

So I'm going to make a pretty controversial claim here right out of the gate. It is usually wise for the newish young associate to play it safe but sometimes we must be bold. We must stand up and say what we believe even when we know there are those who disagree. There has been a lot of public debate about this, lots of heated rhetoric, lots of stones thrown, but I think some of that is starting to die down so I'm just going to put it out there: I liked Baz Luhrmann's version of the "Great Gatsby." I know some of you disagree and that's fair. The 3D cinematography, the fresh Jay-Z produced soundtrack, all layered upon the prose of F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1920's masterpiece struck many critics as blasphemy. I loved it all. I've been listening to the soundtrack on repeat. I know some of you think I'm wrong. You're entitled to that opinion but Ellen liked it too and she's a literature scholar, so there.

I think Fitzgerald's Nick Caraway has something in common with the unfortunate victim of Israel royalty gone horribly wrong from the story in 1 Kings. You see, it's not easy having a vineyard near the palace of the King of Israel, especially if that King of Israel is Ahab, one of the worst kings in their history, and his wife is the star of "The Real Housewives of the Ancient Near East," the ineffable, undeniable Queen Jezebel. Having a little family plot near the summer getaway of royalty might be great for property value but it's a real hazard for quality of life, or life at all.

Naboth, the Jezreelite, had a vineyard *beside* the palace. I imagine that if Naboth were writing a little modernist memoir about the summer the King and Queen of the Northern Kingdom stayed at their "little place up in Jezreel" it might sound a little bit like Nick Caraway describing the summer he spent in West Egg living next door to the

inscrutable Jay Gatsby. Nick explains that his house was squeezed between the sprawling homes of the nouveau riche. In comparison, Nick's house was an eyesore but a small eyesore, therefore it had been overlooked and so he got to live within, as he says, "the consoling proximity of millionaires."¹ So might Naboth have said of his little vineyard beside the palace of the King. However, unfortunately for Naboth, his vineyard was not overlooked. Turns out that proximity to the most aloof, corrupt, willfully ignorant, and indifferent in society was not so consoling for Gatsby, Nick, or Naboth. An invitation to a lawn party, a king's simple request to purchase a plot for a little vegetable garden, becomes a high stakes game. "Give me your vineyard." Give me your life.

II.

A couple weeks ago Baron preached on a text from earlier in this prophetic narrative. He told us about how Jezebel was a foreign born, Phoenician princess who influenced the Israelite king, Ahab, and many of his people to worship the false god Ba'al. This led to a standoff between the prophet Elijah and the priests of Ba'al.

Ahab is considered to have done evil in the eyes of God. He turned from God, turned from his ancestors, and turned from his people. He became just another oppressive ruler of an empire seeking power, wealth, and comfort. Jezebel is cast as the corruptor. In the story of Naboth's vineyard we see the depths Jezebel's malice. King Ahab wants to purchase his neighbor's vineyard and turn it into a vegetable garden. He offers Naboth a fair price but Naboth turns him down. This vineyard means a lot to him, it's been in his family for a long time, he just can't part with it. Ahab sulks off, goes to his room, flops down on his bed and refuses to eat, like somebody's little brooding prince. If he could have written a tweet it would have said, "OMG, some peasants just don't understand anything. So mad. Don't ask. #YOLO." His wife finds him in this state, mocks him for

¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 5.

not acting the way she thinks a king should act, that is, do whatever you want because you can. “Are you not the King of Israel?” Not caring about intricate Hebrew laws and customs Jezebel takes controls and, manipulating said Hebrew law, frames Naboth for blasphemy and sedition and gets him stoned to death.

The story lends itself to many more literary comparisons where class differences, greed, hubris, and the lust for wealth and power are elemental. In fact, that is true of most of the two-volume books of Samuel and Kings. There is all the cunning and conniving, the deception, malice, and cruelty of a Shakespearean drama. It has hints of “The History of the Kings of Britain,” “The Lord of the Rings,” and “A Game of Thrones.” We could call this story, “Naboth’s Vineyard: A Game of Gardens.”

I’m afraid the sad truth is that this story and those like it are so intriguing to us because they give us a way to, at a safe distance, view the stories of our lives which are filled with so many of these same literary elements: hubris, lust, greed, ignorance, and self-serving ambition – sin and brokenness we call them in the church. In our own story, as Children of God, recipients of a vast inheritance, we too have a vineyard dangerously close to the palace of careless, inept, greedy, corrupt, heartless imperial representatives.

III.

Vineyards are a kind of a big deal in the Hebrew Bible. The word occurs 91 times in the Old Testament. The first time is in Genesis 8:9, “Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard.” He planted a vineyard right after getting off the arc. It’s the second thing he does after building an alter to God.

For the ancient prophets of God vineyards were a sign of stability and permanence, reminders of God’s promise. Vineyards don’t flourish just anywhere. They take a lot of skilled care. They are a labor of love.

In the deeply erotic love poetry in Song of Songs, vineyards are a metaphor for a romantic relationship between young lovers. In chapter 7 the young woman beckons her lover to the vineyard where she will give her love. A vineyard in this poem is a sign of God's gift of sexuality and intimacy. Don't let anyone tell you the Bible is boring.

There are precise laws regarding vineyards in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. The laws dictate things like every seven years the vineyard should be allowed to rest to allow poor people to come and take from it what they need, and farmers are told not to strip their vineyards bare – leave some for the poor, the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Vineyards are a ministry to the most vulnerable.

Several Morningside members demonstrated this last Saturday as they built raised garden beds designed by Mary Chapman for the Shalom International Ministry, a new church development of this presbytery, and taught kids of that community, some of the most vulnerable in our city, many refugees, how to work that soil so it brings forth life and flourishes.

King Ahab and Jezebel didn't care about this, "Give me your vineyard." Naboth clearly did care about this. "The Lord forbid I should give you my ancestral inheritance." Naboth reframes the request – this is more than just a vineyard and it's not mine to give.

One more thing about vineyards in the ancient world – they were not vegetable gardens. The Hebrew word for vegetable garden, that which Ahab wants to put in the place of Naboth's vineyard, it's used only one other time in the whole Bible, Deuteronomy 11, where the Lord tells the once enslaved Hebrews about the promised land they are to enter. God says, "The land you are about to occupy is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sow your seed and irrigate by foot like a *vegetable garden*. But the land that you are crossing over to occupy is a land of hills and valleys, watered by rain from the sky, a land that the Lord your God looks after. The eyes

of the Lord your God are always on it.” Ahab’s simple, seemingly reasonable offer to Naboth, to buy his vineyard or give him a better one sounds to Naboth like a slap in the face, a mocking invitation to sell himself back into slavery, to become a pawn, a commodity rather than a child of God who’s value comes not from capital but from his place in God’s family.

We are Children of God, recipients of that same inheritance which we call the Grace of Jesus Christ. Because of this we declare people are not products to be used, stepped on, and traded, and trafficked. People, all people are bearers of the image of God. Precious.

For a faithful Child of God like Naboth who knows the law, knows the stories of his people, knows the situation of the most vulnerable in his community, a vineyard is much more than a commodity, it’s a gift from the Lord. It’s a symbol of security, it’s promise, it’s hospitality, sexuality, care, nurture, and nourishment, and if only it could have avoided the greedy gaze of a corrupt ruler, Naboth would have been OK. But it’s dangerous to be in the shadow of the empire. We know this, don’t we? Our ancestral gift, freedom from the world of sin, unconditional grace from God through Jesus Christ, our call to be a welcoming community, to give our time, our hearts, and our resources to those in need, all of this that we call *being the Church*, our ancestral gift, that sits right here *beside* the palace of the king, squeezed in the midst of a broken world driven to take more at any cost, to manipulate, and disrespect, to scheme and plot and lie and kill. Daily we are approached with a deceptively reasonable offer: trade it all, trade the vineyard of promise, hope, grace, intimacy; trade the community of love, forgiveness, and mutual affection, trade it for a vegetable garden sown with seeds of slavery, oppression, abuse, and hatred; persistent weeds of addictions that reach out and suck our life, our hope, our time, and attention. Our vineyard is in plain view. There is no hiding. But Christ did not

call his followers to hide from the world and hope nobody notices us tucked away over here in a fortified, walled up, sanctuary. Even Nick Caraway's hidden eyesore was eventually found out. Christ called us out into the world to share this gift, to tell the world that *all* are recipients of the amazing inheritance of the grace of Christ.

We have a vineyard here at Morningside, and while we have lovely facilities and committees, I'm talking about Morningside as us, the church, the people. We have an amazing vineyard here at Morningside and we must not hope it goes unnoticed but we must tend in, take care of it so flourishes and it's fruit can be shared with the world. We must not strip the vineyard of this church bare all for ourselves, but we must invite in the most vulnerable in our city to come and share in our abundance and then we must go out, with baskets overflowing and share. We've all seen the fruit.

Brian Johnson and I got to spend this week up in Montreat with some of our youth and 1,200 other youth worshipping God, that's fruit we must share. We've tended this vineyard as we make meals together and sit at table with the folks at Journey and Clifton and form real relationships. We've seen this vineyard's grapes offered up as we lift the walls of habitat houses together and share in life together at congregational lunches. We live our lives boldly in the midst of a world that may not understand or care but we can help them see. The world of greed and consumption makes a seductive offer, "Give me your time and attention, your life, your soul. I'll give you money for it." But we can't sell this vineyard, we can't sell this grace of God, because it's free, it's for all. We offer up to the world a better way to be this world. Take it, be part of us. Welcome to the vineyard.