

“Idol Worship” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
6/17/07 Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian Church

TEXT: 1 Kings 21:1-10, 14-21a Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. And Ahab said to Naboth, ‘Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money.’ But Naboth said to Ahab, ‘Our God Yahweh forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.’ Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, ‘I will not give you my ancestral inheritance.’ He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat. His wife Jezebel came to him and said, ‘Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?’ He said to her, ‘Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, “Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard for it”; but he answered, “I will not give you my vineyard.”’ His wife Jezebel said to him, ‘Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.’ So she wrote letters in Ahab’s name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city. She wrote in the letters, ‘Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, “You have cursed God and the king.” Then take him out, and stone him to death.’... As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, ‘Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead.’ As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it. Then the word of God came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. You shall say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD: Have you killed, and also taken possession?’ You shall say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.’ Ahab said to Elijah, ‘Have you found me, O my enemy?’ He answered, ‘I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, I will bring disaster on you.’

Luke 7:36-50 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.’ Jesus spoke up and said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you.’ ‘Teacher,’ he replied, ‘speak.’ ‘A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?’ Simon answered, ‘I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You have judged rightly.’ Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 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.’ Then he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’... ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’

REV. JIM TAYLOR TELLS THE STORY of a church conference in the days when we were just waking up to the injustice to North American native people by our take-over of their land. The conference leaders introduced the Indian representatives as First Nation's people. As the conversation continued, some attendees got impatient, frustrated. One stood up and shouted "What's the problem? What do you want?"

A First Nation's person walked up to the microphone and said, "Read 1st Kings 21." And sat down.

Issues of justice regarding land rights began long before Naboth and Ahab, and continue to the present. Just this morning, the headlines read "Land Is Priceless, Indian Farmers Tell Developers." The article talked about 33-year old Kiran Mhatre who responded to an industry offer, "I won't part with an inch of my land."

From Indians to black landowners in Oklahoma who were run off their land, even murdered, when oil was discovered; to Katrina victims who will never get their houses repaired or replaced; to the Palestinian/Israeli struggle over "who ran who" off of which land; to victims of eminent domain where government use is deemed more important than individual rights -- History is filled with stories of people having to flee and give up their land because of the greed of those in power! And the Elijah's are few and far between.

The story in 1 Kings is about land grabbing at its most unabashed. Ahab *blatantly* lusts after Naboth's vineyard. He offers an alternative piece of property or other compensation; but that barely masks the reality which Ahab would have well understood. The land is not just Naboth's, it is Naboth's connection to his family, his rootedness, his very identity. Ahab makes a Faustian offer, a request for Naboth to sell his birthright, his soul. I sometimes wonder if Ahab's sullenness may have stemmed less from being denied the land he covets, than from envying Naboth's sense of belonging. Not for a moment does Naboth consider the temptation of wealth over his clear sense of priority, his clear sense of family and heritage; his unflinching alignment with the Hebrew God of covenant, the God of promise and of land.

Ahab's ambitious wife has no tolerance for such sentiment or spousal pouting. Her scheme to get the vineyard from the balky Naboth is clever and lethal. But no sooner does Ahab take possession than the unwelcome prophet Elijah enters the scene. Ahab, who once found favor with God, is now promised a disastrous demise.

Ahab has become an idolater, a worshipper of false gods, a worshipper of statues and power and lust. Shortly after our reading, the narrator says parenthetically, in verse 26: "Indeed there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of God urged on by his wife Jezebel. He acted most abominably in going after idols."

The problem with idolatry is that it leads to unrighteousness.—that is, wrong and cruel action. Some of the Hebrew Testament language may seem harsh to our politically correct, sensitive, defensive, modern-day ears. But if God seems to hate Ahab, it's not because Ahab hates God, it's not in a tit for tat or personal vendetta. Rather it is because Ahab is an idolater whose empty religious practices lead to abhorrent ethics and an evil manner of life. And that hurts God.

And over and above Ahab, we are shown the example of the sinner who throws herself at the feet of Jesus with purity and a love that summons forth forgiveness. And forgiveness yields freedom.

And Over and above Ahab we are shown the example of Elijah, one who stood up against injustice, following the call of an angry and saddened God. And as in many stories, whether in dreams or in the Bible, we are each of these people. There is no choosing with which we identify -- we are all Ahab, and we are all called to be the nameless woman, and we all have the ability to be the prophet Elijah. Being lured by idols, losing sight of God's good providence, clinging instead to false securities, these are all part of the human condition. Whether we act it out publicly, dramatically, or whether we are guilty on smaller, more private matters, we all gravitate to idols of land and possessions and power and entitlement and lust and greed. Our insecurities reach for outward symbols of strength; and our egos, our self will, grab onto them. Normally, our desires are under control. But, sometimes the temptation to allow our desires to run free is so great that we can no longer control them, we can no longer restrain them, we can no longer be master of our desires. This is the whole human problem in a nutshell -- giving in and allowing our desires to run uncontrolled through our lives. The desires which rampage through our lives come in a variety of packages. For some of us it may be sexual lust. For some it may be a craving for power. For some it may be a greed for money. For some it may be an addiction to drugs or alcohol. One of the most dangerous things that can happen to us is to believe we are above the law. When we begin adopting this philosophy, the ideas of right and wrong lose their sense of importance. In their place, we substitute the idea that the end justifies the means and we become willing to sell our souls just to get what we want. We see this with politicians all the time -- Supervisor Ed Jew is the local example in our paper this week. The ongoing scandals of graft and corruption in the Bush Administration are the national examples... people in power who believed that their proximity to the Oval office made them above the law.

We are in a global economy, a world where our comforts are often pulled from the backs of other people's children. What is so wrong after all with owning a cell phone? After all, I can't be responsible for the abuse of those children who are exposed to highly radioactive cobalt in mines in the Republic of Congo, a substance used in the making of cell phones. If I were to give away my phone would my act lessen their exposure to radiation?

We all are complicit in idol worship, and always at the expense of someone else. But we are also all given hope and promise, as part of God's continuing covenant with us.

This hope shines in the rest of Ahab's story, that which we don't hear today: Because of the force of Elijah's judgment and his conviction of conscience, Ahab tore off his clothes and humbled himself before God. God, being pleased with his humility, spared him at least for a time.

At Church of the Roses in Santa Rosa, where I was an Interim Associate, one Sunday, the Scripture reading was from Mark, describing how Jesus met Levi the tax collector and went to his house to eat. . The line in the King James Version read: "This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them." A fairly new parishioner named Edith, hearing this verse for the first time, paled and trembled for the rest of the service. Later she told me that she thought he was calling her name specifically.

She was shaken, but in truth, that could be the reading, and it could be any of us, or all. "This man receiveth sinners and Edith with them" -- or Keenan, or Chris, or Phoebe, or John, or Irene, or whatever your name is.

Because we are all Ahab, we also need to be the sinful woman driven to worship the true God with abandon and love, standing ready for God's forgiveness

The sinful woman is almost profligate in her use of perfume and tears to wash Jesus' feet. Jesus is almost profligate in calling attention to the importance of her actions. Despite the unorthodoxy of her worship, she is received, cherished, praised, forgiven, and ultimately freed.

She is freed from fear. She is freed from cruelty. She is freed from isolation. And she is ready to be an Elijah. Too glib you say? I don't think so. I think our Good News today is that when we surrender our idols, we are freed to be prophetic. Jesus says, "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do."

Elijah was one man with limited resources. He had no armies. He had no arsenal of deadly weapons. He had no judiciary system which could manipulate the processes of justice in his favor. All he had was God on his side. Here was one man who stood up for another man and brought truth to judge the people responsible for his death. Elijah had God on his side, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He could stand for truth and justice because God gave him the volition and courage to speak.

We can all be Elijah's – A single voice crying for truth can make a difference in our world, whether it is the truth of injustice, oppression, physical and emotional abuse, theft, corruption, or the murder and slaughter of the innocent. We can help build homes; we can volunteer in mission, we can give of our own resources until we have less to spend on ourselves. We can pray. We can educate ourselves. We can join with Glenda Hope and we can be Big Brothers and we can lobby on behalf of social justice.

History moves in response to the Word of God through prophets. That's the belief of the writers of the Deuteronomic tradition—as well as the faith of the Church today. George Wallace and Bull Conner didn't have the last word in Selma or Birmingham. God raised up a prophet named Martin King. Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon didn't define Vietnam according to their neat geopolitical calculations. People of faith like Daniel and Philip Berrigan began to declare that if the church's traditional position of just wars is correct, then there must certainly be unjust wars. And in our struggles today, we must believe, although we don't see him or her yet, that God is raising up another prophet.

It could be you.

It could be you.

Amen.