

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, JULY 3, 2022

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

14th SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(based on Psalm 5)*

One: In the morning, O Lord, you hear our prayers.
All: In the light of this day we praise your name.
One: Through the abundance of your steadfast love
you have gathered us into your house.
**All: In the holiness of your presence,
we bow down to worship and adore you.**

***OPENING HYMN** “This Is My Father’s World” GtG 370

- 1. This is my Father's world,
and to my listening ears
all nature sings, and round me rings
the music of the spheres.
This is my Father's world;
I rest me in the thought
of rocks and trees, of skies and seas,
his hand the wonders wrought.**
- 2. This is my Father's world.
O, let me ne'er forget
that though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father's world.
The battle is not done:
Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
and earth and heaven be one.**

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

Gracious God,
you know what kind of people we are,
and that there is much for which we need to be forgiven.
We have coveted what belongs to others
while wasting what we have.
We are eager for personal gain,
even at another's expense.
We speak when we should keep silent
and are silent when we should speak.
Hear and be gracious to us!
Forgive us
and grant us your peace.
Pour out your grace upon us,
and help us to turn from our sins
so that we may love you
by joyfully caring for others. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

One: We live by faith in the Son of God who loves us and gives himself for us.
All: **Our sins are forgiven, and our lives are made whole.**
One: Christ sets us free with gifts of mercy, grace, and love.
All: **God forgives and makes our way straight before us.**
One: The love of God lives in us through faith in the grace of God.
All: **May we live by that grace, knowing the peace God offers.**

***THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING I Kings 21:1-21a

I KINGS 21:1-21a (New Revised Standard Version - updated edition)

¹ Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. ² And Ahab said to Naboth, "Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it, or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money." ³ But Naboth said to Ahab, "The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance." ⁴ Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him, for he had said, "I will not give you my ancestral inheritance." He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.

⁵ His wife Jezebel came to him and said, "Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?" ⁶ He said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money, or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard for it,' but he answered, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" ⁷ His wife Jezebel said to him, "Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

⁸ So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city. ⁹ She wrote in the letters, "Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; ¹⁰ seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out and stone him to death." ¹¹ The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. Just as it was written in the letters that she had sent to them, ¹² they proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the assembly. ¹³ The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite him, and the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth in the presence of the people, saying, "Naboth cursed God and the king." So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death. ¹⁴ Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, "Naboth has been stoned; he is dead."

¹⁵ As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money, for Naboth is not alive but dead." ¹⁶ As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

¹⁷ Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, ¹⁸ "Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. ¹⁹ You shall say to him: Thus says the Lord: Have you killed and also taken possession? You shall say to him: Thus says the Lord: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood."

²⁰ Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" He answered, "I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, ²¹ I will bring disaster on you...."

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “Questions! Questions?” by Pastor Bill Vincent

We all know the answers to questions reveal.
So, too, do the questions themselves – sometimes whether you get an answer, or not.
Our story this morning is driven by questions.
Some are explicit. Some are implied.
Some are spoken. Some are not – maybe for good reason?...or not?

Our first question is not explicitly stated, but implied:

‘Won’t you let me have your land?’

Ahab in essence asks Naboth.

Ahab sees no reason why Naboth wouldn’t.

Naboth sees no reason why he should.

Hence the problem.

They have two difference perspectives.

Ahab speaks of acquisition: possessing, having. For him, this is simply a financial transaction: land for land, or land for money.

Naboth speaks of “ancestral inheritance.” God’s commandments regarding the allotment of land to the different tribes and families. From God to his ancestors to Naboth to his descendants. Essentially, Naboth is saying, “It’s not my land to give away.”

A different way of valuing land...and life.

Ahab sees the land as a commodity to be bartered.

Naboth sees the land as a gift to be cherished and passed on.

So Naboth says No.

Ahab goes home to sulk and pout.

And Jezebel asks the next question.

“Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?”

Ahab’s response indicates (once again) that all he sees is a financial transaction, for he only mentions the vineyard. Ahab’s response to Jezebel nowhere says anything about an “ancestral inheritance” – never recognizes that “ancestral inheritance” might enter into the equation for consideration.

And Jezebel’s response to Ahab indicates that all she sees is Ahab...and power.

She makes no mention of a community connection or ramification. She gives no indication of being aware of (or caring about) how what Ahab wants might impact others (positively or negatively) or might influence the community as a whole.

Ahab wants it – that’s ALL that matters. (Actually, that’s true for both Jezebel and Ahab.)

Of course, Jezebel’s first response to Ahab is also in the form of a question:

“Do you now govern Israel?”

This is a tricky question.

Is it intended as a word of encouragement? Or sarcasm, and therefore rebuke?

“Do you now govern Israel?”

Well...?

The difficulty of this question continues, for the answer is...‘It depends’.

On the one hand, yes, Ahab does govern Israel. He is the king, after all. That’s what a king does.

On the other hand, no, he does not govern Israel – not by himself, and certainly not solely on his terms. God governs Israel: that is the covenant with the people. And as God’s regent – as the instrument of God’s work – Ahab (the king) is expected to follow certain rules and a certain way in his transactions and dealings with others. And in many ways, that is the heart of the whole matter. Once again we see, Ahab does not adhere to the proper perspective.

The next thing Jezebel does, does not involve asking a question. No. She does not ask; she commands – co-opting, it appears, the authority of Ahab himself.

She writes a letter, giving instructions – and she expects them to be obeyed.

And we read,

The men of Naboth’s city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them.

Now, what is interesting to note here is there appears to be no question that they will follow her instructions, for no one questions her instructions. There is no question.

What does that say about power...and its abuse? about fear and intimidation? (what we would call bullying).

One person wielding power over another; and, in the process, devaluing and diminishing the other. And God knows – literally, God knows – that this is NOT the basis for community, or not a good basis for community, and certainly not God’s basis for building and establishing and sustaining community.

Then,

The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite Naboth, and the scoundrels brought a charge against him in the presence of the people, saying, “Naboth cursed God and the king.”

And no one bothers to question the ‘scoundrels’ either.

There is a curious lack of curiosity on the people’s parts. (Does this sound like the Naboth they know?)

Or do they see it as the better part of wisdom?...or a certain kind of wisdom. Because, you know, if you ask a question, you just might get an answer, and you might not like the answer. Or, even worse, if you ask a question, someone else might not like the question; and that could be even more dangerous.

Silence masks danger, seeks to cover it up.

With Jezebel and the scoundrels, there is danger for the individual who might want to ask the question. There is danger for the individual who doesn’t want the question to be asked. But there is also a danger for the community which needs to have the question asked.

And believe you me, God is aware of the danger in any and all variations...and is aware of the need for light to be shone on the question, and what it reveals.

For the ‘scoundrels’ have violated one of the Ten Commandments:

You shall not bear false witness. (Exodus 20)

But will the community know that if no one asks the question?

And because no one asks a question, Naboth is falsely accused and unjustly killed.

As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

Once again, no question is asked. It didn't suit Ahab to ask one.

His initial request for the vineyard was flatly denied. Now he can just walk in and take what he wanted.

Why the difference? What changed?

Well, for one, Naboth's dead.

I can almost picture Ahab: "Naboth's dead. Oh, goodie!"

Ahab's focus has always been on the land only – the acquisition, the taking, the having, the possessing.

The person – Naboth – has been nowhere in Ahab's field of vision.

Ahab never 'sees' Naboth.

God always does.

Which leads us to the next question, which is God's.

As God instructs Elijah to confront Ahab, God says,

"You shall say to him: Thus says the Lord: Have you killed and also taken possession?"

The indictment and judgment of God.

Recalling two (or actually three) of the Ten Commandments:

You shall not kill/murder.

You shall not covet.

But also,

You shall not steal. (Exodus 20)

The Ten Commandments serve as a basis for the people's gathering together into community; as the parameters in which true community as God intends can exist.

And Ahab, in one fell swoop, is guilty of 30% of the Ten Commandments. And if you recognize that the final six commandments deal specifically with how people relate with each other, then he's guilty of half of them! Add up the whole affair (including the scoundrels), and we're talking two thirds of the commandments shattered.

Unfortunately, Ahab may not yet be ready to see that.

So, he speaks the next question.

"Have you found me, O my enemy?"

How do we define enemy? How define friend?

Because Elijah stands in the way of Ahab getting what he wants, is he (Elijah) automatically 'enemy'?

Is that, all too often, what we have done in identifying those around us on our political radar screen? or the international? or even the personal?

Now, first of all, it is important for us to acknowledge that Elijah delivers God's word and stands in for God's way.

"Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord."

So, of course, Elijah is in the right and Ahab is in the wrong.

We, however, should not be so quick to assume the same for ourselves. You and I cannot always be so certain about our stance and where we stand, even though we'd like to.

As someone once said, "We are never more dangerous than when we are certain we are right."

Which does not mean we should not speak out.

But it does mean we should speak out, not with iron-clad certainty (which is not ours to have), but with humility (which is always a good thing).

Yes, we believe we have something to offer when we speak out. But are we willing to entertain the possibility that the other may have a point as well? And simply because they disagree with us or oppose our stance does not necessarily mean they are our 'enemy'. They may even be our friend who wants the best for us, the best for all involved. And that may be difficult for us to hear.

But when the shoe is on the other foot, will we appreciate how difficult it might be for another to hear us?

All this may take some (or a lot of) humility on our part. It certainly takes something decidedly less than our typical arrogant attitude, our know-it-all posture, our 'I'm right and you're wrong' stance.

As God can speak through me, so too God can speak through another.

Will we listen?

Because as someone pointed out the purpose of the prophetic rebuke – whether it comes from you, me, or our 'enemy' – the purpose of the prophetic rebuke is not condemnation, but transformation, repentance: a change of heart and life.

And if we are interested in or even willing to be a part of God's work of transformation, of repentance, of change, then we will sometimes run the risk of being seen as 'enemy'. That may be the price we pay for seeking to be instruments of God's work to transform hearts and minds, and communities...and even ourselves.

And all this complicated, involved look at questions and responses, and what they tell us and say to us and what they reveal – all of this leads to one last question. Actually a question we have not read, but one we must notice.

Elijah is speaking to Ahab: speaking God's word, on God's behalf.

"Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel,...because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin. Also concerning Jezebel the Lord said: The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel. Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat, and anyone of his who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat." (I Kings 21:20-22)

An editor raises his head in the narrative, and notes:

(Indeed, there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord, urged on by his wife Jezebel. He acted most abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the Lord had driven out before the Israelites.) (I Kings 21:25-26)

Let's face it: this guy Ahab is terrible, make no mistake about it. He is evil; he is despicable. He is a lost cause. You can write him off, he is so bad.

And then we read these words.

When Ahab heard those words – the words Elijah spoke on God's behalf – When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in the sackcloth, and went about dejectedly. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, "Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days, but in his son's days...." (I Kings 21:27-29)

God raises a rhetorical question with Elijah:

"Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me?"

And in that question we discern mercy.

To this man who is so despicable and so very evil – who is self-centered and manipulative, and easily manipulated himself; who has no moral compass and no redeemable qualities – to this man, God issues a reprieve.

There is mercy.

Now mercy is not "letting people off the hook." There are still consequences to our actions. In this case, consequences that bleed into the next generation (which might give us pause...if we care at all for our children).

But there is mercy...especially when there is genuine remorse.

And if we are true to our faith and to our faith story, we will be honest with ourselves, and the world, and note: there is mercy...even when there is no genuine remorse.

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Lk.23:34)

Jesus pleaded from the cross.

There is mercy.

Yes, we need to hold people accountable.

Yes, there are consequences.

And there is still mercy – always.

And with our experience of God's mercy – which, yes, we have known and we do know and we do experience – with our experience of God's mercy, we are expected, we are called to extend that same mercy to others – 'enemy' though they may appear to be.

Now, hopefully you were not expecting a blueprint for social justice and solutions to life's social ills.

I have none.

Ahab's and Jezebel's actions are all too familiar to us (sorry to say).

The consequences of the wrong perspective and no moral compass are suffered by millions every day. All too often the consequences are suffered by those innocent of the wrong perspective and the faulty compass. And the earth suffers as well.

And into our situation, God speaks a word. Sometimes through us. Sometimes through others.

And we need to hear, and heed, God's word. When it's spoken to others, and when it is spoken to us.

And we need to hear, and heed, God's call. When it involves our speaking out and asking questions. And when it involves paying attention to God's word by turning a deaf ear to the words of another.

But we need to do all this with the empowerment and the motivation of God's mercy.

For it is all too easy to identify the Ahabs and Jezebels of our day, and point the finger, and say, "Naughty! Naughty! Shame on you!"

It is not so easy to work together to craft different laws and regulation to embody better policies.

It is not so easy to hold accountable those who have power to wield, who are not afraid to wield it.

Just because it is not easy, does not mean we don't try.

And it is not so easy to see the finger pointing at us and know that we too have fallen prey to the allure of power and the temptation to serve only ourselves and our ends.

But whether easy or hard, we must always be spurred on by God's mercy, and energized by God's mercy, seeking to embody God's mercy.

For only in this way will "*justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*" (Amos 5:24).

Only in this way will God's beloved community become a reality in our midst and thrive in our lives.

Only in this way will we honor the example and follow in the footsteps of one Elijah, prophet extraordinaire; and walk in the way of the one for whom he prepared the way: Jesus Christ, our Savior and our Lord.

It seems the only question that remains is: Will we?

***HYMN** "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" GtG 435

- 1. There's a wideness in God's mercy,
like the wideness of the sea.
There's a kindness in God's justice,
which is more than liberty.
There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more felt than up in heaven.
There is no place where earth's failings
have such kindly judgment given.**

- 2. For the love of God is broader
than the measures of the mind.**

(continued...)

**And the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful,
we would gladly trust God's Word,
and our lives reflect thanksgiving
for the goodness of our Lord.**

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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father.
In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image,
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.**

(from A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: We beseech you, in your mercy...
People: ...attend to our prayer, O God.

THE EUCHARIST

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

We give thanks, generous God, because we owe you more than we can ever repay. We give because we love you and want to show our devotion. We give because there are needs to be met among us and in other places where we cannot go. We give because we need to be generous in order to be whole. Loving God, bless all givers who provide for others out of their means, and multiply these resources in your service. Amen.

SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Invitation to the Lord's Table

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: **And also with you.**

Leader: Lift up your hearts.

People: **We lift them to the Lord.**

Leader: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

People: **It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

(The prayer continues...)

The Lord's Prayer (Traditional)

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever. Amen.**

Breaking of the Bread

Communion of the People

(With the passing of the bread, please wait until all have been served so that all may partake together, reflecting our unity in Christ.)

(With the passing of the cup, please partake as soon as received as an expression of our personal relationship with Christ.)

Prayer

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN “O God of Every Nation” GtG 756**

- 1. O God of every nation,
of every race and land,
redeem the whole creation
with your almighty hand.
Where hate and fear divide us
and bitter threats are hurled,
in love and mercy guide us
and heal our strife-torn world.**
- 2. From search for wealth and power
and scorn of truth and right,
from trust in bombs that shower
destruction through the night,
from pride of race and station
and blindness to your way,
deliver every nation,
eternal God, we pray.**
- 3. Lord, strengthen those who labor
that all may find release
from fear of rattling saber,
from dread of war's increase;
when hope and courage falter,
your still small voice be heard;
with faith that none can alter,
your servants undergird.**

(continued...)

4. **Keep bright in us the vision
of days when war shall cease,
when hatred and division
give way to love and peace,
till dawns the morning glorious
when truth and justice reign
and Christ shall rule victorious
o'er all the world's domain.**

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Pastor: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
People: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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