

“Greed or Freed?”

Sermon by The Rev. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

June 12, 2016

Texts: 1 Kings 21:1-10, 15-21a

Luke 7:36-8:3

Again in this morning’s lectionary text, we meet Ahab, the unjust ruler of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. God’s people Israel were named for Jacob, who wrestled with some kind of holy being and after prevailing asked the angel for a blessing. His blessing was a new name, Israel-- which means “struggles with God.” So the kingdom of Israel had-- and still has-- a whole history of struggles with God. At first they tried to live faithfully with just the covenant they made with God to guide them. And yet, they were a persistently stiff-necked people and demanded that God give them a king to rule them. God finally gave them what they wanted, and pretty much as soon as they put their trust into human hands instead of God’s sovereignty, they found trouble. Ahab comes as one of the worst in a long line of unrighteous kings who led God’s people astray.

The role of the prophets, in the face of unrighteous human rulers, was to turn the people back to God. Walter Brueggemann, a scholar of the Hebrew bible, describes Elijah as the prophet who dares to speak “otherwise” in the face of an unjust ruler. He calls Elijah “the big interruption” -- a voice that disturbs the narrative of the powerful. Elijah is a “problem for the king, a hope for the poor, a dazzlement in Israel that no one can decode.”<sup>1</sup>

Ahab covets Naboth’s carefully tended vineyard that sits beside the King’s palace, imagining how much he would enjoy it as his own. The King waves his wealth and privilege to lure Naboth into giving away his inheritance. For Naboth, who is faithful to the covenant God made with the land, this is impossible: he says, “The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.” Instead of accepting no for an answer, Ahab

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Testimony to Otherwise: The Witness of Elijah and Elisha*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001 p. 37

sulks to his wife Jezebel, who devises a plan to have Naboth killed. After Naboth's murder, Ahab takes possession of the vineyard.

Like the two Swedish men who have been in the headlines that interrupted a young Stanford man who was assaulting an unconscious woman, Elijah's presence interrupted Ahab's enjoyment of his newly stolen vineyard. Elijah proclaims Ahab's fate over his wicked and unjust actions in a counter-narrative to Ahab's narrative of conquest and greed.

At the request of the the Presbyterian Church in Colombia, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has sent North American mission companions to spend time in Colombia among communities that are vulnerable to illegal land displacement. Peasant farmers who have been on the land for generations, living subsistently off the land, have been vulnerable these last decades to violent land takeovers, especially as recent free trade agreements have increased the value of the land for single-crop exports rather than food that would feed families and create wealth that stays within the community. Some farmers have refused to leave their land-- and in too many cases, have been murdered as paramilitaries, guerillas and drug lords fight their wars on the backs of the poor. When a North American mission companion joins a community vulnerable to displacement, the church has found that the law gets followed; violence is rarer, and in the case of forced displacement, communities are more likely to get the payouts the law dictates.

I have traveled twice to be guest of the Iglesia Presbiteriana de Colombia. On a church delegation to Colombia last summer, I learned something about being freed from the Iglesia Presbiteriana de Colombia. One of many stories they told that stood out to me is from the Presbyterian Church in Medellin. This church is situated in a neighborhood that in the 1980's was ruled not by law but by the organized crime of the Pablo Escobar drug cartel. The church was of very simple means, so it took them quite some time to buy an electric keyboard and sound system for their worship music. One day the pastor came to church only to find that the keyboard and speakers had been stolen. He lamented the loss to his neighbors, who he considered friends. A couple days later two men showed up on the doorstep of the church holding two teenaged boys by the scruffs

of their necks. “Here are your thieves. What do you want us to do with them? Kill them?” the men asked the pastor, in all seriousness. In the reality created both by poverty and the violence of the drug cartel, death over a minor theft seemed perfectly reasonable.

However, the pastor knew something about the freedom Jesus offers. He asked the men to release the boys. Their lives spared, the boys stuck around and began to do work around the church. They had had, what their pastor called “a profound experience of the gospel” shown in the church’s mercy. They returned what had been stolen and became vital members of the church. Jesus’ lesson about the creditor who cancelled the debts of both the man who owed him 50 denarii and the man who owed him 500 denarii illustrates the incredible gratitude of the one who owed more.

We do not know the story of the woman who bathed Jesus’ feet with ointment and her tears, and we cannot be sure what her sin or debt might have been. Each of the 4 gospels mention some version of this story, but only Luke suggests that the woman was a sinner-- a detail that Luke’s editor may have added into the tradition. Luke’s version shows a person who knows what freedom means. She can love Jesus with abandon-- without attention to custom or what is appropriate. This woman “knows what it means to be unshackled from chains of oppression and domination.” Claudio Carvalhaes, a friend I knew in Chicago who just became a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, says that her action models a “love that restitutes our lives, bringing us back from places of loss, of abandonment, frustration, and sadness. This is one thing the gospel does for us: it reorients our desire so we aren’t working for our happiness in the things we buy or have” or possess-- as was the downfall of King Ahab-- but instead “look for our happiness in the love of God.”<sup>2</sup>

There are about 5 dirt patches around the block where we have been staying in Midtown. This is the week we move to Leonia, but for the past 2 months, our dog Lucy has had to make do with the dirt patches, each with one straggling tree growing out of it, for inspiration on her morning and evening walks. She does not understand these signs

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<sup>2</sup> Exerpts from sermon by Claudio Carvalhaes, “Uncontainable Love” on website *Ministry Matters*, June 6, 2016

that say “curb your dog” but hopefully using the dirt patches won’t offend anyone. Last week, I was holding my daughter’s hand and Lucy’s leash as the dog sniffed thoughtfully around a dirt patch. Just beyond the dirt patch was a crowd of tourists, and an abandoned pizza crust on the ground. Lucy’s nose pulled her toward the crust, into the crowd of tourists. As I tried to pull her back, I ran into my daughter. To avoid stepping on her, I contorted my body but then lost my balance and fell flat into the dog-pee dirt patch, much to the surprise of the tourists and the horror of my daughter who instantly burst into tears. Lucy happily found the pizza crust and chewed it in the midst of everyone else’s confusion.

Now, I believe my relationships with my daughter and my dog, though different from each other, both pull me into deeper relationship with God, even if sometimes I must contort myself to meet their many needs. There are other things, however, that ensnare us and pull us in directions away from God. Our gospel passage today invites us to simply let go of the leash and step backward into the loving grace of Jesus.

Jesus, in his love, invites us to find grace and restoration in the sacred meal we share in his name. When we share the bread of life, and the cup of salvation, God welcomes us to a vineyard that cultivates mutual trust, faithfulness, growth, and covenant.