

WHEN THE ENEMY FINDS YOU

FIRST KINGS 21:1-21a

June 13, 2010

University Church of Chicago

Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

One of my favorite writer/philosophers, Kathryn Schulz has written a book, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*. As Dwight Garner remarked, It is not a biography of Alan Greenspan, nor is it an account of the search for Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. Ms. Schulz notes how many of our beliefs are accidents of fate, hinging on things like our place of birth. "We get things wrong," she writes, "because we have an enduring confidence in our own minds; and we face up to that wrongness in the faith that, having learned something, we will get it right next time."

There are three stages, she says, of our disbelief at other people's ideas when they differ from our own. Pay attention, good friends, because these stages occur frequently in congregations. We first assume the other person is ignorant, then we determine that he or she is an idiot, and finally we come to believe that they are evil. We adore being right, and we blithely assume that we nearly always are. And even when we are wrong, it feels like being right.

That is the story of King Ahab and his evil queen Jezebel as told in today's lection from the Hebrew Bible. In a carefully crafted story, Elijah the prophet confronts King Ahab about his complicity in the murder of Naboth in order to acquire Naboth's vineyard. The first scene in the story (vv. 1-4) presents the initial interaction between Ahab and Naboth. Naboth had a vineyard in Jezreel beside King Ahab's palace. The king makes what on its surface seems a reasonable offer: if Naboth will give him the vineyard, which the king wants to use as a "vegetable garden," the king will trade Naboth for a better vineyard or he will pay him the vineyard's value. Naboth refuses the offer in the form of an oath: "God forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance" (v.3). Ahab then returns home and takes to his bed, sulking and depressed (v.4).

The second scene is a dialogue between Jezebel and Ahab. She asks him why he is too depressed to eat (v.5), and he answers by repeating his conversation with Naboth (v.6). Jezebel challenges him, "Do you now govern Israel?" It's either a challenge or sarcasm—I opt for the latter interpretation. Then she tells him in effect to get up and shake it off. But "I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

Scene three (vv. 8-14) describes Jezebel's plot against Naboth. She writes letters using Ahab's royal authority and sends them to the ruling elite of the city (v.8). Her instructions are that they proclaim a fast, seat Naboth in the place of honor, have two "scoundrels" bring a trumped-up charge against him, then take him out and stone him to death (vv. 9-10).

The final scene (vv. 15-16) depicts another interaction between Jezebel and Ahab. She says, "Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth...which he refused to give you for money, for Naboth is...dead." So Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard...to take possession of it."

But then the word of God came to Elijah the Tishbite: "Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel. He is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. 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.'"

Ahab responds to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" Elijah responds, "I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to what is evil in the sight of God, I will bring disaster on you" (vv 20-21).

It is a cautionary tale about acts of oppression against those over whom any person or government or corporation has power. The news is full of situations around the world today where that warning is tragically relevant: how about British Petroleum and Dick Cheney's Halliburton (which has successfully avoided both blame and bad publicity) and the disaster that threatens the life of the Gulf of Mexico and its surrounding states?

The drilling operation in the Gulf of Mexico was supposed to represent some of the most advanced technology on the planet. It was so advanced that BP and other big oil companies were exempted in 2008 from filing a plan on how they would clean up a major spill. They had no fire department because, well, there would never be a fire, silly.

Like the banks and AIG, the reasoning went: BP was too big to fail. And like Exxon, you can bet your last dollar that BP will fight to the death against any lawsuits. Exxon spent nearly two decades trying to game a legal system that should have brought them to judgment. In the end Exxon prevailed. The Bush era Supreme Court of John Roberts ruled for Big Oil. The original jury award of five billion dollars ended up being around \$500 million—a few days earning for Exxon, which in 2008 reported the largest annual profit for an American company in history.

We live in a climate of fear, anxiety and depression. As Kierkegaard points out, we experience fear in the face of something definite, something we know or can see, whereas we experience anxiety about possibility, about something that is not yet a thing—it is no thing—it is nothing. "Anxiety and nothing always correspond to each other."

Anxiety, Kierkegaard says, "may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy." The reason is as much what we perceive as what exists. "Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom," which emerges when we try to imagine the possibilities that lie ahead. "Freedom succumbs to this dizziness."

That's what is going on in our nation with the growth of the Tea Party people, the anger about health care reform and financial reform and the mounting deficits.

Or in our own city, where former detective lieutenant John Burge and his cohorts who tortured hundreds of men into confessing to crimes they did not commit, many of whom are still in prison. And

do you remember the name of the Cook County States Attorney who would not bring Burge and his friends to trial? Richard M. Daley, our Mayor for Life. And do you know how many millions of our tax dollars have been spent by the City of Chicago to defend Burge?

I was importuned by a well-meaning organizer for the Hotel Workers Union to participate in a gathering of Chicago religious leaders to walk into McCormick Place last Wednesday for the first-ever shareholders' meeting of the Hyatt Corporation. First-ever because the Pritzker family made 908 million dollars last year when the corporation went public. The hotel workers have been negotiating without a contract with Hyatt for two years while Hyatt has been cutting benefits and health care for their employees—most of whom are Latino immigrants. I had previously gone with a group of pastors to talk with Hyatt management. They were cordial, benign, nice people who surrendered no ground in their efforts to oust the union.

While we were talking with them, the Hyatt management in Boston was firing 104 hotel workers who had unwittingly (because they were lied to) trained their replacements. So, I knew that last Wednesday's appearance at McCormick Place would make the pastors feel good, they would get to meet a manager who would speak in platitudes and nothing would happen.

I said to the organizer, "What we need to do is hound Penny Pritzker, who is President Obama's big supporter and fund-raiser and who is anti-union to her very core. We need to show up at every Democratic Party fund-raiser and demand that she live up to what the party professes. Better yet, why don't we break into the shareholders' meeting and launch a protest?" All to no avail. The unions are as chicken-hearted as management. I will no longer lend my body to futile causes. Workers of the world, unite!

Here's the hard truth we do not want to face: you and I are Ahabs who are often passively complicit in the evil perpetrated by the Jezebels of the world. But God stands against all systems that commodify and destroy the lives of human beings. Ahab is like rich people everywhere who live by Mae West's dictum that "too much of a good thing is never enough."

The God of the Bible is not the God we worship in liberal, mainline churches. Our God is a namby-pamby deity who loves us, teaches us to think positively and allows us to mask our anger with piety, our greed with a casual and occasional gift to the church when it is in need, our covetousness with outrageous shopping sprees and lush vacation trips. The God of the Bible brings down those who act unjustly. Along with Isaiah 5:8 and Micah 2:2 this story of Ahab and Jezebel is a reminder that offenses against the heritage of the defenseless are offenses against God—not just abstract principles of economic justice.

We who hear this story must ask ourselves: who are the Ahabs and Jezebels? Who are the Naboths? What is the shape of the conspiracy this time? Who is being paid to make accusations that will destroy lives this time?

After I graduated from high school and went away to college, my parents moved to another town—without telling me. (That they forgot to inform their oldest son that they would not be home when he

returned for the holidays says something about our family's "solidarity.") But I tracked them down. They had moved to an oil and ranching town, Bristow, Oklahoma. And, as always, my Mom took over the life of the Methodist Church in that town. Her co-conspirator was the richest woman in town, a devout and pious Christian whose husband ran the town from his mansion on the highest hill in town.

Robert E. Lee Jones had grown fabulously wealthy as an oil wildcatter during the Oklahoma oil boom days. He was known as a ruthless entrepreneur who ran over anybody who got in his way. He swaggered through the Mayo Hotel's lobby in Tulsa, he supported any Republican candidate for political office and he disdained his wife's religiosity. Until one day a disgruntled competitor who had been robbed by REL Jones tried to kill him.

Mr. Jones retreated to his mansion which was surrounded by hundreds of Angus cattle, show horses and peacocks. He never left his ranch again, and when he went outdoors he carried a pistol. He sat in splendor and misery in the two-story library he had affixed to the mansion, reading his books and talking to his spies who told him everything of importance that was going on downtown.

When his wife learned of my interest in books and reading, she invited me to dinner in their home. I was one of the very few who were allowed up the hill, and Mr. Jones and I would spend hours arguing about politics, philosophy, religion and women. His intelligence and breath of knowledge were astounding. But so was his misery.

He was an Ahab if ever there was one in Bristow, Oklahoma. He coveted land and oil and money with boundless greed. His motto was, "I don't want to own all the land—just everything that adjoins my property." I would like to tell you that he got his comeuppance, but that would be a lie. REL Jones died with honor and approval in Bristow, and the Methodist pastor—one of my mentors and dear friends—was forced to say nice things about him at his funeral. Prophecy was defeated by greed.

Will Campbell, who has a fine distaste for the official church, likes to remind us that "Jesus Christ was not a churchman." Neither was Elijah a devout and compliant Israelite. He did not want to be a prophet. He was called. He battled the prophets of Baal, then fled Jezebel's wrath. He argued with God and wondered why God would not speak in the earthquake, wind and fire—only to hear God speak in a still, small voice, telling him time and again to do something he did not want to do. Like confronting Ahab, who rightly calls him the "enemy."

But God is the real enemy. God is the one who brings judgment on Ahab. God speaks through the tormented prophet, God's servant Elijah.

Here in Hyde Park we engage in "intellectual volleyball." It is our specialty—the kind that says, "Let's bat this one around." We read and discuss and engage in mind games, discussion that does not lead to and guide our personal struggles, self-surrender and religious experience.

Alan Paton has lamented that kind of evasion with the opening lines of his novel *Too Late the Phalarope*. "Perhaps I could have saved him with only a word, two words, out of my mouth. Perhaps I could have saved us all. But I never spoke them...For he spoke hard and bitter words to me, and shut the

door of his soul on me, and I withdrew. But I should have hammered on it, I should have broken it down with my naked hands, I should have cried out there not ceasing, for behind it was a man in danger, the bravest and gentlest of us all.”

There is no place in the church for brutality that masquerades as frankness. There is such a thing as knowledge that destroys. But, as Paton indicates, there is also knowledge for salvation, and we must not withhold it from one another just because it’s painful. Jesus told people the truth—but always with love. Which is to say, dear sisters and brothers, if we are Christian, we shall be both kind and candid, and help one another change.