

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 16, 2016
Proper 6, Year C, RCL

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1 Kings 21:1-10, (11-14), 15-21a
Galatians 2:15-21
Luke 7:36-8:3

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the first reading and the Gospel we have two very different stories about God's response to sin. In the first we hear of the extreme abuse of power by Ahab and Jezebel. When a man refuses to sell Ahab a vineyard, Jezebel hires men to accuse the owner falsely and then have him killed. By contrast, the story from the Gospel depicts a woman who was a notorious sinner and is now repentant.

Let us take them in turn. In the case of Ahab, the king wants to acquire a vineyard that is right next to his palace. He approaches the owner, who is named Naboth, and asks if he would sell it to him. Naboth responds that this vineyard is part of the land that has been in his family for generations and he is not willing to part with it.

[Insert story about Mr. Ashe.]

Ahab goes home and pouts. Then Jezebel steps in to take care of the problem. She buys two false witnesses who accuse Naboth of blasphemy and treason. Both are capital crimes. So the people stone Naboth. When he is dead, the king takes possession of the now ownerless land. There can hardly be a more transparent abuse of power. It is of the same kind as David having Uriah killed so that he can have Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. And just as God sent Nathan to confront David, so God sends Elijah to confront Ahab. God really hates it when those with power use it to kill or steal or harm the people they are supposed to protect and serve. Elijah says

to Ahab, “Thus says the LORD: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.”

The Gospel story is very different. Jesus is at a dinner party at the home of a Pharisee. A woman comes in and starts washing Jesus’ feet, drying them with her hair and anointing aromatic unguent. We are told that she is a sinner, although her sins are not specified. The Pharisee thinks to himself, “If this Jesus were really a prophet, he would know what kind of woman this and recoil from her.” Jesus perceiving what his host is thinking tells a parable about two debtors who are both forgiven their debts. He points out that the one who had a greater debt forgiven would be more grateful than the person who had a small debt forgiven. Then he applies this to the woman and his host contrasting their behavior. The righteous Pharisee had neglected some of the standard acts of hospitality, while the sinful woman had performed them extravagantly. Jesus says, “Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

So what do we make of how differently the Lord responds in these two instances? First, the nature of the sins are different. In the case of Ahab, Ahab is king. He has power that is supposed to be used to protect his people from foreign enemies and to maintain justice within the kingdom. When he use that power to subvert justice, he himself becomes the enemy of his own people. Ahab is not only doing a very bad thing in getting an innocent man killed, he is using the power of his office to do it. It hardly can get any worse. The woman, on the other hand, is most likely a prostitute, who probably was forced into by economic necessity. And something has occurred in her life so that she has already repented of that life. She comes to Jesus not to be saved but to express her gratitude for mercy she has already received. Jesus’ declaration of forgiveness is a statement about something that has already occurred.

As it happens, Ahab repents and rends his garments and puts on sackcloth. As a result God does mitigate his punishment. So even in the worst kind of transgression God responds to heartfelt repentance.

But the stories are making two very different points. In the first, God displays a deep abhorrence of a particular kind of sin, the abuse of power. In the second, Jesus points to the connection between having been forgiven and deep gratitude.

So what can we take home from the Word of God today? First, abuse of power is really, really bad, and God really, really hates it. Now we may be tempted to say, "Well sure, but I don't have that kind of power. I'm not a king." Not so fast, buddy. We all have some power. Parents have power to protect their children. Some of us have power or authority over others at work. Any time a person makes a mistake or hurts us in some small way, we gain a kind moral upper hand that we can use against the person if we choose. There are many small ways in which we can abuse power. We can also fail to intervene when we see someone else abusing power. We can stand aside and let the weak be oppressed by the strong. We can allow those who can avoid playing by the rules the rest of us play by. In politics and business we consent to people misusing their power when we fail to hold them accountable. So, king or not, we have plenty of opportunity to participate in this terrible form of sin. That is one thing.

Second, we take home a vision of what gratitude can look like. We see how Jesus is not at all repulsed by the woman's behavior, but indeed celebrates it. There are no constraints put on our responses to grace, to forgiveness, to being given another chance, to healing, to resurrection, to any of the many, many things God does for us. David's wife, Michal, was embarrassed by the way David danced before the Ark of the Covenant when it was brought to Jerusalem. God punished her for that judgment. Being excited and exuberant are appropriate when responding to

God's graciousness toward us. There is a reason that the dominant picture of Heaven both the Old and the New Testaments is a party, a banquet. Lots of food and wine, singing, dancing.

Come on, let's go!

Come to think of it, when we look at how God uses God's power, it is never to take anything away from us, but to give us good things. God uses power to through the biggest party the universe has ever seen. And we are all invited. Hurray! I mean, Alleluia!