

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Palisades, New York
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Gardens and Anointings
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There is something in teaching called teacher-pleasing behaviors. It is a characteristic, really more of a psychological construct that acknowledges the importance in motivating children relying on their innate desire to please.

Most kids, for a good part of their early educational years, will do things like study or behave just to get the teacher's positive reinforcement. Those of you parents know this, especially when suggesting to a youngster that they do something differently than the teacher suggests! Usually the response is, "No! Ms. Or Mr. So and So says to do it this way!" It's all part of hearing, "Good job or well done" when the assignment is ultimately presented.

It is a good thing, and as children grow and move through adolescence, the reasons for doing these things hopefully become more intrinsic and less subject to the whims of praise. That's not to say that as adults we no longer do things to please people. However, we have established some limits, our own gyroscopes, so to speak, that guide us, whether informed by faith, religion, philosophy, experience – or more likely a combination of all those things and more.

There are adults, though, who have trouble with this need to please, even when it means doing things that are unhealthy for their own psyches: people pleasers, we sometimes call them. It's a tough habit to break, especially when a relationship is based on one person being relied upon for being pleased! In this morning's story about Ahab, Jezebel, Naboth, and Elijah – we meet a healthy and secure individual named Naboth. The king wants Naboth's property; Naboth knows it is property he holds in trust for all his ancestors and those who would follow.

Although he is a peasant, he refuses the king's request – and the king, acknowledging his right to do so, returns home pouting and sullen.

The story could have ended there, but what fun or instructive value might that have ha?

Enter: the dynamic of dominance and power. For a moment, we have a king and a peasant on equal terms based on a tradition they might have shared, or at least respected. Ah, but now Jezebel gets involved.

Jezebel, queen of ancient Israel, Phoenician Princess and daughter of King Ithobaal I. She married Ahab and turned him away from the God of the Israelites and towards the worship of her god, Baal. Ahab, intent on pleasing his bride goes along with her desire to open temples of Baal in Israel. Between his pleasing behaviors and Jezebel's determination to get what she wants - Ahab subjects Israel to tyranny.

It's clear in this passage that the whimpish Ahab is an embarrassment to Jezebel. "Aren't you the ruler of Israel?" How can you allow your power to be threatened by a peasant, how can you allow someone, one of your subjects, not do what pleases you?! "You should be ashamed of yourself!" she must have though or maybe even said!

Incensed, she exerts her husband's authority and has Naboth brought up on false charges and stoned. Jezebel takes the land in the name of the king, she not only takes the land from Naboth, but from his ancestors and descendants as well.

Some of this explains the Prophet Elijah's response to Ahab – a threat that goes beyond what God told Elijah to say. The part about Jezebel being thrown to the dogs were not God's words, but clearly showed how Elijah felt to this king and his queen. Elijah was no fan of Jezebel. Elijah saw her turning the king and the kingdom from God, ignoring Jewish tradition, and leading the kingdom toward Baal and paganism.

But why a story around a garden to make the point of the text? Whether is a literary device to weave the allegory or whether it is a reference to how far humanity has fallen since that first Garden of Eve, the willingness of those commanded by a king or others to falsely accuse innocent people to achieve objectives – says something about pleasing gone awry. Does it matter whether such obedience emerges from misguided allegiance, fear, or simply the hope of gaining gain a bit of the power for one's self by, well, *sucking up*?

It had to be something like that. The scoundrels knew they were wrong. The accusations they made and the end result of Ahab's were simply about keeping the royals happy. So what if the price was a peasant Jew.

So what, indeed.

The sense of being unwilling to blindly follow came through this morning's readings for me. Ahab, Jezebel, and Elijah are a part of a much broader narrative, but this one tale made me think of how often there have been powerful

forces in the Presbyterian church, for example, that went all out to try and persuade me to be less out, more quiet, less visibly gay – so that I wouldn't upset others and make things *difficult*. There were and still are those who will use the weapon of maligning gay people, falsely accusing them in any number of ways, to have them case out from the fasting table, if not literally stoned.

One of the challenges I face in the church as an openly gay ordained minister called by you – one of the challenges is to be on guard against being co-opted by the church; lulled into the institution in such a way that the reason I believe I am here, to work vocally and otherwise for change for LGBT people – that that voice gets silenced by being absorbed into the busy life of a minister with all the wonderful service and blessing of this work.

Even for Palisades, when the PNC calls your next minister, it will be interesting if the next chosen spiritual leader for the congregation is LGBT, in an interracial marriage, divorced with a partner, or other G-6 offenses, and, if vocal about these things, guidance will be offered to recommend a less, “uh, interesting, choice.” And, if so, I know, that the tradition of this church, built on those who were here before and those who will follow, those here who hold this church in trust for generations – will do the right thing.

As with Naboth or any adult, certain choices cannot be made simply to please others, and calling the next minister – or my responding to my next call – are such things. God fills in the gaps, the God that talks to us still in these days of ours.

And criticism, heck, even Jesus got criticized for those he entered into ministry with, and he did enter into ministry with some pretty interesting people. He obviously had friends who were Pharisees, some genuine I am sure – others trying to get close to the power, such as the Pharisee in this morning's story who is disappointed by Jesus's associating with the sinner, not so much because she was a prostitute, but because the Pharisee had invited Jesus into the house because he thought Jesus was a prophet. Having a prophet to dinner was a big deal!

For the Pharisee, the fact that Jesus was unable to discern the woman's true nature indicated that he was not prophet at all. So, now because he believed Jesus was not who he thought him to be, he criticized him for being who he was.

See, that's the danger of leaders being in the closet or double-speak or what have you. You never really know who you are speaking with, and you inadvertently continue the ruse and in some cases the violence of being quiet to please others, or at least not make them uncomfortable. Things don't improve in that place. It's a myth to think they do, at least for me.

And that's why places like this are so important. There is a truth here that is centered in the compassion and generosity of our beliefs – with a healthy honesty that gets beyond the possessions of a garden or the associations with power. We are known by our love as followers of Jesus and by our willingness to struggle to accept others without judgment.

And in so doing, we are constantly amazed at what emerges. We discover in people that who they truly are is as beautiful as any flower in any garden, and that it is their true selves that anoints us with blessings and generosity. This ministry of serving others, is simply woven into the joy of living.

As we remembered our teachers this morning, I know these are the lesson the children have learned here – not just from Church School, but from all of you. As a community, we are part of the raising of children into healthy, secure, thinking, faithful young men and women, not following in goose-step fashion, but following with their heart and their understanding that God speaks with them today, through others, just as Jesus did with those he embraced from all walks of life.

This is a very special congregation and once more, this weekend, has shown just how much this is true.

God bless you all.