

June 16, 2013

1 Kings 21:1-21a

Psalm 5:1-8

Galatians 2:15-21

LUKE 7:36-8:3

## WHO OWNS THE LAND?

Do you own anything that you would refuse to sell unless you were desperately in need -- a wedding ring, perhaps, special photographs, a family heirloom, or something else? Or if someone offered you fair market value for your home and all of its contents, would you take the money and walk away from all of it -- even if, say, it was a home your family had owned for generations? Is it possible for some *thing*, in fact, to be “priceless” in that sense? And if so, who made it “priceless”? Those are some of the questions which are raised by this morning’s first reading from the Bible.

Naboth was an Israelite landowner, a small farmer who tended his own vineyard in the fertile area of Jezreel. The vineyard had been in his family for generations. Unfortunately for him, it lay right next door to the summer palace of King Ahab. The king *coveted* Naboth’s vineyard -- not a good thing, according to the 10 Commandments -- but he did come to Naboth and offered him fair market value for his vineyard, or to accept a more profitable vineyard somewhere else which was already owned by the king in trade for his vineyard. It was a fair offer, even an attractive one if money and profit were the only considerations.

And it was a genuine *offer*: Naboth did not consider this to be, as in the “Godfather” movies, an “offer he couldn’t refuse.” Also, there was no law of eminent domain in ancient Israel: the king could not simply take someone’s property for some alleged public purpose and force a landowner to accept cash payment. It was a real offer. But Naboth said, “*The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.*”

The king was very disappointed and behaved like a spoiled child, sulking and refusing to eat because he didn’t get what he wanted. Enter the ever-resourceful Queen Jezebel, who promised to get him what he wanted. She did not make Naboth an offer with an “or else: clause attached; she did not communicate with him at all. She also did not send one of her “hit men” to “take him out.”

No, she arranged what one commentator calls a “judicial murder”. Under Ahab’s authority, she got two “scoundrels” (in Hebrew, literally “sons of worthlessness”, a nice phrase) to *frame* Naboth, falsely accusing him of “cursing God and the King.” Both were against the law delivered by Moses (Exodus 22:28), and cursing the Holy Name of God was a capital offense (Leviticus 24:10-16). Queen Jezebel, a pagan foreigner, had learned enough about Israelite law to know that at least two witnesses were required in capital cases (Deuteronomy 17:5-6) and that execution was by being stoned to death by the whole village. Her “fingerprints” would not be on the deed.

Jezebel also knew, as noted by one scholar, that “the property of rebels and public criminals in the ancient East reverted to the crown.” So Ahab could get the vineyard he coveted -- disinheriting anyone in Naboth’s family -- by the nature of the offense of which Naboth was wrongly convicted. For Jezebel, arranging this by framing someone for cursing Israel’s God might have seemed especially delicious.

But, as with the earlier case of King David and Bathsheba, God knows what’s going on and sends a prophet -- in this case Elijah -- to remind the king that no one is above God’s Law, and to tell him that he and his royal family will suffer for Jezebel’s trashing of the 10 Commandments (murder and coveting) using his authority. Suffer indeed they would. Read further in 1 and 2 Kings for the truly gory details.

This is pretty straight-forward so far. God’s prophet condemns governmental over-reach which today would appall everyone from the “Tea Party” to the ACLU and all points in between. But there’s more to this story.

Deuteronomy 17:14-20 sets definite boundaries to royal behavior and power. Israel’s leaders were *not* to be absolute monarchs. Years later when the great transitional leader Samuel anointed Saul to be the first King of Israel and Judah, 1 Samuel 10:25 tells us that “Samuel told the people the rights and duties of kingship; and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the LORD.” God was the supreme authority and the people knew that. And *Law* came from God through Moses -- not from the king -- and the people knew that, too, though some kings got their way by brute force for a time. But not *just* power and Law came from God.

Naboth phrased his refusal to sell in a very specific way: “The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.” In Naboth’s eyes, selling would have been a religious offense. He was not bound to his ancestral inheritance just by habit or sentiment. The land was literally *priceless* to him for *religious* reasons.

Why? Not only power and Law came from God, but *so did the land*. Moses in Numbers 36:7 declares “no inheritance of the Israelites shall be transferred from one tribe to another; for all Israelites shall retain the inheritance of their ancestral tribes.” That inheritance had been assigned to them, Israelites believed, by God when their people settled the Holy Land. Moses’ prohibition on land sales between tribes was designed to prevent one tribe becoming richer and richer while another ultimately might become *homeless*.

Very likely, this was the basis for Naboth’s declaration that for him to sell his land to King Ahab would be a religious offense, because he believed that the land had been entrusted to his ancestors *by God*.

Now, please note I said “entrusted,” not “given to him.” There is a very big difference and it matters to *us* as well as to the Israelites of nearly 2,900 years ago. In Leviticus 25:23, God says, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for *the land is mine*; with me you are but aliens and tenants [emphasis added].”

**God owns the land.** This passage makes specific and detailed what God declares more broadly in passages like Psalm 50:12b, “The world and all that is in it is mine.” Leviticus goes on to say that land can only be *leased* until the “year of the Jubilee,” that every 50 years, the year of the Jubilee, land ownership shall revert to those who owned it when it was given to the tribes by God at the conquest of the Holy Land.

Now, as various commentators have pointed out, there’s no historical evidence that this radical policy was ever carried out. (Imagine going on this basis *here*: do the Cherokees know about this passage?) But Leviticus established the principles that (1) only God truly *owns* the land and (2) God apportioned the land *so that everyone could make a living*, and any changes in those apportionments are only temporary and human-based because **all people are equally God’s tenants**.

Could European colonialism have been theologically possible if European Christians had studied Leviticus more? We’ll never know.

Even today, however, I think you can see how radical the idea of God owning the land is. Any person, any government, any corporation has no right to use economic power to drive someone to ruin. Think of the many tragedies of the Great Depression through the lens of Leviticus, the farms which were repossessed by banks and the people made homeless. Think of the foreclosure crisis of just the last few years in this country.

Mahatma Gandhi said that there is enough in the world for every man's need but not for every man's greed. He and Elijah are on the same page.

Now, I invite you to go into our Parish Office, turn right and look up on the wall. There is a certificate from The Episcopal Church naming Christ Church as a *Jubilee Center*. It's not new; it dates, actually, from the last century. We still get a modest grant every year for our Food Pantry from Jubilee Ministries of The Episcopal Church. People usually think of Food Pantries as charity; the Bible invites us to think of such efforts as just the beginning of the down payment on **justice**. What we do is not optional for Christians and it is not charity. It is mandatory and it is one component of justice work.

God created a world of abundance, enough for all to make a living. If that's not the way things always are now, it's because some people have messed up God's plan. There are those today who see themselves as heirs of Elijah, calling for justice, and those today who may get a visit from Elijah, and not a friendly one. We don't want to go there. As we head into our transition this summer, let's think about this: *what does it mean for Christ Church to truly be a **Jubilee Center**?* The owner of our land is waiting for an answer.

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