

July 28, 2019: WHO DOESN'T LOVE A VEGETABLE GARDEN?
1 Kings 21:1-20

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What a great sermon title for this time of year: “Who Doesn’t Love a Vegetable Garden?” And really, who doesn’t? Facebook posts and farmers markets abound with the joyous proclamation of vegetables. But it turns out, there IS someone who doesn’t love a vegetable garden: the prophet Elijah. This being the Bible, there might be a tiny bit more at stake than zucchini supplanting grapes. If the rumors I’ve been hearing about Emmanuel are true—that sermons have been about Israel’s bad kings—then you might have some idea about what is actually at stake in today’s reading. But still—wow. We stopped reading before finding out what sort of disaster Elijah had in mind as payment for those veggies, and it’s a heavy consequence for Ahab’s ill-conceived land deal. A guy dies, and the consequence is widespread blood, gore, and violence. No wonder people don’t usually preach from the Old Testament. It’s like you cheat on your SATs and you and your family spend the rest of your natural lives cleaning toilets at Walmart under live machine-gun fire.

The author of Kings doesn’t give us much on which to hang grace today, what with all the axes he grinds. You may have been hearing this summer about two axes in particular: royal theology and land theology. *Theology*, as you know, means *study of God*, and our writer believes the use of human power to govern, and how land is owned, is integral to the God-human relationship. According to the Hebrew writers (affirmed by Jesus in his ministry), God’s relationship to power is to empower the lowly and challenge the powers that be. From the very beginning, God opposes kings, because invariably their abuse of power targets the most vulnerable. While the prophets and historians of the Old Testament are livid at Israel’s kings abandoning the covenant faith, what really salts their socks is that the people permit it. As if to

say that by tolerating the use of royal power for personal gain, the people are responsible for the abuse. That's harsh.

So today's dilemma boils down to this: when the world skews toward injustice, can we preach the Good News? I think we care about it, because the Good News changes the way we see ourselves, see each other, and see the world. And that's the point. We see the skew toward injustice every time we hear about current events, but the Good News points out the skew and puts the kilter back in what injustice has rendered off-kilter. I'm so fascinated about Good News changing the way we see things. Vision has become a Thing with me these days, ever since I found out I need to have a surgical repair to my eye. I discovered the problem while stopped at a red light. Funny, I thought, that light never flickered before. When I closed my left eye, the light stopped flickering. Cool, I thought. I closed my right eye, the whole light disappeared. Not cool. Here's the amazing thing about perception: not only does my right eye do a fabulous job of compensating for the visual hole in my left eye, the perceptual portion of my brain compensates, too. When I look with just my left eye, the center portion of my vision disappears, but my brain doesn't just leave a blank spot; it takes what's on the edges and fills in missing parts, but they're distorted. That's what I mean by the Good News changing the way we see things. It points out where our perception has a hole and where we're compensating by distorting what *is* there.

It's like the Houses of Mystery scattered across the continent. Wisconsin's version is the House on the Rock, which has whole rooms where balls seem to roll uphill and the occupants appear to shrink and grow, while the room dimensions appear to remain stable. Of course it's just perspective, about construction so carefully out of plumb that it tricks our perception. We give an implicit consent to that trickery and we believe *we* are what's out-of-kilter. That's what I mean by the people's responsibility for tolerating an unjust king.

Naboth is the victim of off-kilter perception. At first glance, it looks like a story about a land deal overly advantageous to the king. The king makes a low-pressure offer to buy a piece of property conveniently-located to him. But this writer gives us a couple of clues that more is at play in the proposed land transaction. Forget for a moment that it takes 3 to 5 *years* to get grapevines to bear fruit, whereas zucchini takes 30 *days* and tomatoes 66. Those are an agriculturist's concern. Valid, but not what the writer of Kings has in mind. The sly allusions to *gardens* evoke Egypt and therefore living in bondage, something Israel should be avoiding like the plague. Whereas the *vineyard* is the imagery used by the prophets for both the covenant people and the Promised Land. Israel is God's vineyard. Suddenly everything is theologically loaded.

The writer has been grinding an axe about the people's responsibility for bad leaders, so it's no wonder he implicates the whole town in Naboth's death, as if it's a parable. They all come to fast, they all sit through the kangaroo court, and no one says a word in Naboth's defense, simply because the royal henchmen chant, "Send him back! Send him back!" Despite understanding that land speculation is forbidden in the covenantal constitution, their implicit consent to the demands of institutional monarchy empty their memories of covenant. When the world skews toward injustice, do we even dare proclaim the Good News? Instead of pouting, like Ahab when Naboth wouldn't sell the vineyard, Jezebel gives him the all-important deniability with her ingenious plot. Like Henry II asking, "Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?" so that his knights murder Thomas a Becket while he's somewhere else on the campaign trail, Ahab has deniability. But for Elijah, deniability doesn't eliminate guilt.

I just finished reading the book *White Trash*, by Nancy Isenberg, who recounts American history from the perspective of the underclass of poor whites. She documents how, from the

original British colonizers to the present day, the poorest and most expendable people in the bottom strata of our supposedly classless society have been used as *manure to fertilize* the fortunes of the wealthy 1%. The British aristocracy, who owned the land stolen from the original inhabitants, literally used that language to justify sending what they considered *expendable* people to the colonies to reap the resources for their personal enrichment. To keep the *hillbillies* happy enough to stay in their place, they cynically established the institution of African slavery, so the white trash (whom they really did call “trash” and other disgusting slurs) would have someone to look down on. They learned so well from Ahab how institutional power can be used to advantage. When the world skews toward injustice, to whom do we proclaim Good News?

For whom would this story about Ahab be good news? We ended the reading before Elijah informs Ahab that all the males in his household will die, and that Jezebel’s death will be particularly gruesome and desecrating. Probably not good news to them. For the writers of the first five books of the Bible, as it was for Jesus, at the heart of God’s kin-dom are the disenfranchised, vulnerable, excluded—the so-called “trash.” In the previous chapter, Ahab made a brother-to-brother sweetheart treaty with his previously sworn enemy. Ahab does so at the very moment when this king is in his custody, when he could have brought the guy to the equivalent of The Hague for trial as a war criminal. In exchange for freedom, the other king offers Ahab personally the ancient equivalent of an exclusive contract to build resorts in all the contested territory they’ve been fighting over. This comes as the nation of Israel has been paying tribute to aggressive foreign powers, something God has explicitly told them not to do. The tributes have been taken from the subsistence crops of the peasants, so that the nobility has not paid a single bushel of wheat. That Naboth still has a vineyard left after the crushing

economic burdens of the peasantry is nothing short of a miracle. And Ahab wants it for a vegetable garden. Can we proclaim Good News when the world skews to injustice?

My 95-year-old dad is a dedicated evangelical fundamentalist. He has been utterly baffled for the last two years by his religious cohorts who support government actions totally at odds with their professed morals and reading of scripture. Like many people his age, he has taken to crowd-sourcing on Facebook some explanation of this lack of cognitive consistency. His recent insight was that his cohorts are thinking in terms of individual rights. They may not do something themselves, he discovered, but when someone else violates their own sense of ethical propriety, they say, "He has a *right* to do this," concluding that they therefore cannot criticize those who do it. Sr Simone Campbell speaks to my dad's point in the July 4 issue of Richard Rohr's daily online meditation. Sr Simone, best known as "the nun on the bus," comments on the civil rights movement as part of our nation's beginning to atone for the sin of slavery. Even though the movement came out of community, she notes, civil rights have come to be exercised as *individual* freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution. We drifted from a concern for the *common* good, she said, as certain groups and individuals began to act as if there were a limited number of rights to go around. The remedy she proposes is a commitment to developing a sense of "civil *obligations*" to balance those "civil rights." Civil obligations would focus on concern and commitment to the whole, translating into such things as voting, and educating ourselves and all children about current issues and our form of government. Things like concern for the nation's future and learning how to listen to differing perspectives. And holding elected officials accountable for their actions. She concludes by saying that community is only created when the efforts of all of us are valued and used. We're not a nation based on individualism, she

reminds us, since our very Constitution begins with the words, “We the People” and affirms that we are called to “form a more perfect Union.”

My invitation to you today is to continue proclaiming Good News, and to proclaim it in terms of obligation, rather than rights. The world is skewed, there’s no doubt about it. But God’s justice will prevail. The arc of history bends toward justice. And that alone is Good News.