

The Third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 6C RCL)

Prophetic Connections

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

There are some stories in the Bible that make you wonder about the careful editing your Sunday School teachers must have done: the terrible deeds of Ahab and Jezebel somehow never made it into all my years of going to church. Oh, I knew the names, and knew they were pretty awful people; but aside from the fact of Jezebel's dead body being eaten by dogs, I had no details, and didn't much want any!

The story of the murder of Naboth, ordered by Jezebel and carried out by proxy, is new to our lectionary in this cycle. It replaces another dreadful episode from another Old Testament book: the story of David and Bathsheba and the murder by proxy of Bathsheba's husband Uriah.¹ Both stories involve royal sinfulness against righteous, innocent people and prophetic expression of God's extreme displeasure. The outcomes are somewhat different, because the reactions of the royal sinners are different: David repents and accepts the penalty for his treachery. Jezebel and her "resentful and sullen" husband Ahab choose to stand in defiance against the God of Israel, and end up, both of them, literally going to the dogs.²

How is it, with a story like this, that we hear the reader say, "The word of the Lord," and glibly reply with thanks? It seems to me we should just let the end be the end and sit silently as we ponder where such a story might connect with our own lives!

I suspect that there are very few murderers among us this morning; Jezebel, Ahab, and their hired "scoundrels" are not characters likely to resonate with our own. But look again: when Jezebel decided to "give [Ahab] the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite," she wrote letters, not directly to the men who were to bear false witness against him, but "to the elders and nobles who lived with Naboth in his city." It was they—the supposedly upright citizens of Jezreel—who hired the hit men. And then they apparently heard the false testimony with straight faces, pretended to be shocked by Naboth's purported treason and blasphemy, and took up stones to kill him in accordance with the Law of Moses. Murder and false witness: Commandments Six and Nine, broken by elders and nobles even as they declared their own righteousness.

¹ II Samuel 11:26—12:15 was the assigned reading for this Sunday in the Episcopal lectionary in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. That lectionary has been generally superseded by the Revised Common Lectionary.

² The story of Elijah and Elisha versus Ahab and Jezebel begins at I Kings 16:29 and concludes with her death in II Kings 9.

Ahab and Jezebel, as Israel's king and queen who should uphold the Commandments of Israel's God, get the blame and the curse from Elijah, and appropriately so; but let us not miss the complicity of the elders of Jezreel, who may be more like you and me than the royals are. They knuckled to pressure from the palace, a cowardice that turned to treachery; and a faithful, innocent man and his family were destroyed.

The Gospel story, too, involves a person of considerable power heaping scorn upon another who is powerless—scorn that turns out, after all, to be unwarranted: Simon vilifies the woman who bathes and anoints Jesus' feet for her sinfulness, but Jesus declares that her sins are forgiven, fully and completely. This is a subtler story than the Old Testament. Instead of a piece of land being taken, it is a reputation. Instead of dying at the hands of neighbors like Naboth, the unnamed woman has been condemned to live with the shame of her sinfulness being known to all her neighbors. Instead of a curse laid heavily on the head of one who offends against God, a short parable draws a quiet parallel to the situation at hand.

Simon cannot help but understand that he has failed as a host in the simplest courtesies, and he feels the sting as Jesus gently points out the failure. The problem is that Simon does not understand that this small, rather private sin is forgiven just as graciously as the woman's flagrant, very public sin; so he feels no particular gratitude, no love for the holy guest who forgives. He is insulated by his position in the community and the power it gives him; he has no sense of having any need of God.

The woman, on the other hand, is desperately needy. Whatever her sin may have been, the shame with which she lives and the utter disrespect in which she is held by the people of the city have driven her to the point where her spirit is defeated. She is one of those referred to in the first of Matthew's Beatitudes: poor in spirit, knowing in every fiber how much she needs God. And as promised in the Beatitudes, she is blessed to see in her own life the power of God to forgive and renew. The Kingdom of Heaven surrounds her.³

We don't know how she comes to understand the blessing of her forgiveness, but it is clear from Luke's story that she is forgiven first, before her intrusion on Simon's dinner party; and that her tears and tender care for Jesus, extravagant as they are, are evidence of that. She is overcome with gratitude and love for God, made present to her in Jesus, and her actions mark the beginning of her new life. Jesus bids her go in peace, saved by her faith—faith which is so much more

³ The New English Bible renders Matthew 5:3 thus: "How blest are those who know their need of God; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs." The first line in Greek (μακάριοι οι πτωχοι τω πνευματι) says literally, "Blessed [are] the poor in spirit".

than an intellectual assent: it is a total commitment of her life to the ways of God.

I am struck, in these lessons, and in the words of some of our hymns today, by how terribly difficult it is for people of status and power to live lives of humble gratitude, caring for others as they wish to be treated. Jezebel and Ahab were not satisfied with the kingdom; they wanted to turn Naboth's vineyard—a symbol of Israel, planted and nurtured by God—into a vegetable garden. Simon the Pharisee was so sure of himself in the presence of Jesus the country rabbi that he did not bother to extend even normal small courtesies to honor him as his guest. Individuals, businesses, and governments wreak havoc on human beings' lives with callous disregard for feelings and livelihoods, to say nothing of wars, genocide, and the kind of devastation of the environment that goes with unbridled greed.

It isn't just British Petroleum or companies that mine diamonds in Africa or coal in West Virginia. It isn't just the Taliban or Al Qaeda or the eternally warring factions of the Sudan. It isn't just Bernie Madoff or the executives of Enron or AIG. Like the elders and nobles of Jezreel, every one of us is pressured and tempted daily to knuckle to the lures our society offers us hour by hour in magazines and on television. Our own sense of well-being seems to be involved as we acquire and get and want, seeking security. Like Simon the Pharisee, we live in comfort while millions suffer oppression, degradation and shame. Even if we never consciously take an active part in making others suffer, our culture's greed for resources involves us personally, whether we protest or not.

If we fail to respect our fellow human beings as Simon did, or fail to stand up for what we know to be right like the elders of Jezreel, we do something terrible to ourselves: we shut the door on the gracious generosity of our God. We lose the opportunity to discover, like the woman with her alabaster jar of ointment, the amazing joy of being truly, deeply forgiven. We lose the delight of offering and using the best of who we are and what we have with our own grateful generosity.

We are not likely to hear a prophet like Elijah call down dreadful disaster on our heads. But Jesus asks our help in his care for the lost, the last, and the least. He asks us to turn aside from careless cruelty and thoughtless greed, to walk with him and support his work. It is the work of love.

Mollie Douglas Turner+
Bruton Parish Episcopal Church, Williamsburg, Virginia
13 June 2010