

Sermon: Just Another Day in the Vineyard

Year C, Proper 6

[1 Kings 21:1-10,\(11-14\),15-21a](#); [Psalm 5:1-8](#); [Galatians 2:15-21](#); [Luke 7:36-8:3](#)

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You know how someone asks, “How are you?” and you say, “I’m fine.” Which can mean anything from *I really am fine* to *I just tripped and fell and have a bone sticking out of my leg but I don’t want to talk about it*. When you ask a minister friend of mine how he’s doing, he smiles and says, “Just another day in the vineyard.” Just another day in the vineyard. I like it. It’s kind of Biblical. It has a nuance of something’s growing. And it refers to work as well. Nothing exceptional, nothing new. Just another day in the vineyard.

But my friend isn’t living as a subsistence farmer. He’s not having to make the land produce enough to feed himself and his family the whole year ‘round. He’s not having to make the land produce not only all the food they need, but all the clothing and fuel and shelter and water and everything else for survival. He’s not having to make the land produce more than what they need for survival because no matter how good a farming family is, they still need cash to pay their taxes and buy everything else that the land simply can’t produce.

90-95% of the people who lived in first century Palestine were subsistence farmers. So they would hear something slightly different when someone said, “Just another day in the vineyard.” Because we are not subsistence farmers, we don’t realize that owning a vineyard is code for wealth and tenure on the land.

When we think of vineyards, most of us think of places like France or California or even La Belle Winery down on 101. We think of neat rows of vines, growing up to chest height, with no other crops on the land. But if you’ve been to some parts of Italy or much of Greece, you might have seen vineyards that look more like the ones that existed in 1st century Palestine. The vines are grown on arbors or trellises above head height, with another crop planted below, usually vegetables or some kind of legumes or lentils. The lower crop, the vegetables or lentils, doesn’t do as well as it would without the vines. The vines are taking nutrients from the soil and blocking some of the sunlight. But if you need to live off of what the land produces, this two level system lets you get a bit more out of every square foot.

So far having a vineyard doesn’t really sound like wealth. But you can’t get enough out of the lower crop to live on. You have to have more land that is not producing vines to grow what you need to survive. And when you plant vines, it’s at least five years until you get a grape harvest. Often it’s longer than that. If you are a subsistence farmer, you don’t have five year’s worth of bounty to live on. What’s the old joke? What’s the best way to have a million dollars from farming? Start with two million.

Because it takes at least five years to get a vineyard going, you need to make a commitment to the land and the waiting. Planting a vineyard is something you do for your children. Because if they can hold on to it, if the inevitable bad years don’t mean they lose the land, they will own a piece of land that is far more valuable than one that just grows vegetables. Wine was a luxury good, it could readily be sold for cash. It didn’t have to be fine wine. They usually drank it within a year or two. Although even fermenting it for a year is another year without income from the land. Another reason vineyards were signs of wealth.

So as the ancient Israelites were sitting in exile in Babylon and wondering how it had gone so wrong, how they had fallen so far from the promise of King David to becoming a conquered and exiled people, they look at Naboth. Here's a guy doing everything right. Who knows if he planted the vineyard or if his ancestors did? Doesn't matter. He's taking care of it properly. When King Ahab tries to buy the land from him, he says, "The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance." (1 Kings 21:3)

To be fair to Ahab, he offered a better vineyard or cash money. But what Naboth is protecting is all the work that went into getting to that point, the point where they had a vineyard that the King would covet. Plus Naboth is referring to the covenant that God made with the Israelites. God gave them the land to live on, but God still owns the land. It's not theirs to sell. When the Roman Empire would arrive in Israel some six centuries later, they didn't understand a culture where someone was entitled to live off a piece of land but not to own it. When the European settlers came to this country, they didn't understand the Native Americans who had a similar approach to the land.

When Naboth tells the King "no", Naboth is holding onto the vineyard, but he's also holding onto all the work that his ancestors put into the vineyard to get that far. Naboth is holding onto all the years they did without to get through years of drought or floods or locusts or all the other perils of farming. Naboth is not willing to give up the resilience that having the vineyard means to his family. And Naboth is not willing to change his relationship with the true owner of the land, the Lord of Israel. Naboth wants to be able to say, "Just another day in the vineyard." And have it mean what it has always meant.

So Naboth says, "God forbid" and Ahab goes home *resentful and sullen* (1 Kings 21:4). He lies down on his bed, turns his face away and won't eat. (1 Kings 21:4) Ahab is a rich and powerful guy. He sees something he wants. He offers someone money to buy the thing he wants. And the person who owns it won't sell it to him. So Ahab goes home and pouts. Man, there's a story that's never been told before. Or since. Just another day in the vineyard.

So Ahab's in bed pouting like a seven year old and Jezebel finds him there. He tells her the whole story. He wanted vineyard. And he offered the guy money or a better vineyard. And the guy said no. So the only choice left was a pity party. Jezebel responds first by asking him, "Do you now govern Israel?" (1 Kings 21:7) That's either sarcastic or meant to remind him of who he was when he wasn't acting like a seven year old. Then she says something shocking, "I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite." (1 Kings 21:7)

It's not hers to give. It's not her family that has taken the risk and made the investment, who has gone without and sacrificed to get a productive vineyard going. It's not her family and frankly, Naboth's point was it wasn't his land to give either. It was God's. Jezebel uses the tools of power she has at her disposal to get two scoundrels to lie about Naboth and cause upstanding citizens to find him guilty of a crime he didn't commit and have him killed. It's so outrageous that the little bit of Scripture we left out of today's reading, verses 11 to 14, repeat the whole sordid plot again, just in case you didn't believe your ears the first time.

Basically, a person with access to power uses that power to take something from an innocent person in order to give another powerful person something they were obsessed with for no good reason. Another story that's never been told before or since. Just another day in the vineyard.

When Ahab hears Naboth is dead, he scampers off to the vineyard to take possession of it. (1 Kings 21:16) A rich and powerful person deciding not to ask any awkward questions about how something they wanted but couldn't get was suddenly made available to them. Just another day in the vineyard.

Ahab is standing in the vineyard when Elijah catches up with him. "Have you found me, O my enemy?" (1 Kings 21:20) The relationship between the King of Israel and the Prophet of the God of Israel has deteriorated to such an extent that even a seasoned politician has to call it like it is. Ahab could have spun the nature of that relationship in a million different ways, but instead he just lays it out there, "Have you found me, O my enemy". "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." (1 Kings 21:20-21). And the word that is translated "disaster" is actually a variant of the word "evil"¹. I will bring "evil" upon you.

So for those of us who have been waiting and waiting for Ahab to get his comeuppance, for those of us who have been waiting for some kind of justice for all the people who stayed on the pious path, who were devoted to the God of Israel, here's the moment. We have been waiting for justice for the widows who suffered in the drought, for the people who did not worship Baal, for the farmers who remembered that the land and everything else belonged to God, here is a moment of justice.

If you keep reading, you see that it isn't just Ahab and Jezebel who are punished, but their children. Anyone belonging to them will be denied an honorable burial. Ahab and Jezebel's sons will die because of their parents' actions. And what of Naboth's family? Nothing can bring back Naboth, but like the widow of Zarephath from last week, they are cut off from the power structure now that the male head of their household has been killed.

So there is justice in this story, but it is not justice we are entirely comfortable with. We may be cheering on the horrible deaths that await Ahab and Jezebel. Or maybe we're not, because it is not up to us to deliver vengeance. Vengeance is mine, says the God of Israel (Deuteronomy 32:35). But certainly, their sons shouldn't be punished for the sins of the parents. And Naboth's family should get something.

Perhaps, we can imagine improvements to the justice described in this story. But make sure that you notice this. God demanded justice for Naboth. Not because Naboth was wealthy, because surely there are plenty of ways that the wealthy can demand justice on their own. God demanded justice for Naboth because he was faithful and he was innocent. However imperfect the justice we experience in this world, God is demanding it for us. And with us. Justice is in this world because God is in this world, because we are in this world, demanding justice and working towards it with God.

The Prophet Isaiah described the Israel and the Israelites as God's vineyard. We are God's vineyard. We are what God has invested in, cared for. We are the most productive use of God's land. When we remain faithful, when we do what is right, we are the harvest God is looking forward to. Just another day in the vineyard.

¹ Marsha M. Wilfong, "Proper 6, Exegetical Perspective, 1 Kings 21:1-10 (11-14), 15-21a" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year c, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 127.