

**JUSTICE AND MERCY**  
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Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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This week I've been reading *The Israel Lobby* written by two pro-Israel authors (John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt) who nonetheless question why the United States gives such enormous financial and political support to Israel—to *Israel of all nations*—when such support often does more harm than good to America's interests and security. Many Americans think Israel, like the USA, is morally superior to most nations and thus deserves our annual, virtually no-strings attached 5 billion dollar aid package. But, if truth be told, in 1948 the founding fathers of Israel instigated terrorist attacks on Palestinians in order to drive them off the land that Israel wanted for itself.

That was then but even now Israel is appropriating land in the West Bank through brutal intimidation and dubious legal methods, defying UN resolutions. Israel prides itself in being a Jewish state but there are times when it seems to have forgotten its Jewish heritage and values represented in such stories as this one from I Kings 21.

Once upon a time, about 700 years before the birth of Jesus, Ahab, the king of Israel got a hankering for more land. Now it so happened that a certain man named Naboth had the loveliest vineyard you'd ever want to see. The King said to Naboth: I'll give you anything you want for it. *It's not for sale*, said Naboth. *It's been in my family for many generations and I'm not giving it up to anybody for anything.*

Ahab went home, flung himself across his bed and pouted. His wife, Queen Jezebel, found him pouting. *What's the matter?* she asked. I want Naboth's vineyard and he won't sell it to me.

*Good grief*, cried the queen. *Stop crying! You're the king. You can take anything you want.*

So the queen arranged for Naboth to be arrested, tried on false charges and executed. The next day Ahab took possession of Naboth's vineyard. Ah, yes, it's good to be king!

And, ah, yes, today it's good to have the most powerful military in the Middle East, weapons of mass destruction in your arsenal along with the unconditional backing of the USA, the most powerful nation on earth.

The queen arranged for Naboth to be arrested, tried on false charges and executed. The next day Ahab took possession. Ah, yes, it's good to be king!

And then along came Elijah, the servant of the Lord. When King Ahab saw Elijah coming, he groaned. *Oh no! Here comes the troubler of Israel.* Elijah pointed his finger at the king and told him what a wicked thing he had done. *From this day forward*, said Elijah, *you and you children shall be accursed.*

What might we learn from such a story? Maybe this: The Lord God is not only the Maker of heaven and earth but also a God of justice. God gives strength to the righteous but opposes the wicked although you've got to wonder at times when the wicked seem to prosper so much. I mean, who do you think will ultimately benefit from the financial recession or from the Gulf oil mess? But, I digress. Sort of.

Meanwhile back to Elijah and Israel. According to international law, Israel is guilty and should be ashamed. But before we get too self-righteous and snooty about our own moral superiority we should own up to our nation's violent appropriation of Indian lands and our sequestering of Indians on reservations, not to mention our history of

taking oil fields and other natural resources from other lands by military intimidation and dubious legal methods. Yes, we are guilty and should be ashamed.

Of course, we might say, that's the way of the world. All nations are guilty. But surely, we'll admit, some are more guilty than others and deserve if not God's condemnation then the condemnation of the international community.

We belong to the Christian tradition, which inherited from Judaism a keen eye for and powerful witness against social and economic injustice. We mustn't neglect or forsake that heritage—even though many Christians insist that the church should stick to so-called "spiritual matters" only. John Calvin, the 16th century founder of our own Presbyterian / Reformed tradition of Christian faith would disagree. Calvin said in so many words: it's not enough to have Jesus in your heart; we must also have good laws and the wherewithal to enforce them. The Maker of heaven and earth is also the God of justice.

Some of you may be thinking: *man, this sermon is a real bummer. It's summertime, for heaven's sake. Can't he lighten up? Guilt? Who needs that? Isn't feeling guilty pathological?*

No, not really. Actually guilt is a good and healthy thing. *True* guilt (as opposed to *false* guilt) lets us know we've done something wrong and can prompt us to seek forgiveness and make amends. Pity the person or nation who feels none and is never remorseful.

But guilt can be insidious. It can cripple and kill the soul. We tend to either take more than we deserve or not enough. I meet people all the time who are forever blaming other people for everything but never themselves for anything. And I meet people who blame themselves for everything. And therein lies the problem. It's hard to take just the right amount that can lead to repentance and transformation.

The earth and our lives are gifts from the Maker. And what gifts they are! Behold! The world is good. And yet we mess up. We hurt and destroy in so many different ways what God has made.

As the "Brief Statement of Faith" puts it: we deserve God's condemnation, condemnation for smashing, raping, poisoning, and exploiting God's good gifts. Guilt and fear have haunted our humanity for a long time. It's what drove pre-historic people to make bloody sacrifices of precious animals and even children in order to appease the anger of the gods. Sadly that superstition has worked its way into our own tradition and won't go away.

It would take a special revelation for us to learn that God does not condemn us anymore than a mother or father could condemn their own child. That special revelation through the life of Christ became THE good news, the gospel, in a broken and fearful world. As the Gospel of John puts it: *God did not send his Son to condemn the world but that the world might be saved, healed.* You see, we don't need God to condemn us. We condemn ourselves enough. There is far more mercy in God than sin in us as this story from Luke 7 suggests.

Once upon a time Jesus was invited to dinner at the home of Simon. Not the disciple Simon Peter. Oh, no. This was a different Simon. This Simon was perfect. Or so he thought. And nearly everybody else in town thought so, too. Simon was perfect, as good as a person could be.

Jesus came to Simon's house for dinner. They ate on the porch near the street so people could see how important Simon was. While they were eating a woman wandered in off the street and knelt by Jesus. She washed his dusty feet which Simon as the host should have done but hadn't. She quietly wept. The tears fell on Jesus' feet. She dried them with her hair and rubbed costly perfume on them.

Simon smirked. Ah, ha. Jesus had been exposed as a sham. This Jesus could not possibly be God's servant because Simon and everybody else in town knew this woman was a no-good sinner and no self-respecting, law-abiding, righteous person would allow such a woman to touch him. But Jesus had. Jesus had not rebuked or condemned her.

*Jesus! What a phony, thought Simon.*

Jesus looked at Simon and at the smirk on his face. Jesus, you see, could read faces and hearts. *Simon, he said, what's your problem? You are so perfect you don't know how to love anybody. Do you see this woman? Do you see this person made in God's image? Can you see or are you blind? Can't you see that this woman loves extravagantly out of a forgiven heart? She loves because she's a sinner saved by grace and she knows it. And just what do you think you are, Mr. Simon?*

Simon had a nose and eye for sin. He didn't have a heart for love.

When we pretend to be guiltless, righteous or perfect, we wither and die. When we wallow in guilt and shame, we wither and die. When we offer and accept love extravagantly the angels of heaven arise and sing for joy.

Yes, we should seek justice. But we should love kindness even more. And whatever else we do we should walk humbly upon the earth.