

“JUST LEAVE A MESSAGE ON MY ANSWERING MACHINE“

Date: June 17, 2007

Text: I Kings 21

The Bible is filled with wonderful stories like that of Naboth and his vineyard. It's a typical story of greed and power. The king wanted the vineyard for his vegetable garden. He tried to buy it but Naboth would not sell. Ahab went home depressed but the queen Jezebel decided to fix things. After all, what a king wants a king should have.

Poor Naboth – the vineyard was a family inheritance and actually didn't belong to him but to his lineage and thus couldn't be sold even if he wanted to do so. He ended up stoned to death, another example of what often happens to the poor and powerless.

It's a great story but you may be surprised at how contemporary is its message. The story of Naboth's vineyard needs to be seen in the context of the age-old question: what is it that God expects of us?

God holds not only Ahab but also all of us accountable for our actions. “Accountability” appears to be missing much of the time in our society, doesn't it? CEO's received huge bonuses regardless of how profitable the business; nobody seems to step forward and claim responsibility for mistakes in the military or political arena; perhaps the most blatant example of lack of accountability was the individual who ordered a cup of coffee at a McDonald's drive in window and then when it spilled sued the company because it was their fault it was too hot! It's easy to blame someone else for whatever happens. Adam blames Eve, Eve says “the devil made me do it” and so it goes in our society.

The story, however, marches to a different tune. Ahab was held accountable for his actions and so are we. What does it mean to “be responsible”? Garrison Keilor of *Prairie Home Companion* tells of a midwestern college professor of classical languages who is fired when the dean realizes that classical languages are dead. Feeling middle-aged and unappreciated by his boss and family, the professor is tempted to flee to Chicago with a pretty young woman who admires him. But as he prepares to leave with her, he stops to take stock and his eyes drift over the houses of his neighbors. He begins to realize how much the people in those houses need each other. If one person strays from the path of what he or she is “supposed to do”, then everyone else might feel it is all right to do the same. “If I went to Chicago”, the professor muses, then some preacher might say, “what the heck”, and not give that sermon about the poor. Or some elementary teacher might say “what the heck” and eliminate studying South America. People in Lake Wobegon may not be all that sophisticated, but they know that if one of them strays from the straight and narrow, others might be tempted to stray too, and all of society would collapse. Happily the professor stays home.

Keilor reminds us of what I Kings 21 is all about: all of us have an obligation to keep “the straight and narrow”. Fathers, who rightly are being recognized in our society today, can't merely fit comfortably into models of the past. We have to find new guidelines around which to shape our role in life.

But what happens when society runs amok of accountability, which appears to be the case currently? Someone has to play the role of Elijah and who better than those who follow the Living Christ? Just think if there had been no Elijah responding to the call of the Lord, Ahab and Jezebel would have been free to continue to take what they wanted regardless. Somebody has to stand up and say, “I simply will not go along.”

In a time when accountability seems to be society's “Achilles' heel” not many are willing to assume the mantle of Elijah. That probably isn't surprising because courage is required to do what

the prophet did and stand up for morality and justice. It takes courage for a father to balance his many roles fairly. It takes courage for a graduate to put something other than dollar signs on the horizon. Whatever be the arena of life, as is said Sunday after Sunday, following Christ requires valor.

The story also reminds us that “being responsible” goes beyond private matters. There is a clear Biblical motif of God’s people being on the side of the poor and powerless. Naboth represents many people in our day, people who through no fault of their own are powerless to control their future. All the Biblical prophets, Elijah, Isaiah, Amos, cry out for “justice to flow like a mighty stream” when it comes to the plight of the Naboths of each generation.

In the Christian context, we are accountable not only for our own private doings but have to bear some responsibility for society as a whole. Such a thought runs counter to much current thinking. People appear to be retreating from such an understanding of responsibility. More and more are saying, “I made it. Let them”. But as Naboth couldn’t make it on his own so there are many today trapped in the same predicament. Christians are not called to “bail people out” with a “look at me, aren’t I wonderful attitude” but rather are called simply to stand with those who in 2007 find themselves in the shoes of Naboth. Christians need to find the courage and vision to do as Elijah did and stand with the oppressed in the struggle for dignity and justice.

We live in a society in which it is easy to put the answering machine on and tell people to just leave a message. Sometimes we even subtly tell God the same thing when it comes to living as His people. Fortunately, there are stories like the one from I Kings, a story about the rich and the powerful and the poor and powerless and one man, Elijah, who intercedes. The story and even more the life, death and resurrection of Jesus compels us to again pick up the phone and respond to God’s challenge of living faithfully each day.

Fathers have a chance to do what “they are supposed to do” to use Keilor’s phrase. Graduates can carry forth a vision of responsible living that includes the needs of others as a top priority. All of us, some in very small and quiet ways, others more dramatically, have the chance to be part of God’s story, to be one of the Elijahs of 2007.

There is a passage from the wonderful book “To Kill a Mockingbird” that has touched me deeply. In the segregated south of the 1940’s Atticus Finch, a lawyer, has just completed his courageous but failing defense of a young black wrongly charged with raping a white woman. Jean Louise, Atticus’ young daughter, watches from her seat in the balcony and she sees her father wearily leaves the courtroom.

Someone was punching me, says Jean Louise, who was telling the story, but I was reluctant to take my eyes from the people below, and from the image of Atticus’ lonely walk down the aisle. “Miss Jean Louise!” a voice said. I looked around. They were standing. All around us and in the balcony on the opposite wall, the Negroes were getting to their feet. Rev. Skye’s voice was as distant as the judge’s: “Miss Jean Louise, stand up. Your father’s passing.”

In my opinion, the greatest honor that can come to us as parents would be someone thinking that we had lived as courageously and honorably as did Atticus, on the side of right and justice in our homes and in the world.

In a world of greed and power where all too many are powerless, maybe God, in referring to us, will say to others: “Stand up for one of Christ’s people is passing.”