

Reflection for Liturgy of the Word

Monday June 15, 2020

Lynne Moldenhauer, IHM

When I read the text from 1 Kings, it took my breath away. It was such an astonishing story of injustice on the heels of all that has been happening in our country that I could not help but wonder if we have progressed much as humans. The conniving to get what was wanted without regard for life and sacred tradition seems to typify an historical trend in the human story.

Naboth had property next to Ahab's summer place – mind you not the king's primary dwelling, but his *summer* place – and the king wanted Naboth's property for his own benefit. He offered what he believed to be a fair, or even better, exchange, but Naboth declined. Why? The key is in the language of Naboth's response: "The Lord forbid that I should give you ancestral heritage."

Ahab could not have understood the deeper meaning in that statement as a Caananite ruler. A clash of cultures. Naboth's response is rooted in the text of Leviticus 25:23 "Land must not be sold in perpetuity, for the land belongs to me, and to me you are only strangers and guests."

The phrase, "*The Lord forbid*" introduces a "strong oath." The land is inalienable, meaning that it was incapable of being surrendered or sold because the land belonged to God and was granted to the Israelites as tenants under divine authority. Naboth kept his oath to God in this regard. This put Ahab in a brooding state that Jezebel could not grasp because he was the king and in Caananite law, the king had absolute power. So Jezebel devised the plan to have two witnesses falsely accuse Naboth of cursing both God and the king. This is significant because cursing God or the king were capital offenses for which the sentence of death would likely be imposed, but to convict Naboth of these charges the law also required two witnesses to testify to the charges in order to sentence him to death. You see how meticulous the detail in the plan was.

Naboth was found guilty and sentenced to death. An innocent man of faith is killed because in his faithfulness to God, the king could not have his land! Doesn't this just jar you? The king's want, and his wife's evil conniving in support of it, is more important than a man's life. When we look at the world around us how often does this story play out? How often are homes, lands and lives destroyed in the interest of greed, control, power, corporate demand or governmental acquisition? How often do we see the poor displaced or resident aliens imprisoned or people of color murdered because of systemic racism, political conniving and power mongering?

The historical repetition is utterly disheartening. Clearly lives don't matter when the powerful want something not in their possession or because of a complete disregard for the truth that all life belongs and matters to God. Then it gets personal: How often do we live from a sense of entitlement – demanding what we think we have to have? I am guilty. It's often more subtle than I am aware of. There is much to embrace in this text.

Against this backdrop is Jesus's astonishing teaching in today's Gospel. Some scholars suggest that Matthew 5:39 should read: "Do not use violence to resist the evildoer." Jesus is a proponent of nonviolence and Naboth is an example. Instead of revenge or passivity or indifference, Jesus instructs nonviolent encounter: turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, give the cloak in addition to the tunic, do not turn your back on the one who asks or wants to borrow.

What do we do with this instruction in the wake of the outrage and heartbreak of George Floyd's death and the countless others murdered by police or lynched by a white supremacist culture? Or the intentional injection of hate-based actions in peaceful demonstrations to cast a different appearance on the movement? Or politicians, our supposed leaders, whose actions create chaos and stir up vile rhetoric intended to create an ever-deepening divide?

There is no clearer moment than now to hold this teaching of Jesus close. To practice its profound meaning. Perhaps we are seeing this in the droves of diverse young people taking to the streets in peaceful protest around the world. Whatever the fire is that moves them, I think we as Christians can recognize Christ among us. Christ is our way to deep knowing of how important the lives of Black, Brown and all called "other" are to God. Surely we hear the heart of God pulse with the words "let them breathe! They belong to Me."