

When Plenty Is Not Enough

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

Galatians 2:15-21

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A few months ago, I came across an article profiling four fathers earning four very different incomes. They asked them all the same questions: What's your monthly grocery bill? Do you carry any debt? What's one thing your family needs but can't afford? The glimpse into their financial lives were fascinating. The millionaire who ran a California technology start-up aspired to save enough to pay off his parents' debts so they could retire. The bar-back from Chicago living at the poverty line could not get ahead because of debt from parking tickets. The real estate agent from Miami earning \$250,000 per year set aside extra money for travel and luxury watches. The Brooklyn concierge's salary was near the American median at \$53,000. He religiously shopped in bulk at BJ's in order to have an extra \$150-200 to set aside for his ten-year-old twins' college fund per month. All of them were relatively happy, all rating their happiness a 7-9 most days on a scale of one to ten.

And, they all, from the bar-back to the CEO, hoped to be earning significantly more ten years later. Frankly, it's pretty understandable. We know the world is an uncertain place, and it makes sense to try and insulate ourselves from situations that might harm us or our families. There are so many things to be anxious about, and the acquisition of wealth is a way we try to curb it.

Now, at a surface level, our story from Kings is one of how two super-villains, Ahab, the king and richest man in the land, colludes with his wife, Jezebel, to murder a poor farmer, Naboth, and dispossess him of his vineyard. Ahab is insatiably greedy and God punishes him two chapters later with a gruesome death. The take home is simple: abuse your power and disregard the law to steal the poor's meager possessions and God will take revenge. So, all you malevolent robber barons out there, watch out!

This approach lets us off the hook. It demonizes Ahab and Jezebel to such an extent that pointing the finger is easy, because discerning how the Spirit might be redirecting us in the text is harder. Of people of faith and intellect, we can dig deeper. After all, are Ahab and Jezebel that much different than us?

Ahab offers Naboth a fair price or a comparable property for his vineyard, but Naboth objects both on religious and legal grounds. This was land God promised to Naboth's family, and Jewish law prevents him from selling it. There was no eminent domain in those days, and Ahab was out of options. As a result, the text describes Ahab as being "resentful," "sullen," and unable to eat after Naboth rejects his offer. He's so anxious to secure his lot that this failure breaks him. Jezebel sees her husband in his brokenness and instinctually tries to help. She cheers him up and promises to make things better.

Up until now, I am sure this is a situation to which many of you can relate. Part of being human is having deep relationships to material things. Maybe it's your retirement investments that you've added to over decades or a piece of furniture or artwork that you carefully crafted yourself. We aren't ethereal spirits floating through the world; we are embodied creatures made to enjoy and love the world.

I'll never forget how strange I thought it was when one of my seminary classmates left our summer internship half-way through. His grandmother had died only a few months before, and it was the first summer that he was not planning to spend at her home in the Adirondacks in many years. Shortly into our work together he discovered that his family was planning to sell their beloved summer property in New York.

The news devastated him. Just the thought of not being able to spend another summer paddling his canoe on the lake or hiking through the mountains with his cousins cut too deep. It left him in a state of paralysis, and he felt like he just couldn't do the work. The call to enjoy that piece of property one last time was just too strong. Although he ended up leaving the internship half-way through the program and repeating the whole thing over again the following year, he ended up grieving his grandmother's loss in the best way he could think of: enjoying the place that she loved so much one last summer.

While the decision cost him financially and professionally, I think he made the right one. Neither his love of that place as a material possession nor his grief at its pending loss were inherently wrong. Now if my friend decided that he would withdraw permanently to that family land and neglect his vocational call, I would say that he tried to smother the grief of losing his grandmother with a worldly possession. If he stayed put at work and never returned to the Adirondacks, he would have neglected how the Spirit of God was moving in his love for the land and his grandmother. The choice was not between choosing God or the property; it was about discerning how the Spirit of God moves through our love for objects all made good in the eyes of God.

Life at its essence is a series of decisions about how we will prioritize our loves. To paraphrase the great theologian Augustine, to order our loves incorrectly is the embodiment of sinfulness and the broken life. Blessedness and happiness are rooted in prioritizing correctly. This affirms the goodness of creation, while making space for us to understand our own brokenness. Love of possessions or money is not evil in and of itself, it's the love of them both to the neglect of others where trouble lies.

That is what we encounter in the story of Naboth's vineyard: two relatable people with their loves gone wrong. Ahab and Jezebel let their love of possessions cloud their vision, and they succumbed to the temptation to diminish the humanity of another in order to enrich

themselves. The prophet Elijah boldly names their sins and predicts how this disordered love will be their downfall.

To find love gone right, we as Christians turn to the Holy Spirit. It is in the Spirit that we can transcend our disordered loves. As we learn in Galatians, we can die to our old ways of being and rise up as part of Christ's body through the Spirit. This Spirit of the living Christ hovered over the waters at creation; it spoke through the prophet Elijah, became one with the person of Jesus of Nazareth; and is still speaking today. It is still speaking in those with the courage to denounce injustice, to take the side of poor, and to love others and themselves as God so passionately loves us.

The story of the four men who all wished to earn more money, Ahab and Jezebel, and even my seminary friend point to something in our human condition that cannot be quenched by possessions alone. They serve a purpose, but if our love for them exceeds our love for God whom we encounter in the Holy Spirit, then we will never be satisfied. The blessed life, the abundant life comes in indulging our love of God, whom we know in three persons, and encountering it again, again, and again. To use the words of Miroslav Volf, "All sufferers can find comfort in the solidarity of the crucified, but only those who struggle against evil by following the example of the crucified will discover him at their side."

There are many of you who may feel broken today, perhaps disenchanted by what you hear on the news. It broke my heart to hear of the deaths of over 20 in a well-known gay night club in Florida last night. We will mourn their loss. Nevertheless, the Spirit of God has plans of abundance and loving community for us that hate cannot overcome. The question remains for us: do we have the courage to make it a priority?

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