

June 12 2016

Scripture Lesson

Galatians 2:15-21, p. 1062

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Reader: This is the word of our Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Sermon *"Lessons from the Garden"*

A great organist is playing a masterful concert. At the end of the first group of pieces he discovers that not only is he supremely pleased with his own performance but that the crowd has risen to its feet in a cascade of "bravos." He is moved to speech; "Yes," he says "That was my best performance ever." As he speaks, the caretaker, the man in charge of the billows down in the basement, the man in charge of blowing the air into the pipes of the magnificent organ joins him on stage and says: "Yes," he adds, "this is our most magnificent performance ever." The maestro is aghast. "What do you mean we? Did you attend music school? Did you practice every day? Did you reach deep in your soul to evoke such music?" The caretaker slithers off the stage.

When the maestro returns to play his second set, he places his hands on the keys and his feet on the pedals and nothing happens. No music comes out. He places his hands and his feet on the pedals again and still nothing happens. Everybody begins to think at the same thing at the same time; the caretaker is not pumping the billows.

The maestro stands up. He thanks the caretaker for his labor and his faithfulness over the years. He returns to the bench. He places his hands on the keys and his feet on the pedals and magnificent music emerges.

Of course you recognize that this a fictional story that would have had to happen long ago when, in the big cathedrals of Europe, where organs were supplied by a rush of air created by the sweat from someone in someplace deep in the bowels of the church.

However, we need to have the point made clearly; we need to remember from where our air comes. We need to remember whose air we play. This story about great music and its dependence on air could be told about almost any one of our lives, but it applies surely to the story of King Ahab that I am about to read to you. Surely Ahab's problem is that he forgot from whence his air came; he thought that everything was his; and not everything was not his. That vegetable garden belonged to Naboth; and Naboth wasn't going to give up his ancestral inheritance just because Ahab was king and wanted what didn't belong to him.

1 Kings 21:1-21.

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. Just as it was written in the letters that she had sent to them, they proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the assembly. The two

scoundrels came in and sat opposite him; and the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, 'Naboth cursed God and the king.' So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death. Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, 'Naboth has been stoned; he is dead.'

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;

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife. Or his job. Or her car. Or so a modern rewrite of the last commandment might go. It is all about coveting, about wanting what others have. It's about what we call envy.

Envy didn't start with Naboth's garden, but it did get a firm push into personal, intimate history right then and there.

Imagine a real king needing another vegetable garden! That's like ministers needing another book. Real kings have real power: they can do what they want. They can want what they have, and not more. Or, they can want more and take it by force. Real power has access to real choices.

Most of us can identify with the covetousness that is shown here in this story. It can't be an accident that the bulk of the commandments are about wanting what is not ours. We see ads for another techno/cyber gizmo and think that we simply have to have one. We don't really have to have it, but we convince ourselves that we do, and we covet it with vigor. It's not really the gizmo either; it is the image of us with the gizmo, the image of our owning, in this case Ahab owning 'the field'. We think that power needs constant increase.

Jesus understood the exact opposite: real power shares its power. Real power gives power away. Real power knows from whence its air comes—and get the caretaker up on the stage to share the applause without the caretaker's having to demand his rightful share.

Most of us know what it is like—to have what we have taken away because somebody bigger than us looks down on us and demands what is ours. We also know how it is to be hit by envy as well as how it is to be envious.

Envy imagines that power has to be hoarded to increase. But think of whom we love; we love the people who get power and give it away. Remember the old gentleman whose factory burned down a few years ago someplace up in the northeastern states. He could have retired, cashed in his chips and lived a life of ease. Instead, he rebuilt his factory because he felt loyalty to his employees. He gave his power away to help his employees. He kept them on a payroll while the factory was rebuilt.

Leighton Beardon, a ministerial colleague of mine in Texas, told me that when his father was dying out in west Texas, his employer kept him on the payroll for several months, even when he could not work. That employer knew that what he was building, was building community. When leaders protect those who are undergoing suffering, they are building community; they are using power like Jesus used power. They get rid of it; they do what the Jewish community calls “mitzvahs” or blessings with it.

Power does not need to increase power. Such is the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ—still the most powerful man in man in the world, even today, precisely because he did not accrue power in gardens, or money or titles. His power came because he gave it away.

Jesus was a man without an address. A man without a home. But he told people, as part of the great corpus of resurrection promises, “In my father’s house there are many dwelling places. I go to prepare a place for you (John 14:2). Jesus a homeless man promises his people a home. Jesus a man without a garden assures Naboth a garden, a place, a room of his own. Jesus an austere man promises abundance. Jesus a simple man promises a multi-faceted dwelling.

And in so doing, Jesus plants within us a memory of our air and its source. What made special was the way he used power; he gave it away. Why? Because he knew that he belonged to the one he called Father or God. He lived outside the rules power ordinarily obeys like what to do on the Sabbath and what not to do then, like how to become big and significant, whom to please and whom to ignore. Jesus paid attention to the little people.

Further, true power doesn’t HAVE to grow. Anything that HAS to grow is not true power but is captive to its own increase. As someone once said, “The worst thing about success is the way you have to keep repeating it.”

What can we do to avoid needing to repeat success, to avoid coveting and grabbing other people’s gardens?

Learn the meaning of the word “enough.” Start the day by shaving it. Cut what will be too much. Practice what Henry David Thoreau calls driving “life into a corner” and reducing it “to its lowest terms.”

Confuse your work and play. Learn to get enjoyment out of what you can do.

Experience the joy of friendship, and the joy marriage and joy of family. Find time to enjoy and value your relationships.

Remember, actively, remember the poor. Let’s not forget where our air comes from.

Thank God In all things. Thank God.

These are personal goals that will change from time to time. Don’t try to meet them but practice them. Keep them; don’t achieve them. They are directions, spiritual strategies, and spiritual goals. Live from them and not just from your job description or cultural and economic marching orders.

When we allow Jesus to plant his peace within us, then we live from his gentle power, mission and goals. We are then where we can be less covetous of what other people have. We don’t need Naboth’s field or advertised promises. We need what we have decided we want. We use our power to get what we want—and we make what we want simple and noble enough to fill up the space where hunger for more might otherwise live.

Some of us are hopelessly buried. We are so busy making up for yesterday that we can’t even imagine tomorrow. We have goals but we don’t touch them, or even remember them often. In this buried, cluttered place, our moral direction slips. We see a thing; we want it. We become capable of doing horrible things to get it. We covet. We sin. We hunt others for it. Eventually we may kill ourselves for what we covet.

Instead, we might use power the way Jesus modeled its use. We might make our goal about power that of getting precisely to give it away. Life for a good king could easily be making sure that all the Naboths of the world have good fields, not that we have control of theirs. Good bosses use power to strengthen people, not themselves. Good parents use power to strengthen children, not just themselves. We can live from deep clarity instead of deep confusion.

We can remember the source of our air.