

A Restless Drive

I Kings 21:1-21a

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First Central Congregational UCC

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Over the last few weeks the church staff has been working on our website redesign. We hope to launch the newly designed site around Labor Day and the kickoff of the new church program year. One of the projects of the last few weeks has been writing the text which will appear on the website. I've enjoyed finding just the right words and phrases to describe who we are and what we do.

One page we have overhauled is the one about the church's history. We decided that what we did have was rather institutional and dry, so we have restructured it around telling the stories of people who have been part of this church. We believe this will appeal more to people wanting to learn about us. Over time we'd also like to record some of you sharing stories about the church and your faith journeys, and then we could embed those videos on the site.

So, in the latest draft, here's how we introduce our stories:

Everyone in our congregation follows a unique spiritual journey. We open ourselves to conversation with one another, so that we can learn from different perspectives. Everyone has a story to share.

That tradition has kept us inclusive, inquisitive, progressive, and dynamic throughout our 157 years.

We may be the oldest, continuously worshipping Protestant church in Omaha, but we have never stopped evolving. Our founding pioneer spirit has never left us. Here are some highlights of our stories.

It then goes on to talk about Reuben Gaylord and Dr. George Miller, the Standing Bear Case, the German immigrants who founded two of our predecessor churches, Lena McGilton's work on women's suffrage, Walter Judd's medical missionary work in China, and more. The emphasis is that this congregation has always explored big questions and engaged the important issues. We continue to live out our founding pioneer spirit, as expressed in our church covenant:

We are thankful for life, for Jesus our Lord, for the courage and vision of our church founders. In gratitude, we covenant with God and with one another, seeking as a church and as individuals to be faithful to God's will. We pray for hearts that open, minds that understand, and lives that serve.

This week, while preparing my sermon, I zeroed in on the phrase “Seeking as a church and as individuals to be faithful to God’s will.” How do we do that?

Well, Naboth had a vineyard. Ahab wanted it. We don’t know anything about Naboth other than this. He had a vineyard in Jezreel near the second palace of King Ahab and that vineyard was on the land of his ancestors.

According to the story, when the Israelites settled in Canaan, the land was distributed. For these former slaves, land was significant; it meant opportunity and freedom. We understand this. Think about what land meant to our pioneer ancestors. Think about what it meant to those GI’s who returned from World War II and used their GI Bill to buy a home. Think about how you felt the first time you had your own place. The day I bought my first house I ran around all excited that everything in it was mine. This was my living room, my kitchen, my toilet!

Land and property mean opportunity -- the same for us as for the ancient Israelites. These slaves had worked the land of others, now they had their own to work. A person is genuinely free only when she or he has more possibilities from which to choose. Property, then, was important to the ancient Hebrews and was protected by law and custom. It was central to their identity as a people, to their relationships with one another, and to their covenant relationship with God.

There are a lot of bad things we can justifiably say about King Ahab, but one good thing is clear in this story -- he does respect the rights of Naboth. According to the covenant law of the Hebrews, the king is not above the law. Naboth has the right to say “no;” he can refuse the king his land.

But, we all know, that rules are often exploited by those with the power to do so. They find loopholes or pull subtle legal shenanigans. Sometimes they even have the power to break them outright. Jezebel has that power, so she concocts her plan of intrigue and murder.

God, however, does not let this injustice pass without notice. God sends his prophet Elijah to condemn the king and queen and pronounce God’s judgment upon them. The powerful Southern Baptist preacher R. G. Lee preached his most famous sermon, “Pay-Day Someday,” on this story. He evocatively describes the encounter of Ahab and Elijah:

As Ahab goes walking through the rows of vines, he begins to plan how he will have that vineyard arranged by his royal gardener, how flowers will be here and vegetables yonder and herbs there. As he converses with himself, suddenly a shadow falls across his path. Quick as a flash Ahab whirls on his heels, and there, before him, stands Elijah, prophet of the living God. Elijah's cheeks are swarthy; his eye is keen and piercing; like coals of fire, his eyes burn with righteous indignation in their sockets; his bosom heaves; his head is held high. His only weapon is a staff: his only robe a sheepskin, and a leather girdle about his loins. Like an apparition from the other world, like Banquo's ghost at Macbeth's feast, Elijah, with suddenness terrifying, stands before Ahab. Ahab had not seen Elijah for five years. Ahab thought Elijah had been cowed and silenced by Jezebel, but now the prophet confronts him with his death-warrant from the Lord God Almighty.

To Ahab there is an eternity of agony in the few moments they stand thus, face to face,

eye to eye, soul to soul! His voice is hoarse, like the cry of a hunted animal. He trembles like a hunted stag before the mouths of fierce hounds. Suddenly his face goes white. His lips quiver. He had gone to take possession of a vineyard, coveted for a garden of herbs; and there he is face to face with righteousness, face to face with honor, face to face with judgment. The vineyard, with the sun shining upon it now, is as black as if it were part of the midnight which has gathered in judgment. Like Poe's raven "his soul from out that shadow shall be lifted—nevermore."

"And Ahab said to Elijah, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" (I Kings 21:20) and Elijah, without a tremor in his voice, his eyes burning their way into Ahab's guilty soul, answered: "I have found thee: because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord."

Ahab has sold his soul, violating God's original plan for God's people. Sam Wells wrote, "justice unravels when we lose sight of who we are in relation to God." The great crime here is not simply that Ahab and Jezebel have broken the rules, they've broken relationships with God, other people, and creation. They sold themselves to other ideas, and now judgment is coming due.

We often imagine Justice as a blindfolded Greek goddess holding scales and a sword. The scales represent balancing two sides of an argument. The sword represents not only power, but precision. According to this Greek model, justice is something we arrive at through reason and order.

But the Hebrew image of justice is not the same as the Greek. God's justice is not blind nor is it about reason and order. The Greek conception of justice is based upon a fiction. It assumes that everyone can equally come into the courts and make their case and that, free from bias, the courts will hear and rule. The Hebrew prophets understood this to be false. The prophets knew that there are people who have been denied freedom and opportunity. That there are people who cannot come and state their case. That courts are not free of bias.

So God's justice *is* biased. It is biased in favour of the oppressed, of the victims, of the poor. Of the brokenhearted, the meek, the persecuted. Because God's justice is about people and relationships. It is about compassion. About hearing the cries of people and responding. About doing everything within one's power to bless people with a better life. It is, as the prophet Amos proclaimed, a raging river that forces all obstacles out of the way:

Let justice roll down like waters,
And righteousness like a mighty stream.

The great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel described this image, which is so very different from the blind goddess balancing her scales:

[It is] a surging movement, a life-bringing substance, a dominant power.

A mighty stream, expressive of the vehemence of a never-ending, surging, fighting movement -- as if obstacles had to be washed away for justice to be done. . . . Justice is not a mere norm, but a fighting challenge, a restless drive.

. . . what is required is a power that will strike and change, heal and restore, like a mighty stream bringing life to the parched land. . . . it is God's power in the world. . . . What ought to be, shall be!

Ahab's problem was that he sold himself to a worldview different from this, one that violated God's will. So, how are we to be faithful to God's will, as our church covenant proclaims?

Instead of selling out, we must embody God's restless drive. Be like the prophet and not the king. Open our hearts and truly care for others. Believe in what ought to be. Advocate, speaking on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves. Use our creativity and imagination to work for a better world.

So, let us open ourselves to possibilities. Welcome new ideas. Push the envelope. Never stop evolving. Embrace the pioneer spirit of our founders. Be like the best parts of our story. Never lose sight of our relationship with God. Let us grow. And keep growing. Opening doors wide to where the still speaking God plans to lead us.

This is the passionate faith which our times require. Let us be faithful to God's will.