

Theme: Where is the justice in the death penalty?

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we promised in our baptismal vows to respect the dignity of every human being: help us treat others as we would be treated and may we work for justice in a world where injustice happens too often, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today's Bible readings remind me of the story of the cookie thief. A woman at the airport waiting to catch her flight bought herself a bag of cookies, settled in a chair in the airport lounge and began to read her book. Suddenly she noticed the man beside her helping himself to her cookies. Not wanting to make a scene, she read on, ate cookies, and watched the clock. As the daring "cookie thief" kept on eating the cookies she got more irritated and said to herself, "If I wasn't so nice, I'd blacken his eye!" She wanted to move the cookies to her other side but she couldn't bring her self to do it. With each cookie she took, he took one too. When only one was left, she wondered what he would do.

Then with a smile on his face and a nervous laugh, he took the last cookie and broke it in half. He offered her half, and he ate the other. She snatched it from him and thought, "Oh brother, this guy has some nerve, and he's also so rude, why, he didn't even show any gratitude!" She sighed with relief when her flight was called. She gathered her belongings and headed for the gate, refusing to look at the ungrateful "thief." She boarded the plane and sank in her seat, reached in her bag to get a book to read and forget about the incident. Next to her book was her bag – of cookies.

The cookies they ate in the lounge were his not hers. She had been the thief not him.

The cookie thief story reminds us, as we see in today's Bible readings, that it often happens that the one pointing the accusing finger turns out to be the guilty one, that the complainant sometimes turns out to be the offending party. In the cookie story, the woman believed she was such a wonderful person to put up with the rudeness and ingratitude of the man sitting beside her. In the end she discovered that she was the rude and ungrateful one and the man was wonderfully friendly.

In the gospel the Pharisee thinks he is the righteous one who is worthy to be in the company of Jesus and that the woman was the sinful one unworthy to be seen with Jesus. In the end Jesus showed each of them where they really belonged and the woman was seen as the one who was righteous and more deserving of the company of Jesus than the self-righteous Pharisee. In the Old Testament reading, Naboth is falsely accused and loses his life.

Before I dig into the Old Testament reading, it is important to set the geography. Jezreel is a valley that begins from the highlands southwest of the Sea of Galilee and runs to the sea. It is a very fertile valley and is still a major agricultural area. King Ahab's capital city is Samaria. He is married to a gentile, named Jezebel. She has enticed Ahab to worship her gods. She also imported her own prophets devoted to pagan gods.

Now the scene is set. Naboth is likely a wealthy vineyard owner. Ahab likely had to buy his wine from Naboth. Naboth's vineyard was next to the royal palace. Ahab wants to convert the vineyard into produce production. The king does offer Naboth a fair deal.

Naboth does not want to give up good productive soil, which has been in his family a long time, for another vineyard. His land was given to Naboth's family by God and Naboth does not believe that it is his to sell to the king. Naboth believes he has the power to stand up to the king.

Ahab went home and pouted. Kings are accustomed to getting their way. Jezebel asked why Ahab was pouting and he told her the story of his attempt to buy Naboth's vineyard. Jezebel basically told Ahab that he is the king and he can do whatever he wants and to stop acting like a baby. She assures the king that she will get the vineyard for him.

Jezebel then sent letters to the magistrates to frame Naboth for capital offenses that would result in Naboth's execution. They did as Jezebel commanded, since she used the king's seal on the documents. They stoned Naboth to death.

Jezebel then told Ahab that Naboth was dead and that he can have Naboth's vineyard. This was too great an injustice to escape God's attention. God looked up the great prophet Elijah. Elijah is to go to Samaria and tell Ahab

that he killed Naboth and that Ahab's blood will be licked up by dogs on the very spot that Naboth died.

When Elijah shows up, Ahab recognizes his enemy. Though Elijah does not deny the enemy charge, Ahab's enemy is really God, not God's messenger. It is Elijah's task to remind Ahab of all the things Ahab does that God hates. Ahab's actions are evil.

Ahab worships pagan Gods. Ahab allows Jezebel to worship her gods and she encourages the people of Israel to do likewise. She builds religious sites in Israel to her gods with the king's permission. Ahab disobeyed God in how to deal with the king of the Arameans. In God's eyes, Ahab is evil. Elijah tells Ahab that everyone in his household will die, slave and free – doesn't matter.

When Ahab went to the vineyard, did he find peace, serenity, satisfaction, justice, or closure? No, he found Elijah. The death penalty offered no solace. It only offered grief.

What comes next that we didn't hear was the horrible deaths that Ahab's children will die and an especially horrible death for Jezebel. Ahab was distraught after hearing Elijah's words. Ahab repented and God forgave him. Ahab was spared a horrible death, but not the rest of his family. Naboth's family did not get the vineyard back. Ahab and the cookie lady could never apologize.

Naboth is tried, convicted, and given the death penalty. God intervenes because Naboth's execution was not just. The witnesses lied on the stand. The government set him up and the government put him to death.

This thing is not unusual to the Old Testament. I think something similar happened to another person from the Galilee region some 800 years later in the New Testament. In that case, the government chose crucifixion. Unlike Naboth, Jesus didn't stay dead. Only one of the Apostles died of natural causes. The death penalty was used often in ancient times.

In the developed world, the United States is alone in using government executions. Some states are reviewing this form of punishment and are finding it wanting. It is expensive. It costs more to execute someone than to

incarcerate them for the rest of their natural lives. And sometimes people lie on witness stands like they did to Naboth. And sometimes innocent people are executed by the state. It makes an apology rather mean and meaningless.

In the United States if you have some wealth, you will not be executed for murder. O. J. Simpson is the famous example of this. If you are poor, you will be executed for murder. This means that a disproportional number of people of color are executed in this country.

Late Supreme Court Justice William Brennan, Jr. said, “Perhaps the bleakest fact of all is that the death penalty is imposed not only in a freakish and discriminatory manner, but also in some cases upon defendants who are actually innocent.” How many innocent people need to be executed before we say enough is enough? Should it not be one? Was Israel a better place after Naboth’s execution?

James Hopkins writes, “Once a human life has been taken, there is a thundering finality that no words can remove. The story ends with Elijah and Ahab in the garden, pondering God’s words, aware that nothing can make things right. Is there some wisdom in this ancient tale for us?”

We now pray: Gracious God and giver of all good gifts, give us the gift of compassionate justice where the exercise of this gift yields appropriate consequences that do not leave us guilty of injustices that can never have atonement, through Jesus Christ our Lord who atoned for our sins once and for all. Amen.

Text: **1 Kings 21:1–21** (NRSV)

21 Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. ² And Ahab said to Naboth, “Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money.” ³ But Naboth said to Ahab, “The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.” ⁴ Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, “I will not give you my ancestral inheritance.” He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.

⁵ His wife Jezebel came to him and said, “Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?” ⁶ He said to her, “Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, ‘Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard for it’; but he answered, ‘I will not give you my vineyard.’” ⁷ His wife Jezebel said to him,

“Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.”

⁸ So she wrote letters in Ahab’s name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city. ⁹ She wrote in the letters, “Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; ¹⁰ seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, ‘You have cursed God and the king.’ Then take him out, and stone him to death.”

¹¹ The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. Just as it was written in the letters that she had sent to them, ¹² they proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the assembly. ¹³ The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite him; and the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, “Naboth cursed God and the king.” So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death. ¹⁴ Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, “Naboth has been stoned; he is dead.”

¹⁵ As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, “Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead.” ¹⁶ As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

¹⁷ Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: ¹⁸ Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules^a in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. ¹⁹ You shall say to him, “Thus says the LORD: Have you killed, and also taken possession?” You shall say to him, “Thus says the LORD: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.”

²⁰ Ahab said to Elijah, “Have you found me, O my enemy?” He answered, “I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, ²¹ I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel; ¹

^a Heb *who is*

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (1 Kings 21:1–21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.