

“Mail Order Murder” / I Kings 21:1-4, 7-11, 16-21a, 25, 27 / 16 June 2013

I told you last week that I love mulling over these great stories from the Hebrew Scriptures that are assigned to us during the summer months, trying to figure out how to extract a sermon from their earthy, broken characters and twisted plots. These are the moody, classic Scriptural texts that have inspired so many great works of art. They're often unhappy tales of treachery, and cunning, and sometimes bizarre violence. And yet, the church had to squeeze them in somewhere, and so the calendar makers sneaked them in on the low Sundays between mid-June and late August. As if to say, “These stories are the hard stuff. They're not for beginners. Strictly off limits to the Christmas and Easter crowd. These gems are for committed churchgoers only.” Yes, these summer stories are for advanced pew-sitters; they're complicated...but wise and beautiful, too. In this ancient account of King Ahab and Naboth, I find a parable for 21<sup>st</sup> century life. You see, just like the powerful in our day, King Ahab never had to look into his victim's eyes or hear his cries. King Ahab found it easy to harm a person he would never have to face. But love calls us to see even our enemies.

I've told you before about the mourning doves that build their nests in the woodwork above our windows. I read somewhere that doves will choose a home-site, and if it remains undisturbed, they'll live there for many generations, even hundreds of years. Apparently, our house is the Capistrano of South Fayette, so in some ways, I feel as if the doves have as much of a right there as we do; they're not paying the mortgage, but they've been there a lot longer. Besides, I like having them around. They're beautiful birds, these doves, with their speckled gray-brown feathers and blue eyeliner around their big, deep, soulful eyes. They're called “mourning doves” because they have mournful voices that sound almost human. We've probably got two dozen of these birds nesting in various spots beneath the eaves of our old house, and we have a pact with those doves: we leave them alone, and they leave us alone. It's an unspoken agreement. There's very little interaction between their world and ours...aside from the strawberry patch.

The strawberry patch, too, is something that predates us. Someone who lived in the house before us planted it, and each year, we've watched those berries grow, but without fail, as soon as one seemed ripe enough to pick, the birds would swoop in and steal it while we weren't looking. This year we got smart, or perhaps we got greedy. This year we put berry netting over the strawberries to keep the birds out. But this past Thursday, I came home from work to find that one of those lovely little mourning doves had managed to get into the berry patch, and having eaten his fill of stolen berries, he attempted his escape, but he'd gotten all tangled up in the net. It was a pathetic sight, the poor bird dangling upside down with its wings spread and motionless. He had clearly been thrashing for a long time because one of the bird's legs was wrapped tight to its tail-feathers. The bird was close to death, frightened, and its leg was clearly broken; there were feathers strewn all over the ground. The poor thing was twisted up too tight; I didn't think I could cut it free from the knot of netting on its foot. Besides, I was pretty sure that the local alley cat—a big, evil-looking thing that I call Grimalkin—would make quick work of this poor dove. It made me enormously sad to realize that the kindest thing I could do was to dispatch the bird quickly. I cut him as free as I could, which wasn't much; the huge tangle of netting remained stuck to his leg and tail. And just as I resigned myself to that unhappy task, that dove—which seemed so close to death—rallied; he darted up into a tree.

Well, to make a long story even longer, we heard the poor thing thrashing around in our hedges all evening, and so we held a family council. We all agreed that, as sad as it made us, we would have to put the poor bird out of his misery. I went into the hedge and managed to free the bird from the branch where he was stuck, and he let me hold him in my hands. You know, St. Francis preached to the birds; Jesus said that God cares for the birds; my daughters were nearly in tears over this little dove, this creature of God's world that had been caught and injured in the nets I had laid. Who was I to lay claim to strawberries I didn't plant, I who had California-grown strawberries gathering mold in my fridge? Who was I to euthanize this bird who wanted nothing more than to meet its own needs? And I found, at that moment, looking into those big, heartbroken eyes that I just couldn't harm this creature.

And so, I sent Chloe to get my tiny mustache scissors from the bathroom. Together, she and I worked for ten minutes, gently, slowly freeing the bird's leg from his tail-feathers, and then cutting away all the bunched up netting that was wrapped around his broken little talon. Now, you can call me crazy; call me a fool, but in that moment, the dove seemed to realize what was happening. As I worked on setting him free, the little bird rested calmly in my hands; he peered intently into my eyes. And the moment I finally snipped away the last little bit of netting from his swollen foot, that bird struggled to be free. I let him go, and he flew up to perch on the roof, where he promptly took a long drink from our clogged gutter. The mourning dove rested, and gazed down at us, and I felt ashamed that I had been so ready to whack the poor fellow. I was convinced that he just might live. At least now he wouldn't die a slow, painful, earthbound death, flailing and frightened. At least now he wouldn't get mauled by old Grimalkin. You see, when I looked that bird in the eye—as crazy as it sounds—when I held him in my hands, I found that I didn't have it in myself to harm him. And all over a handful of strawberries that I didn't need.

Look what King Ahab does for a piece of land where he wants to put a vegetable garden! Today's reading from the Book of First Kings is about mail-order-murder. King Ahab wants a some land that belongs to Naboth, his neighbor, but Naboth says no. This land has been in his family for centuries; it's not for sale. King Ahab mopes. He pines away, but he's not pining for radishes and cucumbers. King Ahab is unhappy because Naboth has shown him the limits of his kingly power. In Israel, under the Law of Moses, even a king has to act justly, respecting the rights and the property of the powerless. If King Ahab throws a fit like a spoiled child, it's because he would like to believe that he—as king—can have whatever he wants. Too much power can make even a good person forget about justice. It's happening still today. Many think that power can buy justice, that even justice is for sale. But in fact, if a ruler leads with power and not justice, then he or she is a tyrant. And Naboth is reminding the king of Israel that even a king's power is subject to the rule of God.

Well, Queen Jezebel is no Israelite, so the Law of Moses means nothing to her. She has Naboth executed on trumped up charges. The genius of her plan is that she does it all by mail. She and her king don't have to see any of the messiness: the false accusations, the shocked and bitter denials, the mock trial, the gruesomeness of an innocent man being pummeled to death with rocks. No, this is not one of the stories you learn in Sunday school as a child, but I believe that it's a pretty good parable for life in our world today. It's easy to harm the one whose face you never have to see. It's easy to participate in big systems of injustice where power outweighs fairness. But if we could really see the faces of the harmed, would it change the way we lived?

Many of us have been tempted, at some point in life, to end a relationship by mail instead of doing it in person. Use nice stationery; at least you avoid the awkwardness of facing the person you've disappointed. When you have bad news to tell, you might call at a time of day when you'll get the answering machine. That way, you won't have to hear the unhappiness in which you've had some hand. It's hard to own our part in the sadness of the world, much less of the people we love. Most of us don't like causing pain.

But what if we really saw the face of the person—perhaps on the other side of the world—who is affected by our lifestyle? What if we could see the faces of those future generations whose world has been laid waste by our seeming need for air conditioning and Styrofoam cups? When a factory collapses in Bangladesh, killing 1,000 people, do we go to our closets and check the labels on our shirts just to make sure that some of those people weren't working for us, just to make sure we didn't have a hand in the misery that was their lives, that our love for affordable garments didn't bring about their tragedy? Or do we shake our heads sadly at the news, and maintain the illusion that we are not involved? Sometimes we participate in systems of injustice that are bigger than any one individual, and the only way to opt out of those systems is to choose a radically different path through this world. If we could see the faces of the harmed, we might all live a little more like the Amish.

We human beings really need to learn to see each other. In the Broadway musical “Les

Misérables,” you come to hate Inspector Javert. He's a cold, pitiless policeman who is completely driven by his desire to punish a man whose crimes seem forgivable. Javert is seemingly on the side of justice, but his justice is too mechanical; it knows no mercy. He's despicable. And yet, there comes a scene in the play when you see this ruthless man at prayer. The stars are shining in the heavens, displaying the order of the cosmos, and you realize that Javert's God is order, balance, symmetry, law! Javert worships perfect predictability, tit-for-tat, punishments and rewards. This is what makes the world feel meaningful and safe for Javert and his kind. In that moment of prayer, you see him not as a driven, maniacal villain, but as a decent human who lives for his sense of what is right in the world. He's a man who doesn't know that just as power without justice is tyranny, so justice without mercy is retribution. Ah, grace! It loves the stranger, forgives the enemy. It makes the world go round! It's called grace, and at this point in the life of our divided world, grace is the only way forward.

What if we could really see people? You might not always get along with the people in your life, but it's hard to wish real harm on a person you've seen at prayer, a person with whom you've sat at table, a person whose humanity you've seen in the joys and sorrows of daily life. Instead of seeing the political, or social, or religious notions that different people represent to us, instead of seeing them for how they affect our plans, what if we could look right into a person's soul, as that dove seemed to look into mine? What if we could see our loved ones through a pure lens, unclouded by old hurts and disappointments? What if we could see ourselves, free of regret, and shame, and self-blame? Might we not be kinder, more generous people? Might we not do less harm?

I wonder if Queen Jezebel could have murdered Naboth with her own hand, instead of doing it by mail. Whenever American sailors sank a Japanese ship, they always scrambled to rescue their so-called “enemies” from ocean waves. Up close, they couldn't ignore the humanity of their enemies. As soon as I freed that dove, my little girls made me take down the berry nets. Now those berries are a service that we provide for our feathered friends. Sometimes decency calls us to tear down our nets. If