

Care of the Soul, Part 1
June 13, 2010

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TEXT: 1 Kings 21:1-11, 15-21

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, ‘The LORD 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.’ The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. 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 the LORD 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.’

“CARE OF THE SOUL” turns out to be a two-part sermon. This week we will consider how easy it is to lose your soul. Next week we will consider how to best tend your soul. San Francisco Summer Opera is currently performing Faust – one of the thousands of adaptations of this four-century-old tale about a pact between a man and the devil. Faust is dissatisfied with the limits of his own human knowledge and power, a doctor who fears death and age and yearns for his own youth. He is a grand figure filled with desire and lust, chafing at the boundaries which are set before him. Originally based on an actual German magician and alchemist Dr. Johann Georg Faust who lived around 1480-1540, the story of human hubris and diabolic cunning reflects the same archetypal sin, or separation from God, that shows up in 1st Kings today.

Remember how it begins: Naboth had a vineyard in Jezreel, close to the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. From this one sentence we already know that Naboth calls this beautiful valley home, that its name defines him: He is Naboth the Jezreelite. In contrast, Ahab and his palace entourage are only here for the season, escaping from the colder Samaria hill country to the south.

Ahab desires this beautiful fertile land next to his palace. In a very Faustian way, he wishes to possess the glory of this vineyard, never mind that it has been tended by generations of another's family. And, as added insult, use it for what? A vegetable garden! This is a man accustomed to his own way. For him, everything has a price. In his value system of acquisition, the king fails to understand the land's connection to Naboth's very identity and rootedness.

I shudder at this eerie evocation of my own experience in Palestine. I stood in olive groves tended by the same family for generations and was escorted off them by Israeli military. I watched police uproot privately owned olive trees. I saw the farm lands which had been usurped for parking lots and for settlements. And I wept over the devastating impact of the Separation Wall. Land grabs are ugly. When ancestral lands are taken away by force or deception, the calamity multiplies. When the sins of arrogance and desire are unchecked, history keeps repeating itself.

Just as Faust coveted youth and power, Ahab coveted this land. To covet is to desire something inordinately, without due regard for the rights of others. The fruit of covetousness is always injury and discontent.

We sell our souls every time we let Desire and Covetousness run rampant. Most of you have heard me say that "the most frequent cause of unhappiness and failure is trading what we really want, for what we want in the moment." This is the human problem in a nutshell -- giving in and allowing our desires to run uncontrolled through our lives. For some of us it may be sexual lust. For some it may be a craving for power, or the need to be right or to tell everyone else what is good for them. For others it may be a greed for money or possessions. Sometimes it shows up subtly, cutting in line or taking something that doesn't belong to you or cheating on a bill. Sometimes it manifest in addiction to drugs or alcohol or food or drama – yes, excess emotional drama is certainly a human temptation.

This is an archetypal pull, an inherited or innate pattern or mode of thought deep in the unconscious. Like Faust and like Ahab, and like Jezebel, we get attached to our temptations. And too often, once we give into our desires, they have control of us. There is a passage in Paul's Letter to the Galatians which says "The acts of the sinful nature are sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you as I did before that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."

Ahab demonstrates the power of desire Naboth attaches to a higher power, the power of identity and rootedness and righteousness. His reply is risky considering that he's dealing with a thug, and a royal thug at that. It also has immense dignity. He does not merely say "No, thanks," but "I will not give you my ancestral inheritance." The phrase rankles Ahab. He remembers it and repeats it as he relates the incident to his wife Jezebel. Ahab's sullenness may stem as much from an envy of Naboth's sense of belonging as from the thwarting of what is really a very childish impulse.

Ahab sulks. He goes to bed and turns his back and refuses to eat. Then Faust's Mephistopheles, takes the form of the cunning Jezebel who announces "I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite." Desire runs rampant. Suddenly everything changes. Inaction becomes throbbing action. A conspiracy is formed. Letters of invitation to betray Naboth go out to people whom he had thought of as his friends and neighbors. We can assume that none of them resists the political pressure from the palace. In a matter of days, Naboth is betrayed. Isolated and condemned he is taken by the mob and stoned to death.

How easy it is to sell our souls. We sell our souls whenever we believe we are above the law. When we even consider it, 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 our desires are more valid than anyone else's, that we are the center of everything. Lord Acton's statement that "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely" is no misrepresentation. Ahab was the king of Israel and his queen, Jezebel, reminded him that he could manipulate the law to his advantage. And she proceeded to do it.

Remember the Iran Contra scandal in the late 80's? The most frightening thing was not the possibility of the President trading arms for American hostages. It was the aides who believed that their proximity to the Oval office made them above the law. They created policy without the President's knowledge, they violated the laws of our constitution, and they lied to Congress just so they could carry out objectives they deemed to be important.

Whether it is the parade of politicians who are continually exposed as liars, tax cheaters, philanderers, extortionists or embezzlers; or whether it is athletes who abuse forbidden drugs, or whether it is an extreme case like the soccer Mom in Texas who hired a gunman to shoot the mother of another cheerleader to give her own daughter a better chance at the cheerleading team -- We need to be honest with ourselves and openly acknowledge that we like to get what we want. Let's face it, we like to win whether it is us as individuals, or our family, or our country, or our baseball team. But God reminds us, not at any lengths.

Once Ahab learns of the execution he goes to the vineyard. And there he is confronted by Elijah. The prophet appears to speak truth to power. The guilty conscience of Ahab asks: "Have you found me, O my enemy?" And Elijah replies: "I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord."

Ahab has been found out, not only by Elijah but by the God whom Elijah chillingly names as Ahab's judge.

Elijah is Ahab's worst nightmare. He gives Ahab the news he must have been expecting: "I will bring disaster on you." The message is clear: God will not allow this sin of envy and murder to go unpunished but will requite the injustice to Naboth with the full force of divine zeal. Ahab gets a temporary reprieve, but soon ends up gruesomely murdered quite un-mourned. Naboth is the one remembered for faithfulness and courage . It is Naboth who asks us to remember that life is more than arriving at goals. Life is what we do as we head toward our goals. Life itself, not acquisition, is the main event, and some things are worth standing up for.

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. This is the spirit of Elijah and this is the spirit of Christ. The Spirit of Christ is that which sees people, the one who notices and cares, the one who also speaks truth to power, but even more, who speaks compassion to the grateful and humble. We thank God for the indomitable spirit of courage which dares to stand for love, truth and justice!

In the end, our operatic Faust found no true love, or true status, he abused happiness, and manipulated power and ends up with bloodied hands. In Goethe's novel, Faustus unleashes an agonized cry as he contemplates the thought of eternal hell:" God forbid it but (I) have done it; for vain pleasure of 24 years hath Faustus lost eternal joy."

The good news here is that although we all are tempted to sell our souls, we don't have to. We have choice, and choice begins in consciousness, and is strengthened with awareness, and intension. After all, it is our very souls which contain the depths of righteousness and generosity and grace which are God-given and Spirit nurtured. It is in our souls that we have imagination and claim genuineness and intuition and satisfaction. It is our highest call to care for our souls and care for the souls of those around us, even the least of those. It reflects our Christ call to be in community.

This week has been about how easy it is to be tempted into selling your soul. But stay tuned, because we will come back to the Gospel reading next week. Next week will be about claiming your soul, and tending the soul. Until then,

May God be in our thinking and our loving and our acting. AMEN.