

From forgiveness to love: 1 Kings 21:1-21a; Luke 7:36—8:3

by [Herbert O'Driscoll](#) in the [June 1, 2010](#) issue

In 1 Kings, the storyteller sets the scene simply. *Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria.* We have already been told a lot. We know that Naboth calls this beautiful valley home, that its name defines him and that he is Naboth the Jezreelite. In contrast, Ahab and his palace entourage are only here for the season from the colder Samaria hill country to the south.

Notice the calculated insult in Ahab's offer to Naboth to buy the vineyard. Ahab wishes to possess the glory of this vineyard, tended by generations of family, and use it for what? A vegetable garden!

His proposal actually contains three insults. First, why does this boorish winter tourist want Naboth's place? "Because it is near my house!" Second, he contemptuously offers the owner "a better vineyard." Third, he says Naboth should name his price (for Ahab everything has a price).

Naboth's reply is risky considering that he's dealing with a thug. It also has immense dignity. He does not merely say, "No, thanks," but "I will not give you my ancestral inheritance." The phrase rankles Ahab. He remembers it and repeats it as he relates the incident to his wife Jezebel.

At home Ahab sulks. He lies on his bed, turns his face and refuses to eat. He reverts to what is probably a lifelong pattern. In the past someone has always come and given him what he wants. Then someone does come, someone who knows Ahab through and through, someone who has the resolve and determination this moment needs.

"Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?" asks Jezebel. Her every word is calculated to feed the wish for attention, to stroke this self-centered man. Even her encouragement is in the form of orders spat out in contempt. "Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful." Then comes the kicker. She doesn't say, "You can have this vineyard" or even "I'll help you get this vineyard." She says, "I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

Suddenly everything changes. Inaction becomes throbbing action. A conspiracy is formed. Letters of invitation to betray Naboth go out to people whom he had thought of as his friends and neighbors. We can assume that none of them resists the political pressure from the palace. In a matter of days Naboth is betrayed. Isolated and condemned, he is taken by the mob and beaten to death.

Once Ahab learns of the execution he goes to the vineyard. There he is confronted by Elijah, who names Ahab's appalling behavior with searing clarity. Ahab has been found out, not only by Elijah but by the God whom Elijah chillingly names as Ahab's judge.

Like Naboth, Jesus is approached by a man of wealth and power, and here too there is an element of betrayal. Jesus is invited to be a guest, but it is a tainted invitation. The Pharisee Simon wants to display this interesting, quaint rural rabbi in front of his affluent guests. Who knows what entertainment his presence will bring?

The meal would have been served in the new Roman manner fashionable in the wealthier homes of the city. There would be couches, with each guest supported on an elbow, his sandals removed. Behind the couches and the tables, hidden in the shadows, would be outsiders permitted to approach the guests for various suppliant reasons.

One of these outsiders is a woman who was a sinner. Simon's later contemptuous reference to her suggests that she may have been a prostitute. We can assume that the viciousness of Simon's comment is enough to freeze everyone into silence. How does the rabbi respond?

Jesus says, almost casually, "Simon, I have something to say to you." Is there sarcasm in Simon's reply? "Teacher, speak." Jesus tells the story of two debtors and then asks a question. "Which of them will love him more?" Simon's reply betrays his growing unease. By this time authority has subtly passed from host to guest.

Now Jesus begins his dissection of Simon's pretensions. One by one he lists the small but calculated insults that have been dealt him since he arrived as a guest, presenting them not as hurts to himself but as social omissions on Simon's part as host.

Jesus shows the glaring contrast between Simon's behavior and the tenderness and respect offered by the woman. Simon and his kind are so convinced of their own

righteousness that they do not feel in need of forgiveness. Unable to feel its need they cannot know forgiveness and cannot experience the love that makes it possible to forgive others.

In case anyone has missed his point Jesus turns to the woman and says, "Your sins are forgiven." There is consternation, a reaction that Jesus ignores as he turns to her once more and gently bids her farewell.