



Sermons from

FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
Ann Arbor | Michigan

“MAKING ENEMIES”

The Rev. Evans McGowan

June 23, 2013

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kings 21:1b-5, 8-11a

Galatians 2:15-21

Growing up in Austin, Texas, I had a childhood hero like many of the boys my age. My hero was the stuff of legend. A skilled outdoorsman who wrestled bears, he was the “King of the Wild Frontier” who fought bravely to his death at the Alamo. Before he was my number one man from Tennessee, however, Davy Crockett served in the US House of Representatives, riding the coattails of newly elected President Andrew Jackson. Before too long he had to make a difficult decision: whether or not to join the President in support of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Many Americans strongly supported it, especially after gold was discovered on the Cherokee land. Davy Crockett felt the act morally wrong and voted against the bill, making enemies in the process, the President included, and soon after lost his seat in the House. The act would become law and lead to the forcible removal of the five remaining so-called “civilized tribes” east of the Mississippi – The Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee-Creek, and Seminole. The infamous “Trail of Tears” refers to the forced military march over hundreds of miles of these Native American men, women and children, with nearly half of them dying on the journey due to extreme conditions and inadequate food and shelter. It was not a shining moment for our nation or our laws.

It’s been written, “There will always be isolated lawbreakers in high places; what destroys morale below is the systematic corner-cutting, the rule-bending, the self-dealing. [...] Once the social contract is shredded, once the deal is off, only suckers still play by the rules.” These words might describe the broken treaties and genocide of the Native Americans, but were written recently by George Packer, whose book *The Unwinding* tells the tale of the last three decades of decline in America. When laws are contorted to serve

individual purposes, not only the victims but **everyone** suffers from the resulting insecurity and injustice. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

If you are like me, you may be wrestling with the laws of this land. We wonder if the government is abusing its power to gather intelligence, if our military is breaking international law with drone strikes, and if our leaders have lost their moral compass in force-feeding men held indefinitely without charge. In a speech last week, President Obama said, “Imagine a future ten years from now or twenty years from now, when the United States of America is still holding people who have been charged with no crime on a piece of land that is not part of our country.” We don’t have to imagine, Mr. President. It’s already been happening for years.

As we look to Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform, knowing full well this is the least productive Congress in history with only 13 laws passed to date, we await the Supreme Court decision concerning the legality of same-sex marriage.

Amidst these complex legal and human rights issues, we need laws that treat everyone equally and fairly. Yet good laws are not enough. We need leaders who will respect the rule of law and not twist the laws of the land to claim their own piece of the pie. Our government goes after whistleblowers, hackers and medical marijuana dealers, while not a single investment banker has gone to jail for his part in crashing the economy not five years ago. We need citizens who nonviolently resist injustice and stand with those whose rights are being trampled under the law. Unfortunately, this morning in our biblical passage we see that the abuse of power runs deep throughout history.

King Ahab is off in his winter palace, away from the capital in Samaria. That means he already has two palaces when he eyes the adjacent estate of Naboth. The king not only wants Naboth’s vineyard but also to turn it into a vegetable garden. That may sound innocent to our ears, but to a Hebrew, vegetable gardens would remind them of slavery and the irrigation

systems of Egypt in contrast to the vineyards God describes in the promised land. The king wants to “take possession” of the land, using the same Hebrew verb that God orders the Israelites to “take possession” of the land of Canaan. In effect, the king is usurping the place of God, letting his desires for his neighbor’s land outweigh any desire he has for the Lord.

Naboth refuses his king: to give up his ancestral land would be to go against God, for this is God’s land, God’s gift to him, and he is but a steward of the gift. Like the Native Americans, Naboth knows this land is not his to give away.

Somewhat ironically, he is accused of going against God *and* the king in a trumped up trial. Why do the elders and nobles go along with this clearly deceitful plan? Perhaps they are beholden to the king’s power, or fear losing their wealth tied to his power. As Edmund Burke once remarked, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” And here, good men not only do nothing but are complicit in murder. Later we learn that Naboth’s sons are also killed (2 Kings 9:26). The abuse of power at the top has a chilling, trickle-down effect.

The king gets what he wants but not without blood on his hands. Nothing can take place without God seeing and knowing. The question is, are the people of God watching and speaking out for the victims of violence? Elijah, the prophet who had gone into hiding due to threats on his life (1 Kings 19:1-3), returns to risk his life on behalf of the dead. I imagine the king there in the vineyard senses the prophet’s presence before he says, “Have you found me, O my enemy?” As God’s representative, Elijah answers, “I have found you.” Elijah, speaking for God, stands on the blood-soaked land, demanding justice for the victims of greed. And justice is rendered. Ahab’s reign will soon come to an end, and he and his family come to an ignoble end. The wicked are paid in kind for their crimes.

Yet does this settle the matter? Is this as good as it gets, to apply the law equally and ensure all are punished according to their crime? What about when laws are unjust? What if in bringing out enemies to justice we invade privacy rights or worse, kill innocents in the process? With drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and who knows where else killing alleged

terrorists along with their friends, family, even children... Are we willing to live with the blood of innocents on our hands? Isn't there another way?

When we kill an enemy, we make more enemies. The people who loved that person we killed, the friends and family of our enemy, now become our enemy. Unless they take the radical steps of forgiveness, unless they follow the path laid out by Jesus, then they too will come back at us with fire in their breath and hate in their hearts.

Equitable laws are important. We should value and advocate for justice; to hold those in power accountable for their actions, whether they be bankers who knowingly fixed rates to their advantage at the expense of everyone else, or they are leaders who knowingly lied in congressional hearings. The powerful and the meek should be equal in the eyes of the law. But the law will not save us.

In writing to the Galatians, Paul reminds them and us that we are not justified by works of the law but rather faith in Christ. Paul urges followers of Christ to *follow* Christ, beyond bondage to the law and into the freedom of faith in Christ. Our salvation is not found in our own hands, in whether or not we obey the law. Our salvation is found in the gift of Christ, the gift of incarnate love. God as love now dwells within us and is reflected in our relationships when we share God's love and experience the gift of love from others.

Indeed, later in Galatians Paul summarizes the law, to love thy neighbor as thyself (Gal. 5:14), echoing the words of Christ. As others have said, justice is "learning to live with others in mind" (The Moral of the Story, Paul Wadell, p. 107). The law is and always has been a vehicle to point us toward loving one another. But if we rely on our own gas tank, we'll never get to the promised land of peace and justice. Good laws make it easier to love one another and unite a nation. Yet there will always be laws that are unjust and people who fall short. This is why as followers of Christ we work for good laws while all the time living in the Spirit of God's love.

We may make enemies in our endeavors for justice. Davy Crockett made enemies when he stood up against the Indian Removal Act. Naboth made enemies when he refused to sell his vineyard. We may make enemies when we speak out for those not being fairly treated under the law. But we should never stop loving our enemies. May we reflect God's love so that love transforms hate, courage overcomes fear, and abounding hope not bombs are spread throughout the world.

When Paul says, I have been crucified in Christ, he uses the perfect tense. He is saying I have been and will continue to *be* crucified with Christ, sacrificing anything that isn't love in me and replacing it with the love incarnate in the universe since before the dawn of time. My life may not endure but love endures for God is love, and God endures. Let us go above and beyond the law, loving freely that all would know the grace of God and be equal in love if not always equal under the law.

We gather on the Lord's day and on the Lord's land to remind ourselves that God loves us and everyone through and through, and when we really believe that, when we really take that to heart, then we won't need to worry about obeying laws or killing or being killed. We will know a deeper truth: that we have already died; that love has already arrived. We are a new creation in Christ's love, continually creating new incarnations as learn to grow, to love and to serve. Let us venture forth to lead lives of love.

Hallelujah, Amen.

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