

July 4, 2010

1 Kings 21:1-3, 17-21 Galatians 6:7-18 Luke 10:1-11, 17-20
“We’re not worthy”

I grew up in Nebraska, but my brother and I did not grow up as farm kids. Our dad was a chemistry professor, and Mom, after a wartime stint in the Waves and work as a bookkeeper, mostly stayed home and worked taking care of us. However, Nebraska seems to give all who grew up there at least a tinge of rural roots.

So, when the Scriptures, which did address many rural folk, focus on nature and crops in various ways, it actually feels a bit like home to me. Well, this week’s Bible texts are full of agricultural images, phrases and situations. The passage from 1 Kings tells of Ahab, King of Israel, and how he wanted to own the luxurious, prosperous vineyard of his neighbor, Naboth. Paul writes about how we reap what we sow. And Jesus sends out seventy followers because, “the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.”

Is there a word for US in these readings today? For us twenty-first century suburbanites who are only allowed to water our lawns and gardens every other day in the early morning or late evening?

I think there is. I believe the Word of God speaks a word of caution to us today—a word of warning about the ever-present danger of self-righteousness and arrogant abuse of power.

First, the story of Ahab and Naboth. You remember Ahab. He was the King of Israel who ran into a lot of conflict with the prophet Elijah. Ahab’s wife, Jezebel, was a foreign princess, and she brought her forms of worship with her. She tried to turn Israel away from worship of the God of Moses, Yahweh.

Naboth’s vineyard—his grape farm---adjoined the King’s property. Ahab wanted it. He made a generous offer for it, either a better farm, or a fair market price in payment. But Naboth told the king he wasn’t selling. Ahab went off to pout, sulking around the palace. Jezebel saw Ahab’s behavior as ludicrous for a king. Why can’t he just take whatever he wants--- he’s the KING! Through conspiracy, perjury, murder and theft, she managed to get Ahab his heart’s desire.

God comes into this story through his prophet Elijah, who denounces the king. We learn here that it doesn't matter WHO YOU ARE, you don't have the right to take what is not yours, what is not given to you by God.

On this Fourth of July we rightly celebrate and treasure certain values and principles that guided the founders of our nation: values that hold human life to be sacred, that seek justice for all, that oppose tyranny and uphold freedom. However, we have to recognize that our nation's founders also fell into Ahab's sin. We remember that Native Americans were treated like Naboth was by the greedy king.

The story of Ahab and Naboth is a warning: what makes us think we DESERVE MORE than others on this earth, more comfortable ways of living than the vast majority of the earth's people? Why do we think we are WORTHY of all we have? There is an insidious nationalistic self-righteousness that creeps into our thoughts and speech that is decidedly unbiblical, unchristian, and God warns us of this today.

The apostle Paul writes that we will reap what we sow. If we sow in self-interest, our harvest will be twisted and bitter. Paul tells us not to grow weary in doing what is right. He says we should work for the good of all. I think he is pointing vigorously away from kidding ourselves by thinking, "If I look out for MY interests, it will end up that others' interests will be taken care of, too." Paul teaches it's more realistic to look at what others need straight on, and pay attention to how those are being handled.

There's even a sneaky way that doing good, working for the good of all, can become a kind of protective cloak. We do good to look good. We do good so we won't go to hell. But you see, if we do good because we hope to avoid pain, or to assure our own safety, there are good chances we'll end up trying to avoid carrying the cross.

The Christian faith is not a shield against suffering. If we run from suffering, we can't follow Christ. God's word to us is a warning: we cannot reap the lush harvest God plans for us if we continually sow seeds to save ourselves from pain or sacrifice.

In Luke's gospel Jesus sends out seventy of his followers to run ahead of him into the cities and towns he will be visiting. Jesus does not portray

Christian ministry as easy, but as difficult. Yet he says ministry can be fruitful: “The harvest is plentiful.”

I find these words of Jesus VERY interesting. Many times I see Christians looking at those outside the church as pretty pathetic. They are characterized as being evil, minions of Satan, or at least as hopelessly deluded, leading empty lives of purposeless scurrying like crazed caged rats running on their little wheels going nowhere. They are ignorant, don't know God, and WE are the ones with all the wisdom, answers and light to shine into their darkness.

But Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful.” The Word of God cautions us today. God tells us to look at the world and its people entirely differently. If WE described the world as a field, would we say the people are poor twisted plants, stunted, diseased, distorted, rooted in impoverished soil burned dry by drought? I think we often operate out of that perspective. But Jesus said, “The harvest is ready, it's ripe, it's lush, it's time to go pick the juicy, ripe fruit that God is growing in the world.” Jesus is telling us God is ALREADY in people's lives; God is nudging, prodding them to grow toward the sun ALREADY, we don't need to do all that much, really, just a little tap and the fruit will fall from the vine.

God tells us to approach our neighbors with humility, to assume that God is with them and loves them just as much as God is with us and loves us. We need to be vigilant, and not fall into spiritual self-righteousness and arrogance. Remember, when the seventy came back from their mission, they were so excited to have discovered the thrill and power of trouncing evil?

And Jesus said, “Hold on, don't be excited about the power you have over evil (after all, it's not YOUR power, but GOD'S power)----- rejoice instead in God's goodness to you and to all.”

As we receive communion today, let's come with humble hearts rejoicing in God's love for us. We are better than no one, inside or outside the church. We are each of us in need of God's grace, and totally without power except the power God's gives us. We're not worthy.

Many years back, the fictitious characters of “Wayne and Garth” were popularized in a feature film. In the movie, the two young men are notoriously infatuated with beautiful women. It's all they think or talk about.

They present a ridiculous parody of a kind of arrested psycho-social development. When in the presence of a pretty woman, they often fall on their knees, bowing their faces to the ground, waving their arms, rocking back and forth on their heels. In plaintive voices they wail, “We’re not worthy, we’re not worthy.” It’s very silly, somewhat stupid, and, depending on the tastes of the viewer, hilarious or idiotic.

But----- because there is very little in our culture EVER that says ANY of us are not WORTHY of ANYTHING—even in a joking way--- I actually appreciated their ritual in the film.

It seems as though today the word UNWORTHY is a dirty word—it’s sick or destructive. But God’s Word to us today seems to be telling us a truth using that word: WE ARE NOT WORTHY of God’s love. We just happen to have it. We don’t DESERVE vineyards or wealth or national privilege. We don’t DESERVE to have our self-interest looked after FIRST. We don’t DESERVE the relationship of love we have with our God. We just have it as a free gift.

God’s Word calls us away from arrogance, calls us away from the misuse of the power he gives us. God’s Word calls us away from self-righteousness.

As we come forward for Communion today, remember, we’re not worthy, we’re just invited--- and welcome. The table is set for us by our gracious host, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.