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# It's Not Complicated

1 Kings 21: 1-21

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 16, 2013 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

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If you've watched TV in recent months, you've likely viewed one of the commercials from AT&T's new add campaign. Most of the commercials begin with a group of children gathered in a circle with a man asking them questions. The questions are always simple and seemingly straight forward, yet the children give wandering, sometimes illogical, and somewhat incoherent responses. One commercial stands out as particularly incoherent, and therefore, particularly funny. In case you haven't been watching TV, let me read you the transcript.

The man guiding the conversation asks: "Who thinks more is better than less?" The children in the circle raise their hands. Then the man says, "Okay. Why?" One girl answers, "More is better than less because if stuff is not less (deep breath). If there's more less stuff (breath) then you might, you might wanna have some more and your parents just don't let you because there's only a little. But we want more, we want more like (breath) you really like it. You want more." The man who has been listening encouragingly along the way, concludes, "Right. I follow you." Then a voice comes over the scene saying, "It's not complicated. More is better."

It's not complicated. Even if like the young girl in the commercial, we can't quite explain it coherently, we've all learned and know that more is better. Maybe it's human nature, maybe it's a sort of evolutionary survival of the fittest mentality, but from our very earliest days we desire, long for, crave, even covet more. To some extent, our need for more keeps us alive; it is what makes us human. We are not self-sufficient and self-sustaining; we are people who need more to live: more food, more breath, more water. Yet, from our very earliest days, this need for more that is part of being creation rather than the creator turns in upon itself to reveal our separation from the creator. More becomes about adding to what we already have, about accumulating extra. More is to be desired, sought after, and pursued at all costs. Or as a credit card add I saw recently said, "More is always better."

It's not complicated. More is better. Or is it? Our Old Testament lesson for today is a story about wanting more. It's a story about individuals, about community, and about God. Let's consider this story through three lenses: the personal, the political, and the theological. The story of Naboth's vineyard is about individuals with wants, desires, choices, and moral and religious convictions. It is a story about communities with guidelines and laws, with ways of enforcing these to the benefit of some and the detriment of others, and with stories the community tells itself about what is right and good and wrong and evil. This story is about God and the way God relates to people who are sinful and righteous. And as a story about individuals, and communities, and God, it is both a story of correction and of redemption.

Though our reading today doesn't give us the full background, we already know from the book of 1 Kings that King Ahab was an immoral king who in his twenty-two years as king did "evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him" (1 Kings 16:30). At the beginning of our reading, King Ahab sees a lush, fruitful vineyard in Jezreel near his house and approaches the man who owns it to make a deal. The faithful Naboth refuses to trade or sell his land because of the inheritance laws of God. With Naboth evoking the LORD's mandate, Ahab goes away sad, resentful, angry, and pouty. Like a child who didn't get his way, Ahab sulked and groaned until his wife noticed. Maybe we can hear these words on the lips of Ahab. "More is better than less because if stuff is not less. If there's more less stuff, then you might, you might wanna have some more... But I want more, I want more like, I really like it. I want more." Jezebel reminds Ahab of his powerful position and devises an elaborate plan to get Naboth's vineyard for the king. Through a labyrinth of lies and deceitful scheming Jezebel and her scoundrels have Naboth unjustly put to death and dispossessed of his vineyard. When Ahab seeks to claim the newly available land, he meets the prophet Elijah who carries with him the judgment of the LORD.

As a story about personal decisions and actions, we might see Ahab representing a person of power whose desire for more drives him to strike a deal. On the surface, he's concerned about being fair,

maybe he's even generous. Ahab says, "I'll give you a better vineyard or, if you rather, I'll buy it from you for full price." But when he is denied, when it's revealed that he's stepping beyond the bounds of God's plan for God's people, it becomes clear that Ahab represents someone so consumed by a lust for more, for the next best thing, for something new, that it sends him into a depression-like state—sullen and unable to eat. Alternatively, we might see Naboth as a person of relative means, but one who's clearly subject to those who are truly powerful. Naboth is one willing to stand for what he knows God requires and is willing to speak the truth to the powerful people who threaten to worship greed rather than God. Naboth's faithfulness to the law makes him righteous, and Ahab's idolatry makes him unrighteous. Further, Jezebel and her scoundrels reveal a level of personal sinful action that results in the harm of others. As those who will scheme, and deceive, and tickle the ears of the powerful in order to get what they want, they represent the ways people lie and tell half truths for their own benefit. In this reading, Elijah is the alternative to the deceitfulness of Jezebel and those who schemed with her. As God's prophet, Elijah proclaims the unpleasant words of judgment and announces a corrective word to boundless desire and unlimited want for more. Instead of saying, "Don't you know your power? Don't you know your resources? Have what you want!" Elijah says, "Your desire for more has cost you everything!"

As a personal story, we might think of ourselves as Naboth or Elijah. Maybe we act righteously and speak truthfully in our everyday lives even if it's unpleasant or costs us greatly. Maybe we see their example and want to strive for their faithfulness and courage to speak the truth in places where unbounded desire for more surely guides the decisions of others. Or maybe we aren't in the prominent places of power at work or in our community or even in our families, and we identify with the experience of being taken advantage of, of suffering injustice, or of being the victim of the lies and cruelty of others, so we long for an Elijah to proclaim judgment on those harming us. Maybe we are inspired with righteous indignation and are ready to proclaim this judgment ourselves in the situations we find ourselves everyday.

But if we're eager to stand with Naboth and Elijah, we also need to see how we stand with Ahab and Jezebel. We see what we want, and our desire for more is mostly unchecked even at the expense of others. We are told to "be true to ourselves" and to "pursue our desires." In a world where bigger is better and there is no such thing as too much, we go for what we want. And if something stands in the way of having what we want, we either sulk or scheme until we can have it. We're reminded by many around us that we are queens and kings of our own domains, free to have whatever our budgets and lines of credit will afford us regardless of need or God's desire or what others sacrifice to make those things available to us. Maybe, like Jezebel, we've lied or withheld the truth in order that we could get our way. Maybe we've been the ones encouraging others to go after more, to live extravagantly, to do whatever it takes to have it all. Maybe as we've pointed our finger of personal justice and righteousness with Naboth and Elijah, we've realized we have fingers pointing right back at us.

Let's look at this story as a political story, as a story about the life of a community together. As a political story, we see the ways laws and structures of privilege and power shape life together. In this story, Naboth represents the community on the margins of power with little to protect it from the greed of those in control. Righteous protest, truthful speech, and God's law are what this community has as its guard against injustice and oppression. The land inheritance laws of Leviticus on which Naboth bases his protest served to remind the people that land was God's gift. The land was God's way of providing a social safety net, and the law was meant to ensure that those who were poor and vulnerable wouldn't have their means of life and sustenance removed through the sale of their land. The law was a safeguard so that desperate situations wouldn't induce mortgaging the future because of the predicament of the present. In this story, the law represents the community standards that guide relationships and provide boundaries for how people interact with their neighbors. In a political reading, Ahab represents those at the centers of power and privilege. From his place as a decision-maker and leader, Ahab has the opportunity to enlarge the territory of the privileged and pad the pockets of his posterity in most any manner he pleases. Jezebel and her cronies are the prevailing voice of those who benefit by affirming the greed of the powerful and turning the laws and guidelines for life together against those who are particularly vulnerable and disempowered. After all, if more is better, "it's not complicated" stick with

those who have more, and you'll get more. Can't you hear them saying to Ahab, "Right. Right. I follow you."

As a political story, we might see ourselves siding with Naboth and those outraged and horrified by the systems and structures that keep the materially poor impoverished and susceptible to the greedy whims of the powerful. Maybe we're the kind of people who protest for widows and orphans and immigrants and the downtrodden and strive for a society marked by justice for everyone. Maybe we've committed to making our common life better by proclaiming the truth even if it is unpopular or costly. Maybe social justice is our watchword and song, and so we are those who with Elijah name how laws have been used to crush and sometimes kill the disenfranchised. Maybe we testify to God's displeasure, even anger, at our harming of one another and call our communities to account.

But even if we stand in the light with Naboth and Elijah, it is for us to look also at the dark places where our political life—i.e. our life together—mirrors Ahab and Jezebel. Maybe we've been part of the privileged and the powerful for so long, we've lost sight of the ways our communal choices affect those we rarely encounter face to face. Maybe we've been short sighted in our investment planning or business ventures such that we miss the long-term effects of the "good deals" and the "fair trades" we offer those who are in no position to resist. Maybe we've been so consumed by talk of excellence and of being a place where great things happen, that we've forgotten to consider how the policies and laws we create and support hinder the flourishing and delight of those right next to our homes. Or maybe we've heard the cries for more, for unbounded growth from those around us, and instead of challenging the dominant cultural voice, we've joined the chorus saying, "It's not complicated. More is better." Maybe we don't craft grand dishonest schemes like Jezebel, but maybe we've simply encouraged and propagated that myth that success is equated with excess. So the ordering of our life together speaks clearly, "It's not complicated. More is better."

As a theological story this is a story about God's people Israel. God's vineyard of delight and joy, God's promised land as represented by Naboth's vineyard, has been taken in dishonesty, corruption, greed, and, ultimately, idolatry. Ahab has repeated the sins of Israel multifold—from worshiping other gods to committing murder to coveting his neighbor's property. The law Naboth clings to represents the guidelines for God's covenant with God's people, and Naboth's murder reveals the way God's people have turned away from and trampled on God's relationship with them. Elijah, as the speaker of God's word and truth, represents God's holy anger and broken heartedness at the sins of God's people. The relationship between God and God's people has been thoroughly damaged and death is everywhere. Yet as a theological story, it doesn't stop there. We can also hear God's continuing story with humanity. Ahab and Jezebel show the ways humanity has turned from God, twisting our relationships with God and one another to the detriment of everyone, especially the broken and needy and powerless. Naboth and Elijah reveal God's way of bringing justice and judgment into the story of humanity. God's word of judgment comes in Jesus—a man who like Elijah proclaims God's truth and who like Naboth was wrongly accused, marginalized, and murdered for the sake of God's relationship with all people. Yet, unlike the story of Naboth's vineyard, God's longer story includes resurrection and, therefore, the possibility of restoration, redemption, forgiveness of sins, and finally reconciliation with God and our neighbors.

The theological story connects the personal and political into one great story. The theological story keeps us from boasting in our own self-righteousness or wallowing in self-loathing. The theological story provokes us to participate in making the systems and structures of our communal life ones of justice and reconciliation, while also acknowledging how we knowingly and unknowingly reinforce injustice in our life together. The theological story is a story of how judgment and justice come, and by the blood of God's Son, redemption is available whether we're being judged or being justified. The theological story is a story of restoration, restitution, reconciliation, and redemption because the one who came to proclaim the word of the Lord is also the one who was unjustly accused and murdered for the sake of greedy rulers and deceitful schemers, for the sake of courageous justice seekers and truth-speakers, and for the sake of all of us who are a complex mix of saint and sinner alike. This theological story is the story the church proclaims and strives to embody in our life together, in word and deed, through confession and pardon and peace and communion. The church is the place where we learn to tell the truth to one

another about ourselves and the world, and where in learning the truth we make room for justice through forgiveness and grace that comes in Christ. May today be the day we find the courage to tell the truth and the grace to give and receive forgiveness in Jesus our Lord. And then, we may just proclaim, "It's not complicated. More justice and more forgiveness are better." Amen.