

Living in a World We Do Not Control – Ben Wayman

I Kings 21:1-21a; Psalm 5:1-8; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

“Who’s in charge” is the hot topic in the Wayman household right now. Just this past week Michelle and I introduced to Caden a ‘responsibility chart’ whereby he immediately announced that he was in charge of this chart and we were not.

Caden’s question of ‘Who’s in charge’ is an important question for Christians to be asking. It’s important because how we answer this question largely determines how we live our lives. And how we live our lives has everything to do with being God’s friends.

In Ruth’s sermon last week, she pointed out that most history until recently, has been told from the perspective of those in charge – the kings, the rulers, the rich, the men. She suggested that we might begin looking at the past through the eyes of the Otherwise – the unnamed, the marginalized, the oppressed, the poor, the women. Scripture often does this kind of history.

As we can see in our lessons today, the Otherwise certainly do history differently. Our readings today show how the Otherwise handle the question of ‘who’s in charge.’ Building on Ruth’s suggestion that we have much to learn from the Otherwise, I would like to suggest that in today’s lessons the Otherwise teach us that God is in control and we are not.

This is the good news of which we just heard in our Gospel lesson. Jesus’s proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of God is that God is in control and we are not. God’s being in control is threatening for those who think they are in control. And the Otherwise only make things worse for them by reminding them that they are deeply deluded.

“Do you now govern Israel?” Jezebel says to Ahab. Jezebel isn’t really asking a question, she’s making a statement of what she sees to be fact: “You are now the king of Israel – act like it.” For Jezebel, to be in charge and to be in control are one and the same. “You are in charge, Ahab, there is nothing you cannot make happen.”

Jezebel is the daughter of the King of Sidon. She knows all about kingship because she’s paid close attention to her father’s unlimited exercise of power. You don’t ask for a small piece of land from a local landowner; you take it. Clearly, Jezebel is not an Israelite; she’s a Phoenician who worships Baal. She has no concern for the kind of limitations placed on kings by God and Israelite law. For Jezebel, being in charge equals being in control.

It’s interesting how money is often used by those in charge. In our OT lesson, King Ahab assumes that everyone has a price. But Naboth proves him wrong. Naboth is the Otherwise. We know little about him beyond our reading in today’s lection. But what we learn is that

Naboth refuses to accept King Ahab's seemingly reasonable offer. His refusal is based on his ability to see clearly who is in control.

Naboth cannot sell King Ahab his land because it belonged to his ancestors who had been given this land by God. For Israelites, land could only be sold to a family member. The limitations on their land were based on their belief that this land belonged to God. Naboth cannot sell his vineyard to someone outside his family – not even the king – without offending the one who IS in control. Naboth's history is clearly not the one Ahab had in mind.

Another reason why Naboth cannot be bought off is because he does not confuse Kingship or Money with being in control. That's why he responds as he does – "The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance." Naboth is not sentimental – he's faithful. Naboth sees the world much differently than Ahab – kingship and money may be in charge, they may exercise some kind of power, but they are not in control.

Naboth was killed for seeing the world in this way. All he did was remind King Ahab and Jezebel, who thought they ruled the world, that they were in the grip of a deep delusion (Stanley Hauerwas). Jezebel and King Ahab could find no other way to respond to Naboth than to have him stoned to death.

It is interesting that Jezebel, Ahab, and the men of Naboth's own city killed him under the guise of Israelite religion. That there were two scoundrels, that there was an imposed fast, that Naboth was killed by stoning all indicate that Naboth was the one unfaithful to God. The one thing Naboth cared about – faithfulness to the God who is in control – seemed to have been stripped from him by the cunning of these scoundrels. The apparent effectiveness of those in charge can be overwhelming. The power of violence and can make it hard for us to imagine that they are not in control.

But this is what the Otherwise in our stories today insist. They insist that God is in control and kings and money and violence are not. One of my favorite pastors would call this faith. Faith – he says – "means living in the world God promises until the promise comes true. That makes people of faith seem strange to everyone else, because everyone else isn't living in the world God promises" (Sam Wells).

The unnamed woman in our Gospel lesson today certainly qualifies as strange. Here this Otherwise woman shows up at a Pharisee's house unannounced and uninvited. Oblivious to who might be in charge of the home, she enters, finds Jesus, and then weeps, bathes, dries, kisses, and anoints his feet. She is over-the-top affectionate with Jesus and under-impressed with the Pharisee or his customs. The lavish gestures of this woman – worshipful gestures – defy the Pharisees's assumptions about who is in control.

Our reading from Galatians helps us understand better the Pharisee's irritation. In Paul's letter to the Christians in Galatia, he insists that Jewish customs are no longer in charge. Paul

challenges a group of Christians who were insisting that in order to be fully Christian one must be circumcised and practice Jewish law. Instead, Paul insists that Christ alone is in control. In Christ a new age has begun that eclipses previous commitments. And this new age makes possible for Jews and Gentiles to live and worship together.

Paul helps us see that this Pharisee does not understand that Jesus, the one who IS in control, has taken charge. Sinners cannot make Jesus unclean; rather, Jesus makes sinners clean. 'Your sins are forgiven.' The Otherwise woman in our Gospel lesson is so overwhelmed with gratitude to Jesus that she cannot help but act worshipfully toward him. It's as though she completely forgot about the customs of her religion and the expectations of her culture. All she sees is Jesus.

I used to think that this Otherwise woman was trying to convince Jesus to forgive her. After all, she was a sinner – she had a lot of debt to pay off. But that's not what the text tells us. Look at verse 47: "Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love." The HENCE tells us that the woman's gestures are pure gratitude. She's not trying to convince Jesus of anything, she's thanking Jesus for everything. Her debt has been forgiven.

Today Jesus and the Otherwise woman show us that God's forgiveness is more powerful than our sin. Your sins are forgiven. We should not flatter ourselves – we're not in control nor are we capable of sinning beyond God's forgiveness.

Being forgiven changes everything. The Otherwise know this. And their knowing this changed everything about the way they lived. The Otherwise are not amused by Kings, or Money, or Pharisees. But they ARE in awe of the God whose forgiveness is more powerful than their sin. It's not an accident that Jesus describes sin and forgiveness in economic terms. In both our Old and New Testament lessons, we see that the Otherwise use money for setting free rather than coercion. Naboth remains free by refusing to sell his land to Ahab. The creditor in the parable sets the debtors free by forgiving the money they owe. The women in the Gospel lesson use their resources to free Jesus and the disciples for ministry. One way to remind the world that God is in control and we are not is by handling money in setting-free kind of ways.

The difference between scoundrels and sinners is that sinners know that God can set you free. The two scoundrels we encountered in our I Kings reading are not proper sinners because God is not on their radar. 'Scoundrels' is not a theological term. But in order to be a 'sinner', one must acknowledge the One sinned against. In order to be forgiven, you have to recognize that God is in control and has the power to forgive you.

We Christians are sinners. We are sinners because we recognize that we have sinned against God. But as sinners, we also believe that God has the power to forgive sins. The good news today is that God is in control and YOU are forgiven.

So – If we take it to be true that God is in control and we are not, that God has forgiven us – sinners though we are – What would it look like for us at St Paul’s to be an Otherwise people who are capable of reminding those who think they rule the world that they are deeply deluded? (Stanley Hauerwas) I’d like to close with three suggestions for how we might live in a world we do not control.

First, it means that we are not enchanted by money or those who are in charge. We’re not amused by kings, rulers, and the rich because we know they are not in control. As people who serve the God who is in control, we expose the lie that Money makes the world go round. I’m not advocating anarchy, nor am I suggesting Christians take up a barter system. I am encouraging us to think rightly about what it means to be in charge and to imagine how money can be a tool for setting free rather than coercion.

Practically, this looks like any number of things. Naboth is a great guide here. For example, you might refuse an offer for a higher paying job because you recognize that this particular job would compromise your commitment to God. When we are not enamored with money or position, we are capable of radical faithfulness.

As noted earlier, Christian faithfulness really looks strange to the world. What kind of a people turns down more money? What kind of a people give their resources to supporting a church that seems to be so ineffective in solving the world’s problems? What kind of a people get together to read an ancient book, share a bizarre supper, and worship a mysterious God? Make no mistake about it – we Christians are strange. And our strangeness pertains to both what we believe and how we live our lives in light of what we believe. As the Otherwise show us today, we should live our lives in such a way that our lives do not make any sense if the God we worship does not exist.

But in order to do this, we need friends. Friendship is a second way in which we can be Christian in a world we do not control. For example, we need each other here this morning to help us see that what we believe and how we live is true. Money and violence can be very convincing. They seem to be able to accomplish so much that they challenge whether God is actually in control. Naboth died because a greedy and violent world would not accept the truth that God is in control. There are real consequences to living in the world God promises until the promises come true. But if what we believe is true, it would be foolish to live in any other way. Friendship offers us the companionship and the courage to live in a world we do not control. This past Tuesday morning, 7:30 came and went and no one had showed up for prayer. At the time, I thought that finally the day had come in my three years of pastoring here at St Paul’s that no one would show up for Morning Prayer. But a few minutes later, Matt Zahniser did show up. Matt believes that God is in control. His belief helps me believe. We need friends to live the Christian life.

This morning we have come together as friends to worship God. Worship is the most precious gift we have for living as Christians in a world we do not control. Worship is our most powerful

challenge to those who think they rule the world. The unnamed woman's gestures toward Jesus are an affront to the Pharisee's power assumptions. Through our worship, we offer the world an alternative to the thinking that being in charge means being in control.

Worship is what we do when we see clearly who is in control. At St Paul's we come together every day to pray, read scripture, and receive Communion because we cannot imagine living otherwise in God's kingdom.

Christians are an Otherwise people whose lives look strange to people who think they are in control. And so I'm excited for Caden to learn from his friends in this church that being in charge isn't as interesting as the God who is in control. I am thankful to be a part of the forgiven, Otherwise people who live in the world God promises until the promises come true.