

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 11  
The Reverend John H. Brock

Saturday, June 12, 2010  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

1 Kings 21:1–21a; Luke 7:36–8:3

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

1870 – I know, none of us were around then, that’s okay. 1870 was the year of the first Vatican Council. It was at that first Vatican Council that one of the things that the Roman Catholic Church passed was the dogma about Papal infallibility. Now, the best that I can understand about Papal infallibility – and I’m not trying to get on an anti-Roman Catholic soap box here, that’s not at all what I mean here – the best that I can understand about Papal infallibility is an idea or a theological understanding or a dogma that is considered to be infallible, that is it cannot be changed and is always right **\*if\*** the Pope at the time receives a divine revelation directly from the Lord God.

There was a Roman Catholic in England whose name was John Acton. He became a baron and went by the title Lord Acton. He did not agree with this concept of Papal infallibility, even though he was a very devout Roman Catholic. He became a rather outspoken critic of the Papal infallibility, and continued to be an outspoken critic until the church hierarchy let it be known that they would no longer tolerate any dissent. And so, even though he was publishing his own periodical, he stopped that, but he found other outlets in order to get his views across.

In one of these other outlets, specifically in a letter he wrote to Mandel Creighton, who was a supporter of Papal infallibility, he wrote the line for which he is probably most well known - Although I am going to tend to guess that most of you are like me and had no idea who had first said this line. Lord Acton wrote:

*"I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men with a favorable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption, it is the other way against the holders of power, increasing as the power increases. Historic responsibility has to make up for the want of legal responsibility. Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority: still more when you superadd the tendency or certainty of corruption by full authority. There is no worse heresy than the fact that the office sanctifies the holder of it."*

Since I heard many of you quote that along with me obviously you’ve heard it, or at least some version of it. Too often, it seems, that we do come across examples of Lord Acton’s famous line. Recently I’ve been hearing about the trial of Rod Blagojevich, former governor of Illinois who apparently tried to use his position for his own personal gain. We have recently lived through the times when there were CEOs who felt that their companies were “too big to fail.” Or as we had in our reading tonight, we hear about King Ahab.

Our story tonight is almost one that you can do a Hollywood blockbuster movie out of. We have the most politically powerful man in the northern kingdom of Israel (That's the bigger of the two kingdoms, Judah being the geographically smaller sought kingdom). He is in Jezreel, which is where his *second* palace is. The primary capital of Israel is in the city of Samaria. He's got everything that he needs, not necessarily everything that he wants. What Ahab does want is a vegetable garden. Is that such a bad thing? A vegetable garden? I love vegetables. I'd love to have a vegetable garden. Ahab wants a vegetable garden. What's the big deal there?

Well, the big deal is that he wants a specific plot of land for his vegetable garden. This plot of land that is directly adjacent to the palace that happens to belong to a man named Naboth. It has been in Naboth's family for generations. It has been handed down to Naboth's family through the division of the land when they first came to the country. The Lord God speaks to Naboth and tells him that under no circumstances should he sell his field to King Ahab, even though Ahab promised him that he would give him a better plot of land for his vineyard or even compensate him just fine financially.

Ahab does not react very positively to this news. As a matter of fact, what does he do? He goes to his bedroom and he pouts, whereupon his mother, I mean Queen Jezebel, comes in and treats him exactly like the child that he is acting. Then she sends out a letter to the mayor and the town council. They in turn do what the Queen has ordered them to do. They bring Naboth up in front of the township council. They get a couple of ringers to raise these false charges against Naboth; they use Naboth's words against him. He said, "The Lord forbids that I should give you my ancestral inheritance." They said it was the equivalent of blasphemy. Those in charge, in turn, get the crowd to turn against Naboth, giving him a death sentence which they carry out with deadly accuracy. When Jezebel is informed of Naboth's death, she in turn goes and tells her husband. "Quit acting like a baby. Get up – you got your vegetable garden."

Why is it that so often it seems that even though we have what we need, we want more? Those in positions of power use it for their own gain. I've already said Rod Blagojevich, we could go back in history and say Richard Nixon; we've seen it in corporate business; we can look at what's happening in the Gulf right now with BP Oil. We've seen it unfortunately in the church as well; the abuse of children, and the embezzlement of funds. Maybe something's happened in your own life. Maybe someone you know and trust has actively let you down. Maybe a boss, a teacher, or a store manager took advantage of you to their own personal gain. We struggle with how to deal with such abuse.

There are those who would say, "Oh well, it's all in God's hand, and you simply have to accept the situation." There have been folks throughout history who have sought to keep people in their place by telling them they will be rewarded in heaven, or that person will be punished when they die, so you don't need to do anything right now. Leave everything as it is. Keep the status quo. In other words, Jezebel killed Naboth, Ahab takes the vineyard, but don't bother doing anything to

the King and Queen. First of all, they are the King and Queen and well, you know, it's okay. They have their reasons.

Elijah, though, does not let them off the hook. He confronts them. He holds them accountable. Just like we are accountable. I am accountable. I'm accountable for what I do. I am accountable for what I say. I am accountable no matter if I'm a well-known politician, or an associate pastor, or a lawyer, or a doctor, or a borderline poverty person. I am accountable and responsible for what I say and do. I am accountable and responsible to treat others fairly and *not* for my own personal gain.

I heard an interesting news item on WITF radio the other morning. It seems that there are some law enforcement officials from all over the state who have been speaking to the legislature and petitioning Governor Rendell about the recent budget cuts. Law enforcement statewide, like most branches, have experienced reductions in their expenses. But as I listened to the story I realized that something different was going on here, because these law enforcement officials were not seeking to restore or even increase their own budget line. Rather, they were asking that the budget for Head Start and other early education programs be restored at least to their previous amounts. They were asking for the restoration of these funds because they know first-hand that opportunity for education at a young age has a direct and positive affect on those children, especially in lower economic status, which in turn affects years down the road how full our prisons are. The story was an example of people in positions of authority *acting responsibly*. Not letting their position of power turn them to their own gain. They were being accountable to the people that they in turn serve.

I am accountable to myself, to my family, to you my congregation, to those who are around me, and most definitely I am accountable to God. Together, all of us are accountable to each other and to our Lord. We are accountable regardless if we are in a position of power or not. As believers, we are called to live out our faith responsibly and accountably; not to be abusive, not to seek our own gain, but to seek to bring the Gospel of Christ to all whom we meet.

Amen.