

Do You See This Woman?

I imagine King Ahab as a 6 foot tall 250 pound baby throwing a tantrum!

He wants what he wants when he wants it.

And when he can't get it, "he lays down on his bed, turns away his face, and won't eat." 1 Kings 21.

Not only is the Bible full of grown men acting like spoiled toddlers, it's also full of stories of the horrific treachery that this spoiled king and his wife inflict.

Jezebel is King Ahab's wife and Naboth is the poor man whose heritage is a simple vineyard.

Ahab wants the vineyard to grow his veggies because it's close to the palace.

Naboth won't sell.

So Queen Jezebel has poor Naboth set up; stoned to death on false charges.

All so that the man with the power can get what he wants when he wants it.

On the one hand, the story of Naboth is a tragedy of greed and self-centeredness.

But in fact the reading is more than just a story of one rotten king, one innocent peasant.

It's a metaphor, an example, of the march of powerful nations, powerful corporations, powerful people, that overtake and destroy the poor.

It's a march that continues to this very day.

What struck me first in reading the story of poor Naboth was how much his story is like the story of the people of Guatemala, whom I had the privilege of visiting.

Their farms are on hillsides as steep as our Ko`olau mountains!

Corn grows almost straight out, at a right angle.

Farmers die from falling off of their fields, because the fields are so steep.

Yet Guatemala is also home to miles of lush, flat agricultural lands.

When I asked why the farmers weren't using those fertile, flat lands, the response was always the same.....

Fruit companies from the US took those lush lands 100 years earlier, removed the native farmers, and grew cheap fruits for export.

Naboth's vineyard is stolen again.

The farmers of Central America aren't alone in their loss.

The people of Hawaii lost their land to those who wanted what they wanted when they wanted it.

Like Archbishop Tutu remarks about the missionaries and the Africans, "when they showed up, we had the land and they had the Bible; then they said 'close your eyes and let us pray,' and when we opened our eyes, we had the Bible and they had the land!"

The theft of Naboth's vineyard occurs over and over again.

That theft occurred to our friends from the Marshall Islands and Micronesia, who, between 1946 and 1958 were the victims of 66 nuclear bombs exploding in their homeland and nearby waters, including a hydrogen bomb, code named Bravo, that was detonated at Bikini Atoll, even though our officials knew that prevailing winds had shifted the night before, even though they knew the deadly fallout wouldn't travel over open ocean, it would head for populated islands.

The bomb explodes in a huge, expanding flash of blinding light.

Two suns rise in the eastern sky that morning, one created by God, the other created by us.

Hours after the blast, two inches of snow-like ash, the remains of pulverized coral, fall from the sky on the island people, turning the drinking water into a blackish yellow, children playing in the fallout like in a kind of deadly snow, soon bending over with diarrhea and vomiting and hair loss..... many die.

The people get no explanation or apology from our government. J. Niedenthal, Bikini Atoll, March, 2008.

Our friends from this part of the world, who arrive in Hawaii today, they are Naboth's children.

It's said that "a person can choose only within the world she can see." C. Campbell.

We need to hear the stories of the theft of Naboth's vineyard, thefts that continue to this very day, so that we who are often shielded from those worlds might enter them, and in the entering, be changed.

Which is why preaching the readings almost always raises unpleasant questions, because preaching the readings puts a mirror to our collective face, always challenging us to look deeply, to really see the stranger, the foreigner, the weirdo.

Because, it isn't we who interpret scripture, no, it's scripture that interprets us.....

Today it's Simon the Pharisee's turn.

Simon invites Jesus into Simon's world: a world of privilege and clear expectations, a world where a woman letting down her hair in front of a man not her husband is like a woman today going topless in mixed company!

Visitors to Simon's world give Simon respect, courtesy, and honor.

Simon is quick to size up every situation; quick to judge; quick to put people in their place.

That is, until Jesus walks through the door, and just as he does to your world and mine, Jesus turns Simon's world upside down.

The woman's tears are a water basin, her hair a clean towel, her cracked-open heart, rejoicing with the love that follows pure forgiveness.

Had she listened to Jesus preach at some other time?

What is her sin?

We aren't told so we don't know, yet it is a sin well known to her neighbors, to those in the crowd.....

But in her encounter with Jesus, she experiences undeserved mercy, and the consequence of receiving undeserved mercy is overwhelming gratitude.

And Simon is confounded.

Contrary to Simon's judgment, Jesus knows "what kind of woman this is."

Contrary to Simon's judgment, Jesus is not only a prophet, but something far greater than a prophet.

But rather than judge Simon for his narrow vision, (which I immediately did when hearing this story!), Jesus invites Simon to see this woman in a completely new way, and in that seeing, to see himself in a completely new way too.

One fellow calls those who show up every Sunday at the Mass, people like you, "a group of rebels against a world that worships money."

Because, when money is worshipped, it's easy to steal vineyards.

When we worship anything that is not God, it's easy to take what other people have, to size them up and discard them, to turn other people into mere categories, mere labels...

Jesus helps us to change that.

"Do you see this woman?"

This question marks the entry point into the kingdom of God — a place of seeing each human being as a person made in God's image: forgiven, redeemed, loved, whether they know it or not.

"Do you see this woman?"

Pope Francis recently explained why humanity so needs mercy.....

"He says that because 'we consider our sins to be incurable, things that cannot be healed or forgiven, we lack the actual concrete experience of mercy.

The fragility of our era is that we don't believe there is a chance for redemption; for a hand to raise you up; for an embrace to save you, to forgive you, pick you up, flood you with infinite, patient, indulgent love; to put you back on your feet.'

This is why we need mercy." R. Rohr, quoting Pope Francis

The roles and classes and categories we create are illusions that isolate, even intimidate us.

Illusions that Jesus, gently, yet persistently pops!

When Jesus says the first shall be last and the last first, that she who humbles herself will be exalted, and she who exalts herself humbled, think of spoiled King Ahab and think of Naboth.

Think of Simon and think of the woman.

But think too of the poor farmers of Guatemala, and think of your sister or that former friend with whom you had a falling out.

Can we see each other for who we really are?.....flawed and broken..., all dying for mercy, for a kind word, a healing touch?

Our brokenness is not a barrier to God, it is the very pathway to God.

Face yourself.

Accept that you too are alienated from yourself, from family, friends, even God....

And in that facing, feel the grace of God's gentle whisper: "I know and I love you...."

God's love reaches every dark corner, into every heart, no matter how cold it has grown, for God is determined to have every last one of us!

Even that crybaby King Ahab, even the scheming Queen Jezebel, even Simon, even you, even me....

"Do you see this woman?"

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