving people in high office, but they certainly do not represent less than that. Self-serving people in positions of authority and responsibility should be answerable to the highest moral standards. What a shame and tragedy that in our great democracy, so many of those who are in positions of power and authority are there to get what they want, to line their own pockets, rather than to serve the people, to build up the community, and to help the poor and the oppressed.

In the Old Testament story, we have a “universal moral tale” that is relevant to any century and to any form of government. People in power are tempted to abuse power and sometimes do. That is why the checks and balances system of our American democracy is so essential.

Our Presbyterian form of church government, which many people who are not Presbyterian think is as tedious as tedious can be, is based on the notion that power can corrupt. Authority is never invested in one individual office but always in judicial bodies that provide checks and balances to one another. No minister’s vote counts more than the vote of an elder.

The tendency to abuse power is as old as human nature; it is endemic to human nature and therefore to human institutions. I am not suggesting that we should be suspicious of all leaders. God calls wonderful, honorable people to leadership in church and in government, and to civic responsibilities, but we must never forget that the instinct to benevolence is less natural in the sinful human creature than the instinct to take what you want, when you want it.

Al Adams, my husband, has taught Sunday school for almost 30 years. For a number of years, he taught the two and three year olds. Someone asked him one Sunday what curriculum they followed in that two year old class. Al answered, “We’re learning to share. It’s going to take all year.”

We were in a crowded parking lot one night last week and couldn’t find a parking place to save our lives. Up and down the rows we went until we spied one. Someone else spied it at the same time. The gladiator instinct descended upon us all. It does not immediately occur to many of us to wonder whether the other person might need to park in the slot we want more than we need to.

Ah, human nature. We see it at its ugliest in Ahab and Jezebel. They thought they had gotten away with taking what they wanted it, that no one knew what they had done. They were wrong. Guess who knew about every single part of the plot. Guess who saw every stone being hurled. The Lord God Almighty. The Lord sees and knows everything. How does that grand old prayer put it? *Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid...*

That's the truth. There are no cover-ups with God.

At last, our friend Elijah makes his appearance on the scene. He has been sent by Yahweh to let the king know that God knows what he and Jezebel have done. As a consequence, Elijah prophesizes a disgraceful death for Ahab and for his whole household. We'll have to have a long sermon or two on the Old Testament picture of God as a God of judgment. But this much we can say today: The fate of Ahab and Jezebel was self-engineered.

This much also we can say: It matters what we do. Ahab, when he heard Elijah, was repentant and regretful. He put sackcloth on and said he was sorry and he went about dejected, which moved the Lord, not to cancel the judgment that came as a consequence of Ahab's abuse of justice, but to postpone it. Ahab's victims were not only Naboth and his family. The whole nation had forgotten the ways of God.

The 10<sup>th</sup> commandment. Do you remember it? The last climatic commandment? *Thou shalt not covet. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thy neighbor's spouse, thy neighbor's servants, and presumably thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's vineyard either.*

The plain English word for Ahab and Jezebel's sin, a sin that will ruin the human soul, ruin a nation, is greed. (a Howard Thurman idea) Where does greed come from? It comes from the worry that you never have enough and that you must have more and you will do whatever you can to get more, even if it belongs to someone else. This is something our nation needs to think deeply about, 231 years after we were founded. America's obsession with getting and spending can't be good for its soul.

This matter of coveting is also a personal issue. I think how it shows up in my heart – I'm not going to have someone executed – but I can be envious. Can you? I can look at someone and think, boy, I wish I looked like that! Or I wish I had what she has. We rarely take from others what they have, but none of us is above being envious of those who have what we want. Sometimes we don't even admit it to ourselves, but we can act hatefully toward the person who has what we do not and not even be aware of it. *Thou shalt not covet.* It's not a commandment meant to make us miserable. It's a commandment meant to make us human in the way God intended.

The Apostle Paul wrote that he had learned the secret of contentment, because God has given him everything that is essential for the living of human life. Today we think about our nation, its rich heritage, the promise of its future. I cannot think of a time in the history of our country that has called for more moral leadership than these troubled days. What a wonderful opportunity; what a wonderful responsibility we have to replace this addiction to having more things with having more compassion for others, to replace the love of power with the

power to love, as God loved the world, as revealed in Jesus Christ, who let go of everything for our sakes, including equality with God.

Some of you got up early this morning and heard a sermon I preached on the radio. I concluded that one and I will conclude this one with perhaps my favorite quotation from American history. Learned Hand was one of our nation's most outstanding jurists. He once asked himself, "What is the spirit of liberty?"

In answer, he wrote these words:

The spirit of liberty is the spirit that weighs the needs of other men and women alongside its own. It is the spirit that remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded. It is the spirit of him, who 2000 years ago taught humanity a lesson it has never learned, but never quite forgotten, that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered, side by side, with the greatest. Where the least shall be heard and considered, side by side, with the greatest.

Let us pray...

Merciful God, we praise you for the privilege of worshiping you openly and freely. Help us to hunger and thirst for all that is good, until your kingdom comes on earth. All power and glory to you mighty God, now and forever. Amen.