

**ENTITLEMENT VS HOSPITALITY-** A Broadview UCC Sermon  
by Dan Stern      I Kings 21:1-16; Luke 7:36-49      2013 version

“Why not ‘have it all’?” That’s what the mainstream advertisers’ scream. For some time now it’s been the dominant cultural norm to promote a whole lotta’ ‘gotta haves’. “What’s mine is mine. And I want more. I DESERVE it!” When people get used to getting what they want when they want it, they start to think that’s the way things are *supposed* to be. It’s called acquiring a “healthy” sense of entitlement. Actually, it’s pretty dang arrogant.

Maybe our contemporary style of entitlement took off like gangbusters in the days creatively described in the television show, *Mad Men*. But it’s nothing new. It’s an attitude, an approach to life as old as King Ahab’s and Queen Jezebel’s.

The results of this ‘gotta have it’ attitude is chillingly described with poetic accuracy in the words of one of our hymns, # 568: “Discontent with finite powers, we reach to take what is not ours, and then defend our claim by force... And swerve from life’s intended course.” Just one of several Biblical examples: King Ahab just HAD to have that house and garden expansion. He was king, so never mind that the ancient Levitical law protected peasant farmers by keeping family plots intact. (Never mind either that 39 of 41 kings in the OT were said by the prophets to have “done what was evil in the sight of the Lord”)! Ahab had to uphold his kingly “divine rights” reputation, don’t you know!

Entitlement. Over time, that way of thinking becomes more and more greedy, deceitful, and violent. King Ahab, like many other corrupt kings of long ago Israel, was supposed to have his presumed ‘divine right of Kings’ checked by the prophets, but he didn’t want any checks and balances. He wanted to get his way, like he assumed neighboring nations’ kings got their way. So he took poor old Naboth’s family farm for his own selfish ends.

It's possible that villainous King Ahab had a little bit of humility left in him; he sure had a lot of the big baby in him when at first he didn't pillage, but rather, pouted. When told he couldn't have what he wanted, he went home sullen and resentful, threw himself on his bed, turned his face away, and refused to eat.

His temper tantrum might only have been a passing moment or two of immaturity had it not been that others were willing to do his dirty work for him.

The killing of an innocent man and the stealing of his land does not take place directly at Ahab's own hand. Not even at his scheming wife Jezebel's, who forged his signature. Others of the system passively allowed it to happen too, either knowingly or out of willful ignorance. Hired stool pigeons and scoundrels were the ones who put Naboth out into the cruel, accusatory streets, where people gleefully did the evil monarch's bidding and stoned Naboth to death. There were the scared, complicit public officials, the elders Naboth would have hoped might have defended him, the ordinary somewhat bloodthirsty people out to see some excitement, and where, pray tell, were his friends and neighbors, ordinarily good folk who didn't tend to engage in public stonings? Probably holed up in upper rooms, behind closed doors.

This is for the most part a story about engaging in violence while staying far away from the conflict zone. It's exactly how warfare takes place today. We kill from a distance. In computerized wars fought by weaponized drones, a president can kill from his house with a telephone call. Command "pilots" who remain on the ground in New Mexico, North Dakota, New York, and Georgia, release drones that fly over villages in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen, and fire missiles at human targets. Just point... and click. In defense of the drone program, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham confessed, "Sometimes you hit innocent people, and I hate that, but, you know, we're at war." Perpetually now, it seems.

I don't know about you, but when Senator Graham says that 'we' are at war, that 'we' have killed thousands, I want to distance myself from his 'we'. I am, after all, from a peace church background. I've opposed wars before. I'll oppose wars again. So have and will many of you. But I, like Ahab, benefit from the violence of others. King Ahab rather passively benefited. So it is for most of us. Most of us have never picked up a stone and thrown it at anybody. Most have never pointed a gun at anyone else's head. But: if we have any retirement savings or cash in the bank, we have it dependent on global markets policed by our armed forces. In his book *Pure War*, Paul Virilio makes this claim: "There is no longer a clear boundary separating "the civil and the military because of the total involvement of the economy in war. All of us are already civilian soldiers, without knowing it."

When some low-ranking whistle blower exposes something, the names Bradley Manning and Jeffrey Snoden come to mind- society as a whole doesn't question what gets exposed as much as attack the expose' messenger. We WANT there to be secrets kept from us! We don't want to know the truth we feel we can't handle. So we focus most on the one who's easiest to accuse- the one who brought the truth to our attention. Notice, for example: it's the name 'Jezebel', not so much the name Ahab, that has over many centuries become thoroughly associated with evil. So much so, that the name Jezebel has pretty much been removed from the new baby girl name selection list. We don't have many little captain Ahabs around now either, but his name doesn't carry quite as much weighted infamy. And though the prophet Elijah puts the blame squarely on the king, the initial instigator, blaming the female temptress, the bad lady in the story, is what usually happens.

Funny too how when just about everyone has a part in wrongdoing, it's so easy to say 'someone else' is to blame! Take your pick- Boehner, Obama, gays, terrorists, liberals, whistle-blowers, small-town dimwits, big city elitists, corporate sells-outs, illegal immigrants, always - somebody - else. Few of us directly do the actual killing and

plundering. But better believe it: killing and plundering gets done in our names and on our watch.

We live under the illusion that we're not involved, but we are. We may think our hands are clean. But scripture shatters such fantasies, exposes hard truths, and invites us to pay attention to "the micro-politics of violence in our own lives." We are tangled up in evil; we have much to confess. Just being willing to say and do that is alone the beginning of good news.

Ultimately and I think appropriately all the proceeding intrigue led to King Ahab's fall from the throne in disgrace. But before that happened, terrible harm was done. Were all who knew it to be happening just 'innocent bystanders'? Is that all WE are, just pretty much nice people, innocently doing pretty much nothing? Or are we agents of God's justice? Arbiters of due process, inserters of forgiveness and grace in the midst of all the world's absurd me-first and me-only cruelty? Frankly, I'm afraid most of us are a lot more like King Ahab than we're willing to admit. We just want our way. We pout when we don't get it. We're not as obviously evil as Queen Jezebel, but we do willingly cooperate with the likes of her. Am I being cynical? Maybe. But alas, Jesus and the prophets keep insisting on telling it like it is!

Maybe the New Testament will go a little easier on us. In Luke 7 we encounter Simon the Pharisee, who in Jesus' day had a fancy house, & threw big dinner parties and only invited "A-list" guests. Maybe occasionally, just for fun, he might invite someone like Jesus who he likely intended to publicly belittle and besmirch. But for sure, Simon would *never* have agreed to have anyone at his table with the low-class manners of that unkempt, aromatic perfume-carrying town prostitute. Watching where Jesus was heading, and following him, *she* somehow managed to slip into Simon's house when no one was watching.

Right there in the home of the Pharisee, Jesus speaks truth to power! Like the prophet Elijah in his own day, Jesus disses the prevailing attitude of entitlement. He doesn't let any of us off the hook either. But he does also recognize and honor privileged entitlement's counterpoint, which he lifts up in the very guise of that previously-mentioned polite-company-crashing prostitute. In her own way she is perhaps overly-indulgent herself. But Jesus sees and acknowledges in her the exact opposite of entitlement- an attitude of genuine gratitude, hospitality, and grace.

Just think how excessive in her virtues was that poor, disgraced woman, who, in front of all who so disapproved, ever-so-messily massaged that perfumed oil into the calloused, tired feet of Jesus. In like manner, this unnamed woman had the grace-filled gift of forgiveness lavishly poured out on her. She who knew she had been forgiven much was exceedingly grateful. A number of women who came after her, having been cured of evil spirits and infirmities, became named disciples. Conversely Simon, the one who thought he had little for which he needed to be forgiven, lived on the verge of perpetual resentment.

Simon the Pharisee felt that he was entitled to have those he wanted in his home and turn away those he did not. Frankly, most of us feel the same way. As I mentioned, he DID entertain the occasional unpredictable newcomer: he had Jesus over, after all. My guess is that *nowadays, Jesus wouldn't get invited over in the first place.* In our society, a widely sought-after sense of entitlement has pretty much blown to shreds remaining fragments of that old fashioned virtue called hospitality. The Bible emphasizes hospitality to the stranger and foreigner especially, and America's supposed to get that. A nation of immigrants, right? "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free?" Right? Well, let's just say, we have a long way still to go. Two of my friends, together as life partners for 25-year cannot return to the US unless they abandon one another because one is Brazilian. They still cannot, via legal marriage, both become US

citizens. Some of you will recall that our church's friend Margarite's Haitian birthmother didn't dare hope she could escape grinding poverty in Haiti even with a daughter in the US because her mother still has no access to the proper papers, the right connections, the coveted skills.

Thankfully there's always some good news in the mix. I was so pleased to hear the other day that the Supreme Court did something right- they said that drug companies cannot patent human genes. This will make medical innovation and cancer research far more doable because scientists will be able to afford to do research they've longed to do but feared being sued. Now if only they'd reverse their findings giving the multinational agribusiness giant Monsanto near-total control of our food supply by forcing farmers to use only their genetically altered seeds. Entitlement, you see, isn't just a presumed divine right of kings. Nowadays it's a presumed divine right of corporations.

Entitlement's polar opposite, hospitality, is counter-cultural. So too are gratitude and forgiveness. None of these are frequently or lavishly being offered these days. It runs against the grain to be as willing as Jesus was not to care what anybody in proper society thinks. It bucks the trend to NOT feel threatened and angry and under siege all the time, but rather, to be willing and open. With things so stacked against hospitable, grateful, forgiving ways, basic hospitality requires of us a whole lot of courage and a whole lot of discipline.

The start of Summer may not seem like the opportune time for the pastor to preach about discipline, and all this other hard stuff. Time to take things easy, right? Get some rays. And right you are, please, by all means, let summer be a Sabbath resting time for you if that is what you most need. But I'm guessing that some of us may also need the reminder that we can put courage and discipline this Summer into hospitality and prayerful gratitude and forgiveness, into not buying the big lie that we're entitled. We're not entitled to anything. As Will Campbell paraphrased the Apostle Paul, "We're all SOB's, but God loves us anyhow." Anything good that we have in this world is ours

because we're loved and forgiven, not because we're entitled! So if we're to be lavish and excessive about anything, let us be lavish and excessive about love and forgiveness, gratitude and generosity, like that woman who massaged Jesus' feet and dried them with her hair. When we are grateful, we can hardly help but be hospitable and forgiving-fruits of the Spirit, these. The more grateful we are, the more lavish our gestures of courageous hospitality.

If we are to bring enough oil and prayerful gratitude to the table, if, in other words, we are to carry out our calling as a church in this time and place of need, we're gonna need to put discipline to our daily task. Writer Peter Devries put it this way: "I write when I'm inspired, and I see to it that I'm inspired at nine o'clock every morning." "In the last analysis," said Bernard Baruch, "Our only freedom is the freedom to discipline ourselves." Let us practice the hearty Christian disciplines of excessive gratitude, persistent prayer, and lavish hospitality. Let us be the church we are called to be. Amen.

### **1 Kings 21:1-21**

<sup>21</sup>Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. <sup>2</sup>And Ahab said to Naboth, "Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money." <sup>3</sup>But Naboth said to Ahab, "The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance." <sup>4</sup>Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, "I will not give you my ancestral inheritance." He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.

<sup>5</sup>His wife Jezebel came to him and said, "Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?" <sup>6</sup>He said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard for it'; but he answered, 'I will not give you my

vineyard.”<sup>7</sup> His wife Jezebel said to him, “Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.”<sup>8</sup> So she wrote letters in Ahab’s name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city.<sup>9</sup> She wrote in the letters, “Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; <sup>10</sup>seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, ‘You have cursed God and the king.’ Then take him out, and stone him to death.”<sup>11</sup> The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. Just as it was written in the letters that she had sent to them,<sup>12</sup> they proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the assembly.<sup>13</sup> The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite him; and the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, “Naboth cursed God and the king.” So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death.<sup>14</sup> Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, “Naboth has been stoned; he is dead.”<sup>15</sup> As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, “Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead.”<sup>16</sup> As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

<sup>17</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: <sup>18</sup>Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession.<sup>19</sup> You shall say to him, “Thus says the LORD: Have you killed, and also taken possession?” You shall say to him, “Thus says the LORD: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.”<sup>20</sup> Ahab said to Elijah, “Have you found me, O my enemy?” He answered, “I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD,<sup>21</sup> I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel;

### **Luke 7:36 - 8:3**

<sup>36</sup>One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table.<sup>37</sup> And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house,

brought an alabaster jar of ointment. <sup>38</sup>She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. <sup>39</sup>Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." <sup>40</sup>Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." <sup>41</sup>"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup>When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" <sup>43</sup>Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." <sup>44</sup>Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. <sup>45</sup>You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup>You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup>Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." <sup>48</sup>Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." <sup>49</sup>But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" <sup>50</sup>And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

8 Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, <sup>2</sup>as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, <sup>3</sup>and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.