

“The summer of our discontent”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
June 12, 2016

Rev. Patrick David Heery

Last year, on Black Friday weekend, 151 million people went shopping, determined to get for themselves and their loved ones their greatest desires: new iPhones and high definition TVs, Nike shoes and shirts by Ralph Lauren, Blu-Ray DVDs and Xbox video games.

One of my favorite stories from Black Friday comes from a Johnny Rockets restaurant manager.

The restaurant doesn't open early like the rest of the stores in the mall because it doesn't serve breakfast. So it's just him and another employee, early in the morning, setting chairs out, when they hear this loud rattling and shouting. A crowd of people is pressing against the front doors, banging on the glass. They are screaming for food with such force that you'd think you had wandered onto the set of the zombie-apocalypse TV show *The Walking Dead*.

He points them toward the food court and tells them that they don't serve breakfast. Suddenly, a woman shoots forward and spits at him, shouting, “I know you have bacon!”

Now, I like bacon. I might even say I love bacon. Still, I feel this may have been an overreaction.

Whether it's bacon or the newest tablet, we as a people want more. More things. More entertainment. More conveniences. More technology. We're told that the more we have, the happier we'll be.

Ahab, in our reading from 1 Kings, wants more too. He wants Naboth's vineyard. He has all the power and wealth in the world; he lives in a palace. But it still isn't enough.

Ahab admittedly is prepared to be generous. He offers to pay Naboth the full amount or even to give Naboth a bigger and better vineyard. So imagine his surprise when Naboth says no. Ahab is the king, and in his world, everything is for sale. Naboth, however, insists that this property is not his to sell; it was a gift from God to his ancestors.

So, Ahab's wife, Jezebel, conspires to have Naboth killed. And when the deed is done, Ahab gets what he wanted. He gets more.

Now we may like to think of ourselves as Naboth or Elijah in this story. In fact, I *know* that sometimes we are the ones who stand against injustice and commercialism, even when it costs us dearly. We're the people who take the side of the poor, who worship God and tithe. Perhaps some of us, like Naboth, don't have much power at work or in our families, and we too know what it's like to be manipulated and exploited.

But if there's some of Naboth in us, some of Elijah, there's also some of Ahab and Jezebel.

We try so hard to buy happiness. Yet, we, like Ahab, remain unsatisfied. We live in one of the richest countries in the world, but according to studies, we Americans are unhappier than we were before the Great Recession.

Whereas once William Shakespeare and John Steinbeck opined about “the winter of our discontent,” the time when fortunes fail and we abandon our ethics, we now live in what I would like to call the “summer” of our discontent.

And in this summer, we think that if we can just get that one other thing—that job, that house, that vineyard—we will finally be happy. The problem is that we have to hurt others in order to get that one other thing.

We have, to be fair, generally not wielded the sword; but we have looked the other way when it fell.

We want cheap clothing, and as a result, women and children work 20 hours a day in sweat shops for pennies. We want food year round, fuel, and other commodities, and so corporations consolidate small farms into monocultures of commercial crops for export—or buy up land that corrupt governments have stolen from people who have lived and depended on that land for centuries. In 2009 alone, nearly 150 million acres of land was grabbed, more than 70 percent of it in Africa, displacing vast populations.

It’s September 10, 2003. Hundreds of delegates, clad in expensive suits, have gathered at the World Trade Organization summit in Cancun, Mexico. A 56-year-old Korean farmer, small in stature, bent over from years of labor, shoves flyers into their hands. The flyers are quickly tossed into trash cans. On them is printed a kind of last will and testament from a man who moments later, standing atop a police barricade, takes his own life with a knife to the heart. Free-trade agreements were flooding countries like South Korea and Peru with cheap farm imports, sinking prices and deepening debt. Lee Kyung Hae’s words should haunt us: “I am crying out my words to you, that have for so long boiled in my body.... Farmers who gave up early have gone to urban slums. Others... have met bankruptcy.... For me, I couldn’t do anything but just look around at vacant houses, old and eroding. Once I went to a house where a farmer abandoned his life by drinking a toxic chemical because of his uncontrollable debts. I could do nothing but listen to the howling of his wife.”

The scary thing is that we can become so accustomed to the *modus operandi* of this our economy of discontent, as well as the collateral wailing that accompanies it, that we fail to recognize our God-given alternative.

And it’s right here in this story. It’s in the name of where Naboth lives: Jezreel, which literally means “God planted.” And it’s what Naboth is trying to protect. It’s the land that, after the Exodus from Egypt, God gifted the Israelites. This land is part of a social system designed by God to give God’s people what they most need to live fully, happily, and sustainably.

According to the laws set down by God, this is God’s land; the Israelites are merely tenants. And one of the conditions of the lease, of the covenant they made with God, is that they can’t sell

their land unless in extreme necessity. Even then, it would eventually be returned to them in the year of Jubilee, when all debts are nullified.

The land bound the people together with a common safety net, such that the poor and the vulnerable never lose their means of life. The land represents what really matters in life: our relationship with God and with one another.

Many years ago, some seminary students and I watched the documentary *No Impact Man*. It's this crazy story of a man in New York City who drags his Starbucks-drinking, Prada-wearing wife and their two-year-old daughter into a year of removing from their life everything that hurts the planet. Instead of taking the elevator, Colin Beavan walks up 24 flights of stairs. They turn off their electricity. They walk or ride a bike to the farmer's market, where they buy only locally grown food. No new clothes. No shampoo. No television. No airplanes, no subways, no taxis. No coffee. They make their own soap, hand wash their own clothes, use candles for light, and set up a box of hundreds of worms in their tiny NYC apartment for composting.

His wife hates it.

And of course it's extreme. And, as Beavan admits himself, he still has a carbon footprint.

So, yes, it's naive. And it's funny. But their daughter loves it.

Because guess what? Her parents aren't glued to their phones or computers anymore. They play games and go outside more; they spend more time together; they talk; they get to know their farmers; they eat according to the seasons; apples taste so much sweeter; days last longer; and for all their arguments and for all that they're sacrificing, they discover that their lives are fuller, maybe even happier.

At times, we will be like Beavan and Naboth, guarding this gift (the land, each other, life), suffering for our resistance. At times, we will be like Elijah, prophetically decrying the system of exploitation and rebellion from God. At times we will also be Ahab, indulging our desire for more, fundamentally misunderstanding the source of happiness, hurting people even to get more.

And it will go on and on like that forever, exchanging these roles like so many masks in a Greek play, unless we realize who we really are in this story, I mean, deep down, who God made us to be. *We are the land*. We are the vineyard in the story. Christ is like Naboth, trying to protect us, killed by the world that wants to consume us, wants to twist us into power-hungry, unhappy people. And Christ is like Elijah, the prophet who comes back, that "old enemy" of consumerism and death, and declares Jubilee, the year of freedom.

We in the church should see ourselves as walking vineyards, intoxicating people with our joy, vouchsafing the poor, and inviting the lost into Communion.

Our lives, our church, our community, our earth—the things we've been ignoring while paying so much money to be distracted—they are the gift; they are the secret to happiness.

We don't need more palaces. We need each other.

Look, we may be no more able than the vineyard in this story to stop the world from trying to buy us. We may not be able to free ourselves completely from this system of exploitation any more than we can from sin. But the good news is that the prophets of God, and Jesus Christ himself, have come to free us, to let us grow again.

We have been returned to Naboth, to each other. Let your lives show it. **Amen.**