



“Doing Justice, Loving Mercy”

1 Kings 21:1-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

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The Third Sunday after Pentecost

Elijah the prophet spent a lot of time on the run. He was a prophet of the God of Israel and for that reason alone, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel hated him. In fact they'd issued more than one death warrant for the prophet.

The problem was the royal family served a different god. Elijah taught that God is one and the creator of everything that is. God is the Lord, and there is no other God.

That God, according to all the prophets, is a God who has definite ideas about moral conduct and ethical behavior. They insisted that God demands allegiance and obedience. God's law, summed up in the Ten Commandments, is non-negotiable and good for the health of the nation.

The kings of Israel were commissioned to act on behalf of God to assure that righteousness, justice and peace were established in the land. The establishment of justice lies at the center of God's law. The Psalmist, for example, declares that since God is just, the king must act justly,

Give the king your justice, O God...
For [the king, like God] delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy
From oppression and violence he redeems their life
and precious is their blood in his sight. (Psalm 72:1, 12-14)

Many people and most kings, then as now, found God's demands inconvenient and onerous. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, for example, preferred the local God, Baal, to the austere and demanding God of Israel.

Like most gods in the ancient world, Baal was a fertility god. Baal temples and Baal worship featured orgiastic rites complete with sacred prostitutes of both genders. The point was by means of sex to ensure the fertility of women, livestock and fields.

For obvious reasons, Baal seemed like a better religion than Israel's God who forbade adultery, even the coveting of your neighbor's spouse. God didn't seem like a lot of fun. Baal did.

There was another problem. Ahab, like his father before him, was rapacious and power hungry. Ahab grew up in the palace of his father, Omri, who'd been a general in the army who had staged a coup d'état, overthrown the king, and claimed the throne.

King Omri defended the borders of Israel against its traditional enemies to the south and east. He also grabbed all the land he could for himself in order to benefit the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor. And he made his son, Ahab, the heir to his throne.

Ahab continued the policies of his father. He made alliances to establish his own power and to enhance the national defense. One alliance was with the powerful King of Tyre. Ahab married his daughter, Jezebel. Jezebel was a devout worshipper of Baal and with Ahab began a program to establish Baal as the new god of Israel. The new royal family gained power and wealth and, as usual, it went to their heads.

The Old Testament Lesson is one example of the corruption, abuse of power, and injustice of Ahab and Jezebel.

Ahab lived in luxury in a lovely palace. Just outside the palace wall, in full view from Ahab's window, was a vineyard owned by one of Ahab's subjects, Naboth. Ahab decided he wanted Naboth's vineyard. He planned to make it a royal garden.

Ahab went to see Naboth and made him an offer the king thought Naboth couldn't refuse. "I want your vineyard," the king said. "And, I'm willing to make you a deal. I will give a better vineyard in exchange, or I'll give you the cash value of your land." So far, so good. Sounds like a fair deal.

But, as Naboth knew full well and Ahab should have known, such a land deal went against centuries of tradition that was based on God's law. The law says that all the land is God's gift. It's God's land. But God lends it to families as their ancestral land in perpetuity. The land should never leave that family.

Naboth's answer to the king was direct and to the point. "God forbid I should give up my ancestral inheritance."

Ahab was shocked by this turn of events, and spoiled son of the palace that he was, went home, went to bed, sulked and refused to eat. When Jezebel heard about Ahab's behavior, she rushed into Ahab's bedroom and said in no uncertain terms, "Get up and eat and start acting like a king, not a spoiled little boy. I'll get you your field."

Jezebel created a plot. She bribed some of Naboth's neighbors to throw a party, invite Naboth and afterward, accuse him of treason and blasphemy. The plot worked and Naboth was tried, convicted and executed. Jezebel told Ahab to go claim his new vineyard.

When Ahab arrived at Naboth's vineyard, the prophet Elijah was waiting for him. It seems like every time Ahab misbehaved, Elijah showed up. The two of them had a history.

The sight of the old prophet was likely disconcerting. Elijah lived in the desert, and wore odd clothes. He was a strange, austere and accusing figure.

Ahab spoke first. "You found me, O my enemy."

Elijah wasted no time on pleasantries, "What you have done is evil, a gross injustice, and you have blood on your hands." Then come some powerful words worth reflection: "You sold yourself for the price of a vineyard." The prophet continued. "You are finished. God judges you guilty, and it's over for you and your family. This is the word of the Lord."

This story is much more than a story about a corrupt king and a prophet of God. Like most of the biblical stories, it points toward God. The story is a story about God. The story of Elijah and Ahab declares that God is just and demands that justice be established on earth. That is the assignment of the people of God and the assignment of civil authorities.

The story argues against human corruption, abuse of power and bullying. The story suggests a special burden is placed on civil authorities to fight corruption and abuses of power.

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According to the story, all humans, including kings, presidents, nations and churches, are accountable to God. You may recall a well-known quote by Thomas Jefferson that is inscribed on the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just. Justice cannot sleep forever." How long has it been since an American president trembled before the justice of God and the accountability of this nation to establish justice?

We live in a moral universe and judgment is a fact of the moral universe. God always has the last word. We do "reap what we sow."

"You sold yourself for the price of a field." What is our price?

I quickly add there is another side to this old story – and another side to God. Without in any way contradicting the story of the justice and judgment of God, the Gospel Lesson offers a contrasting truth.

Simon was a religious leader, a man of power and influence. He invited Jesus to dinner. He'd heard about Jesus and either from curiosity or suspicion wanted a closer look at the young prophet. Luke just told his audience that Jesus was accused of being a drunk and a glutton because of the unsavory characters he spent time with. Then Luke tells us this story.

The dinner was likely held in an open courtyard where the invited guests reclined on low couches around the dinner table. They ate leaning on their left elbow while eating with their right hand. The invited guests were all men. Women and children ate at a different time and place. Friends and neighbors of Simon stood around the outside of the courtyard to observe the scene.

A woman entered the courtyard, a woman with a reputation and a past. She was referred to simply: that sinful woman. Breaching every form of etiquette, she walked straight to the reclining men, knelt by Jesus' feet and began to anoint his feet with scented oil and dry his feet with her unbound hair (moral women never went out with unbound hair). All the time, the woman wept and kissed Jesus' feet.

Jesus made no response. Simon was horrified. Jesus, sensing Simon's horror, said, "Simon, I have something to say."

"Say on," Simon answered.

"A man had two debtors. One owed him \$1 million; the other owed him \$100. In an act of stunning generosity, the man forgave both debtors all they owed him. Simon, which one of the debtors will love the man they owed more, the one who owed \$1 million or the one who owed \$100?"

"I suppose the one who owed \$1 million," Simon answered.

"You are right, Simon."

Then Jesus turned to the woman and said to Simon, "See this woman? When I came in to your house you did not give me water to wash my feet (a common act of hospitality). But this woman wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give a kiss of greeting (another expected form of hospitality), but this woman has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head (an expected sign of hospitality), but she poured oil on my feet. Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much." Apparently she'd had an encounter with Jesus earlier and received forgiveness for her debt of sins.

"Simon, you don't know the first thing about forgiveness or love. Woman, your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

The mercy of God is as great as the justice of God. That is a very good thing. As James puts it in his epistle, “Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

But, and here’s the catch, mercy is neither automatic nor cheap. God is not a fool. Justice requires repentance and amendment of life.

Ahab repented when confronted by Elijah and the judgment of God was delayed. But he soon forgot God and repentance and went back to his old ways. And judgment came to him and his house.

We moderns want mercy without justice. We hear multiple public apologies, but little confession of guilt. Instead, we hear new ways of evading confessions. “I misspoke.” And now the new and outrageous “I misremembered.” No accountability, culpability or confession. In our brave new world, leaders stonewall, spin and evade accountability.

Every once in a while there is a notable exception. It is rare to find moral or spiritual lessons in professional sports, but last week there was one. You may have heard about the pitcher for the Detroit Tigers who was one out from a perfect game – that means no one had gotten on base for the other team during the entire game, a very rare feat – when the umpire made a terrible call. He called a runner safe at first base, ruining the perfect game.

After the game the umpire, Jim Joyce, who made the call looked at the TV replay of the call and realized he’d made a terrible mistake. Quickly he went to the radio booth and with voice breaking told the radio audience he’d stolen a perfect game from the young pitcher. He admitted he was dead wrong.

In response, the Detroit manager said Joyce was one of the best umpires in the business and shouldn’t be judged by this one call. The pitcher who was robbed said no one should hold it against Joyce since we all make mistakes. The pitcher and umpire appeared together before the next game.

A terrible mistake became a moment of confession, accountability and forgiveness. It ought to be an example to us all about the relationship between justice and mercy.

One more thing: Fred Craddock asks where the forgiven woman went when she left the dinner. Craddock suggests we look at the next paragraph in Luke. It describes the new community of the forgiven. Jesus’ band of disciples included a group of women, some of whom had been forgiven, others healed, all of them made new by the grace of God revealed in Jesus.

Maybe that’s where the forgiven woman went. Her story cries out for a community of faith formed by the justice and mercy of God. Not just any church will do. The gospel calls for a people irrevocably committed to the justice of God on earth and the God of Justice described in Scripture. This new community is made up of people who understand that mercy and justice live in tension resolved by faith.

Hear the word of the Lord. “You sold yourself for the price of a field.” “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Amen.