

June 12, 2016

TEXT: 1Kings 21:1–20

TITLE: Wrestling with Power

We've seen it all before. Someone wants what they cannot have—maybe so much so that their desire makes them sick. The only way to get what they want so badly is to take it—leveraging whatever advantage they've got: strength, money, power, fame. They figure out how to prey upon the vulnerabilities of the other for their own gain, while the vulnerable are robbed of what little they had.

So it is with our text today. King Ahab of Samaria sees a piece of land adjacent to his second home. In his mind's eye, he can already see the vegetables that will flourish in this fine soil. He can smell the aroma of the buds. He has a vision, you see. And like most people with a vision, he pursues it. He approaches the owner of that land, a man named Naboth, and asks—quite nicely at first—if he could purchase his property. King Ahab promises to pay handsomely, or, if Naboth prefers, will offer him another piece of property that is of even better quality than his original land.

But Naboth's answer is a simple "No". The land was not, in Naboth's estimation, his to give away. The land was his inheritance, appointed by God. With no offense meant to the king, Naboth did not believe that he had the authority to sign away this land. God was in charge of this property.

Sick from greed, the king sulks around his palace. He is so distressed that he doesn't eat. And so his wife, Jezebel, comes up with a plan. Through a combination of deception, trickery, false accusations and an abuse of power—both hers and the king's—Naboth winds up stoned to death, and the king acquires the land he wants. Lies heap upon lies, and before you know it a man is killed.

Yes, we've seen it all before. From schoolyard bullies to sweat shop owners, we have seen across time that some people get what they want by exploiting others—especially those who are vulnerable. An abuse of power, coupled with a prejudice against another, is a dangerous combination.

We have confessed, too, that our own nation's history, too, has been fraught with such drama. Oppression of the minority is, quite disturbingly, a part of our history. It's not the part of the story we like to talk about. It's not the part of our past of which we were proud. It is not this legacy that we celebrate on national holidays when we display our flags and host cookouts and watch fireworks at night. We focus on the good parts: the promise of democracy, the Statue of Liberty, baseball, rock and roll, and apple pie.

But just as our history is filled with stories grounded in the belief that all people have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, our history was likewise built upon a foundation of conquest and domination. Native Americans were murdered and run from their land; men and women were kidnapped from Africa and sold and owned as slaves

in the US; women whose efforts helped birth and nurture a nation, were denied the right to vote for the first 144 years after independence was won. The list goes on.

Author, lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson says:

We have in this country this dynamic where we really don't like to talk about our problems. We don't like to talk about our history. And because of that, we really haven't understood what it's meant to do the things we've done historically. We're constantly running into each other. We're constantly creating tensions and conflicts. We have a hard time talking about race, and I believe it's because we are unwilling to commit ourselves to a process of truth and reconciliation.¹

We need to face the truth. As much as we don't like to address the skeletons in our closets; as much as we like to put on our best clothes and our kindest smile and mask over our imperfections, the truth is that our history has a complicated back story filled with disturbing patterns of personal and institutionalized racist, sexist, heterosexist, and xenophobic oppression.

And the truth is that this story still impacts us, today. We do not live in a post-racial or post-gendered society. We still live in a world where African American men are incarcerated at a disproportionate rate to their white counterparts.² We live in a world in which a white, middle class male Stanford University student athlete received a meager six month sentence for sexually assaulting a woman who was unconscious, behind a dumpster.

We live in a world where Muslim children are being bullied in school; where 20 people were killed and over 40 injured in a shooting in an Orlando gay bar last night.

And we live in a world in which these realities affect us every day—whether by capitalizing on our vulnerabilities or by perpetuating systems of power that grant us societal privilege—or, perhaps, both.

Our text reminds us that even in the face of injustice, we still live in a world in which God is God. The God who we worship today is the same God who spoke through the prophets to name and dismantle injustice of the day. The God who we worship today is the same God who through Christ promised to free the captive, restore sight to the blind and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

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https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice/transcript?language=en

² <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2012/03/13/11351/the-top-10-most-startling-facts-about-people-of-color-and-criminal-justice-in-the-united-states/> “1 in every 15 African American men and 1 in every 36 Hispanic men are incarcerated in comparison to 1 in every 106 white men.”

God spoke truth through Elijah, calling out the injustice that Ahab and Jezebel had played out in secret. And God speaks truth to us too—through modern-day prophets, through our witnesses of courage, through the conviction of truth on our very own hearts. As one commentator states: “The Holy One stands against all systems that commodify and destroy the lives of human beings³.” God is a God of life. And the life and new life that God offers is not just for some, but for everyone.

Today marks the forty-nine year anniversary of the Supreme Court ruling in the case of Loving vs. the state of Virginia. An interracial couple, Richard and Mildred Loving, married in the District of Columbia, were pulled from their bed by police in Virginia one night, and charged under a Virginia law that prohibited interracial couples from marrying out of state and returning to Virginia. The couple pled guilty and were each sentenced to 1 year—a sentence that was suspended for 25 years on the condition that they never return to Virginia together. Frustrated that they couldn’t visit family together or return home, the couple, with the help of the ACLU, filed charges against the State. The unanimous Supreme Court ruling was issued on June 12, 1967, overturning every anti-miscegenation law in the nation.

Those of you who have met my husband or seen our photos on Facebook know that my own marriage is an interracial marriage. Shortly after we were married in 2008, I was struck with a great humility, recognizing in a new way that David and I were able to get married because others before us had fought and struggled against the institutionalized racist oppression of every day to make our marriage a reality—and that just 41 years earlier our own marriage wouldn’t have been recognized as legal in every state. As Prop 8 was being debated in California, I was convicted that my privilege as a heterosexual married woman could not be for naught. As others had worked for my right to marry the person I loved, so too did I need to be an ally in the fight to ensure that every loving couple could have the right to marry.

Privilege and power; vulnerability and victim-hood. These are dynamics with which we dance everyday: every day a police officer pulls us over; every day we walk to our cars at night; every day we use a public rest room.

There is no swift antidote to heal the pains of our past or the struggles of our present. But the text offers us a clear starting point: telling the truth. As lies embed themselves in the fabric of our culture—in courtrooms and churches and neighborhoods—we can follow in the footsteps of Elijah and, with God’s help, call out the lies and point out the truth. Every time we tell the truth about the hurt that has been a part of our history; every time we name the injustice we have experienced first hand; every time we confess our complicity in feeding systems that harm—we start to slowly diffuse the power that has held us captive for so long.

³ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).

As a people of faith, we are called—from whatever position in which we stand—to engage in prophetic dialogue so that the oppression of our day might be called out and dismantled one truth at a time. This truth might be scary. It will likely be uncomfortable at first. But ultimately, truth can and will lead to transformation: to convicted hearts, persuaded minds, redeemed actions.

As Brian Stevenson says again:

The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice. That we cannot be full evolved human beings until we care about human rights and basic dignity. That all of our survival is tied to the survival of everyone. That our visions of technology and design and entertainment and creativity have to be married with visions of humanity, compassion and justice.⁴

So tell the truth: tell the truth that while we have made progress, we haven't yet reached the Promised Land. Tell the truth—that while we know there is injustice out there, sometimes fear or ignorance hold us back from speaking out and taking a stand. Tell the truth—about the ways in which we benefit from the powers that be, and the ways in which our growth is stifled by the limits that power imposes.

May we likewise, in word and in deed, tell the truth about a God of justice—whose omnipotence was shown through the outpouring of God's own self in Jesus Christ:

- who was born as a baby in Bethlehem,
- who welcomed the outcast and liberated the oppressed, and
- who suffered and died to free us all from the power of sin and death.

May we tell the truth about what is possible when love prevails—things like reconciliation, hope, redemption and new life.

Dare to engage the truth. Let the truth work on you and through you. For, as John tells us, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:32)."

Thanks be to God.

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https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice/transcript?language=en