

13 June, 2010; Proper 6C
2 Kings 21:1-21a; Ps 5:1-8
Gal 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

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“Ahab said to Naboth, “Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden’...But Naboth said to Ahab, “The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.” (1 Kings 21:2-3)

These words are bittersweet for me, for, like many children and grandchildren of immigrants, I have no ancestral inheritance to keep or to give away. There is no place on earth to which I am bound by generations of inhabiting it, no home in which I can see my ancestors’ portraits hanging on the walls. In most cases, even the stories have died away, suppressed by a generation who came to America in order to be Americans. The Old Country was, for them, a place of suffering, a dark shadow which they did not wish to bring into their bright new lives. And so, if Ahab came to demand my inheritance, I would not know how to reply.

What is your ancestral inheritance, the one you would not trade away? In other words, what is the bedrock of your identity? In ancient times, it was your land and your people. The Hebrew people were bound up in the land, which could not be alienated from them forever. When they were given their land at the time they entered Israel, it was given, not to persons, but to tribes -- and, although it could be bought and sold and traded away, every fifty years, at the jubilee, it came home.¹ It returned to its original owners, and they were homed again. That’s why even skilled craftsmen -- potters and blacksmiths and carpenters like St. Joseph -- were considered the lowest of the low: they had no land.

And, of course, your people. Today, many of us would identify with that one. In the American South, they ask it straight out: “Who are your people?” But even here, when I asked you what was the bedrock of your identity, I suspect that a number of you thought of your children, your spouse or partner, maybe a much-loved parent: the people whose joy or suffering inspires your work, upholds your spirit, and strengthens you to go on.² The thing about the Hebrew land-grant system was that it kept you with your people. When Ahab offers to buy Naboth’s land, he is threatening him with the loss of everything that he is: his land, his tribe, his home. What is to Ahab a convenience -- a garden near his house, locally-grown produce at its freshest! -- is, to Naboth, extinction. These are not demands that human beings are meant to make of one another.

And so it is striking to see Paul make that choice, and gladly, in his letter to the Galatians: “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” (Gal 2:15) St. Paul knows -- none better! -- the allure of position. After all, this is a man who can recite his credentials glibly enough when he sees an advantage in it: “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” (Phil 3:5-6) And yet, he also knows that, before God, our identity counts as nothing. Our worldly achievements count as nothing. Even our virtue counts as nothing. Before God, there is only the mercy of Christ Jesus, and our

¹ There is a raging debate among scholars over whether the jubilee was practiced, but it remains in the Hebrew law as an ideal for ordering society.

² For many immigrants, and particularly for those whose ancestors came here on slave ships, “people” tends to be defined in terms of immediate family, as we may not know who our “ancestors” were, or even what country they came from.

willingness to accept it. "It is no longer I who live," writes Paul, "but Christ who lives in me." (Gal 2:20)

This is hard for us to understand, in our world shaped more and more by the identity with which we are born. Every day, our collective identity is eroded a bit more, and we endure the fragmentation of our culture. Those who "matter" in this world see us as members of ever-smaller groups, segmenting us by age, by gender, by orientation, by race, by national origin -- but really, what do these facts say about any of us? They do not indicate whether we like classical music or country, whether we are engineers or taxi-drivers, whether we are generous or mean, how well we love. They may describe our particulars, but they do not touch the core of our humanity. It is there at our core, and only there, that God does touch us.

The woman who came to Jesus at the dinner party was a wrecked human being. Luke does not tell us whether she was gentile or Jew, married or widowed. About her, he says only one word: "sinner." (Luke 7:37) That one word erases the rest of her, renders it meaningless. For a sinner, there was no place among the adherents of any religion. For a sinner, there was no family to claim her, no nation, no home. And so she crept to Jesus and stood behind him, weeping -- for herself, for her life, for the cruelty of those who turned her away. Or for Christ himself. Maybe she recognized that he was the kind of man who would, one day, be condemned as she had been. We do not know.

But we do know that Jesus looked on her, pronounced her saved, and let her go.

Does the story seem familiar to you? You've heard it often enough, I know, but have you lived it? Have you come to a place where the walls closed in and people turned away, where you could see no way forward, where all you could do was weep for what you had squandered, for the gifts you did not use and then, when you needed them, could no longer find? If so, you were standing on the place of bare earth: take off your shoes, for that place is holy ground! It is the place of utter and abject honesty, where we let go of all our props -- our beauty, our charm, our successes, the diplomas which hang on our walls -- and stand before God, naked as we are, and know that none of it matters at all. That is none other than the house of God, and that the gate of heaven! (Gen 28:17)

When Jesus stood among the five thousand, he asked the disciples, "How many loaves do you have?" And they said, "Five, and a few small fish." Please notice: Jesus did not ask them about fish, only about bread. In their answer, the disciples moved from grudgingly offering the minimum ("five") to living in generosity. They offered up all that they had, not only what was asked of them, and that offering was multiplied, broken and broken again until all had eaten and were satisfied.

So it is with our souls. We can cling to our possessions, our identities, our selves as the world defines them, and there will be no miracle. Or, we can open our hands and let all of it spill out, not to be lost (it is never lost!), but to be shared, and the grace of God will multiply in us, thirty and sixty and a hundred fold. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for [Christ's] sake will find it." (Matt 16:25)

When Simon welcomed Jesus into his home, he did it coldly: without tending to Christ's body, without welcoming him as a friend. He came as one Pharisee to another, two teachers of the law together, people who might learn from one another, people who might, eventually, be colleagues. But the woman came with her ointment, almost certainly her most prized possession, and she poured it out upon the feet of Jesus as her offering of love. And her tears, perhaps, were not tears of shame at all, but tears of gratitude. For Jesus says an astonishing thing. He does not say, "Because you have done this, I will forgive you." Rather, he says, "her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love." (Luke 7:47) *Therefore* she has shown great love! She poured out her offering not as a plea for forgiveness, but as grateful acknowledgment of the mercy which had, somehow, found her, even in her sin.

Where she stood, we stand, although this can be hard for us to see. The woman, at least, had the advantage of knowing herself to be a sinner. There is clarity which comes in seeing your own failures. But if you think your greatest sin is sassing your mother or walking by a poor man without sharing your bread, it can be hard to see yourself straight, to release the props you cling to. It can be hard to believe that Christ lived and died for *you*: it seems so *disproportionate!* But look around you. This earth and its wealth are disproportionate to your needs. The people around you are more than you desire or demand. The love which sustained you when you were a hungry child, crying out in the night, was given just because you called. And on it goes, all your life long: your friends, your education, the discoveries of your mind, the struggles which teach you to know your own strength -- all these are gifts which have come to you by sheer grace, disproportionate gifts from a disproportionate God. These are your ancestral inheritance, which no despot can take away.

This life and all that is in it is gift, the sheer overflowing bounty of our Creator. The only proper return we can make is every moment of our lives -- and who among us has done that? At best, we make our piecemeal offerings, one by one, and pride ourselves on what we have given, like children offering finger-paintings to Picasso, not seeing the masterwork around us, but only the work of our hands. But God, in God's love, overlooks our blindness, and receives the fingerpaintings with joy.

Always, the forgiveness of God precedes our offering, "kindles our heart, and awakens hope." (Collect for the Presence of Christ, BCP, p.124) In that mercy lies all we have, and in that mercy lies all we are. And in that mercy, we find our heart again, not in the identities which mean nothing, but in the one true self which endures to eternal life.

What marks who you are? Not your land, not your people, but the cross that was marked on your forehead.