

"What Is *Your* Vineyard?"
Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year C
June 13, 2010
Text: 1 Kings 21:1-15
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Ahab is depressed, so depressed he can't eat. His wife can see that he is unhappy, so she asks him why. What a thoughtful and considerate spouse she is. Why is Ahab depressed? He says that it is because he can't have what wants, in this case Naboth's vineyard. Is that the real reason he is depressed? Probably not. We can't know for sure, but chances are that the king's emotional needs are not being met for one reason or another. That's usually why we get depressed.

What Ahab *wants* is the vineyard (or so he says); what he *needs* is probably something more like affirmation, a feeling of self-worth, a sense of value, a state of contentment and fulfillment. If we are honest enough to admit it, how many times are we like Ahab, thinking that simply having some material possession or some situational change or a different relationship will make us happy or keep us from being depressed? How many times do we say in one way or another, "I would be happy *if* such and such were true" or "I won't be depressed *when* such and such takes place"?

Ahab plays the role of the victim in this drama triangle. How ironic it is that the king of the nation, the most powerful person in the country, so quickly and easily and freely puts himself into that role. No wonder we are tempted to do so with respect to ourselves, even when we possess far less power and control. By the king and queen at least, Naboth is seen as the persecutor in this case, the mean and heartless person, keeping Ahab from being happy and causing him to be depressed. So Ahab's unhappiness and subsequent depression are not his fault. Not at all. He can't be blamed. He is not responsible in the least. It is Naboth who is the bad guy in the story.

Completing the drama triangle is Jezebel. She is the good wife, isn't she? She works hard to meet her husband's needs. First, she tells him that he is entitled to have whatever he wants, since he is, after all, the king. What's wrong with that? Doesn't our own culture teach that kind of narcissism? Don't most people in our society walk around with an equally extreme sense of entitlement?

Second, Jezebel proceeds to get her husband what he wants. She is the rescuer, the fixer, the provider, the enabler. She tries to make him happy, no matter what it takes to do so. The end (Ahab's happiness) justifies the means (Naboth's death), doesn't it? Isn't she simply doing what she is supposed to as a wife? Who could fault her

for doing everything she can to put an end to her husband's depression?

In the end, Ahab gets the vineyard. Jezebel sees to it. But does it make Ahab's life better? Hardly. Things go from bad to worse for him. Almost as soon as he sets foot on the land that is now his, the prophet Elijah shows up to spoil Ahab's fun by passing judgment on his behavior. Ahab has what he has said will make him happy. He has the vineyard. His "if" and "when" statements have come true. But Elijah makes it clear that Ahab's having the vineyard will not bring him the happiness he so desperately is seeking. In fact, what having the vineyard will bring is disaster, and that's a long way from happiness.

I know this situation and these people rather well; I grew up with them. I was raised being told over and over and over again, "Your dad will be happy *when* his father dies and he inherits the family business. If it all belonged to your dad and it were his and his alone, then he would be happy and would be the kind of person all of us want him to be." That was what I was raised to believe, and I bought it—hook, line, and sinker.

The truth is that my dad had a great emotional need. He needed a sense of identity, a sense of personhood, a sense of being of value and worth. He didn't have those things because he wasn't given "the blessing" as a child. "The blessing" is nothing more or other than being

told in word and deed by your parent or parents, "You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased." The blessing had been given to my dad's older brother who died as a teenager. He died with the blessing, and the blessing died with him. It wasn't passed on to my father.

So my dad felt that if he could own and operate the business, just as his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had before him, he would be somebody. He would be important. He would be blessed. He would be affirmed. He would have value and worth. He would have genuine personhood and authentic identity. He believed with all his heart, just as we, the rest of his family did as well, that the business would give him what he needed to be happy and not depressed.

As was true for Ahab, my father did get what he thought he wanted. His father finally died, and my dad inherited all the holdings that had been my grandfather's. But *it changed nothing*. It didn't make him happy. He remained depressed and along with it, bitterly angry much of the time.

For Ahab, the vineyard was his "if" and "when." "If" he could possess it, he would be happy. "When" it was his, he could quit feeling depressed. But here is the problem: "If" and "when" are used to describe only conditional realities. True happiness, with its basis as joy, must not be conditional. For followers of Jesus, *joy that gives rise to happiness transcends all situations*.

That doesn't mean that we never become unhappy, never get frustrated and angry, never become anxious or afraid, never feel sadness or grief, never feel isolated and alone, never feel betrayed or abused. We don't go around with false facades, fake happy faces to hide what we are really feeling. But the joy we are to feel as disciples of Christ, we feel regardless of our situation, no matter what our circumstances are. It is not dependent upon or contingent upon some "if" or "when." *We rejoice always.*

So I ask you, "What is *your* vineyard?" For my father, it was the family business. For Ahab it was Naboth's vineyard. What is yours? What is that thing you are counting on to make you happy or keep you from being depressed? Is it a material thing? A new house, a new car, a new set of golf clubs, a remodeled kitchen, a boat, a vacation, a portfolio of secure investments, a winning lottery ticket? Is it a situational thing? Another job, another school, another place to live, another church, a successful diet, a new hairstyle? Is your vineyard relational? Do you believe you would be happy in a different marriage, with new friends, if you could change your children, when your children finally leave home, if you didn't have to deal with your mother or father? What "if" and "when" statements are you making? What is it that you are convinced will make your life better—more meaningful, fulfilling, and happy?

Friends and loved ones, in case you have not figured it out by now, let me share something with you. *Emotional needs cannot be filled materially or situationally or relationally.* Let me repeat that: Emotional needs simply cannot be met materially or situationally or relationally, at least not ultimately or entirely. No new possession and no new set of circumstances and not even a new relationship can make you happy or keep you from being depressed. In some cases these things can help bring happiness to our lives, but if we are counting on them alone to make us happy people, we will be forever disappointed and frustrated.

How are emotional needs met? What best can fill those needs? The more I read my Bible and the more experience I have in life, the more I am convinced that there is only one way our deepest need can be met: Our deepest need cannot be met materially, situationally, or even emotionally. *Our deepest need can only be met spiritually.* We can and will only be happy when the hole in our soul is filled with the one thing that can fill the hole in our soul: God.

King Ahab couldn't have his emotional needs met, because he was looking to have them met in all the wrong places and in all the wrong things. My father couldn't have his emotional needs met either, for the same reason. I suspect that what was true for them is also true for some or even many of us here in this room today. So my prayer is

that we quit counting on material and situational and relational things to make us happy and start counting on the only thing that will. *May we give ourselves over to God.* He stands ready to meet our deepest need. God can and will make us feel lovable and capable; God can and will give us the sense of identity and self-worth we are seeking; God can and will welcome us, embrace us, accept us, affirm us, encourage us, and empower us. God can and will provide us with meaning and purpose and fulfillment. That and only that can and will bring us joy and ensuing happiness.