

Bible Study
Proper 6, Year C
June 12, 2016

[RCL] Psalm 5:1-8; 1 Kings 21:1-10, (11-14), 15-21a; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

1 Kings 21:1-10, (11-14)

The story of Naboth's Vineyard is one of the more memorable stories we find in First and Second Kings. It is a troubling story of the lust for power, jealousy, and deceit. The story is also complex, full of characters, unfamiliar cities, and unexpected plot twists. We have four main characters: Ahab the king of Israel, Jezebel his wife, Naboth a vineyard owner, and Elijah. Ahab travels from his palace in Samaria to the town of Jezreel. He sees Naboth's fertile vineyard and he wants it for his own. Consider this: This is Naboth's family inheritance. He has waited for years to "till and keep" this plot of land, and now the King of Israel shows up and says, "I want this for a vegetable garden!" (1 Kgs. 21:2). It is a flagrant misuse of power and misunderstanding of family, place, and inheritance by Ahab.

The complex plot unfolds with Ahab returning home, nursing his wounded pride. He refused to eat and became resentful. Jezebel, King Ahab's wife, could not tolerate this attitude. She taunts him by asking, "Do you now govern Israel?" (v. 7) Jezebel, in a series of deceitful acts in which she pretends to be Ahab, arranges for Naboth the vineyard owner to be stoned to death since he will not hand over his power. The story ends with the entrance of a fourth major character onto the scene: Elijah the prophet. Elijah hears of Naboth's death, the greed of Ahab, and the deceit of Jezebel, and he comes to pronounce a judgment from God onto Ahab and Jezebel.

The story is known as one of prophetic social justice where, even though Jezebel and Ahab attempt to do their work in secret, God knows of the oppression done, and will bring eventually bring justice through God's prophets.

- There are many characters and many details in this story. It may be fruitful to write down each character and his/her stated or assumed motivation for taking action in this story.
- It can be easy to judge and think we know the details, how might a closer look reveal more depth?
- Think of a time in history or in your own life when you witnessed injustice like that done to Naboth. Did you pray to God for justice or were you afraid to do so?
- What does the prophetic justice tradition of the Scriptures offer our contemporary conversations about justice?

Psalm 5:1-8

Psalm 5 is an individual's prayer. The first eight verses begin by asking God to hear the words that are about to be spoken. There is trust that God has heard the psalmist's voice before, in the morning, and so the psalmist watches and listens for God again in the morning. The next three verses explain how God is a God of justice and goodness, a God who will not tolerate evil. The selection of the Psalter ends with a confident recommitment of faith, similar

to the familiar verse in Joshua 24:15: “But as for me, through the greatness of mercy I will go into your house; I will bow down toward your holy temple in awe of you”. Our portion of the Psalm ends with a plea for direction and guidance and an assurance that the Psalmist will go wherever they are called.

- Consider your own individual prayers to God. Are they similar to this Psalm: Beginning with pleas to be heard, moving to assurances of God’s good qualities, and ending with a stronger faith that asks for clear direction from God? If not, how do your prayers differ?
- The Psalmist talks of praying in the morning. Is there a time of day where you “watch” and “listen” for God more?

Galatians 2:15-21

Centuries of argument and controversy can be heard reverberating through these verses. The central question of the passage is “How will we be saved? Through what we do or what we believe?” It is the question not only of these verses but also of so many theological arguments, especially around Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Paul provides the building blocks of this argument when he adamantly states that we are justified to God through our faith in Jesus Christ and not our “works.” It is important to note the problematic aspects of Paul’s argument. His statement in 2:19 that he has died to the law so that he can live to God is radically different from the Jewish perspective on the law (the law here were things like circumcision, dietary mandates, and Sabbath observances). To the Jewish people, those acts of the law actually brought one closer in faith to God. Paul is suggesting the opposite. As Christians interpret this passage we need to be mindful of the importance of this message of grace and faith in Jesus Christ, but also of the possible damage done to our Jewish brothers and sisters through various interpretations.

- How do you think the argument over faith and works continues to play out today? Is it still relevant?
- Do you follow religious “laws” or “principles” in your lifestyle? If so, do they inhibit or help your faith?

Luke 7:36-8:3

The Gospel for today is a dramatic, sensual story of relationship with Christ. There are multiple sections to the story: The invitation to dinner, the bathing of Jesus’ feet, the parable, and then a few short verses at the end, marking a transition in Jesus’ ministry and naming the women who went with him. Each of these sections could merit time in study. What is perhaps most striking (and also most famous) is the action of the “sinful” woman when she comes to anoint Christ’s feet. The reader is not told how she learned that Jesus would be eating with the Pharisees, or what her thought process was for entering this occasion where she was *surely* not welcome. But she is there and does many ordinary acts of hospitality with an unexpected extraordinariness. Scholars have learned that bathing guests’ feet was a typical act of hospitality, but it was certainly not ordinary to anoint them, bathe them with tears, and dry them with hair. One can easily imagine the discomfort of the Pharisees as they watched this unfold. Then Jesus tells a parable of the two creditors to explain the situation to Simon. The parable demonstrates the importance themes of hospitality, forgiveness, and relationship. The selection for today ends with a significant transition statement naming the different

women who Jesus did his ministry alongside. It can be easy to gloss over those women's names, but consider how radical it was to have them named in Biblical times!

- Jesus highlights the extravagance of the sinful woman's actions towards him. Have you ever acted so extravagantly and lovingly towards Christ? What would this look like today?
- In what ways is hospitality a part of your ministry or your community's ministry?
- How might this reading change and inform your attitude toward hospitality?

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