

“Cross the Mersey to a Place Where No One is Turned Away”  
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Covet: to wish, long, or crave for – so far so good –

Covet: to wish, long, or crave for (something, especially the property of another).

Ooops. There's the problem to “covetousness.”

Ahab coveted that little piece of land that belonged to Naboth. He wanted it so badly that he was willing to look away as Jezebel unjustly had Naboth killed, so the king could steal Naboth's birthright, his ancestral heritage which God forbid Ahab from ever giving away or selling.

And, in the end, Ahab's terrible, cowardly action is punished. Justice has been served.

End of story.

But wait a minute, Ahab got what he deserved, maybe – I guess so, but what about Naboth? Where's his justice? Did he get what *he* deserved?

The answer, I think, is almost as understated as it is simple: Naboth was faithful. Say no more.

His role; his purpose; his life was to be faithful. He did not disobey God and sell or trade his birthright. He left this place, violently, but a person of faith. The writer leaves it at that.

I wonder, “Is it that simple?” Is that what everything is about – about being faithful, as best as we can?

Funny, there was nothing in this narrative about being perfect. There is no confusion or even suggestion that any of Naboth's human struggles brought him this unfitting end. Nothing - about always being right, never making mistakes, or even arguing against some teachings one might think are wrong or needs to be changed. Just the simple underlying direction to be faithful to your God.

This is nothing new in the old books we read. The ancestral importance of protecting one's birthright in the times of Naboth had a lot to do with generosity and hospitality. The land God gave the people of God was meant to be a sign of

their covenant with God, their faithfulness, and to have a place for the stranger in which to always be welcomed. It was important...

You may remember the story about Lot and his family who were visited by the strangers that turned out to angels. When the people of Sodom turned against the visitors, the angels helped Lot's family escape and then, in the story, the cities were consumed in destruction. Well, there are many who say that the "wrong" that was done that caused the cities to be destroyed was their lack of welcoming and hospitality of these and other strangers. There is a story in the Jewish texts that refer the "bed" that strangers in Sodom were forced to sleep in. It is said that if the bed was too big for the stranger, the stranger was literally stretched to fit. And, if the person was too big for the bed, well – they were cut up to fit!

Clearly, the hospitality of such places, despite their wealth – left much to be desired. And there really is something fundamentally wrong with turning away others...the tradition of hospitality and generosity was God and life-giving.

The more I think about it – the more it makes perfect sense of its importance. Think of any person who is alone or left out, marginalized, discriminated, treated as a second or third class citizen...

Think of the outcome of such treatment: people feel shunned, forgotten, lost, unloved, even by God. They become picked on, bitter, saddened...all because they were unwelcomed. It's a big thing.

If the Great Commandment of Jesus is to Love God with all your heart, your soul, and all you might – and then to love your neighbor as yourself...

The Jewish sage, Hillel, an elder contemporary of Jesus when asked to sum up the Torah, to a gentile put it this way: Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a, the "Great Principle"

"That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn."

If you think about it more, we could extend this even to mean that the expectation of hospitality is an ancestral birthright?

Then and now – no different, I think. Then and now that coveting causes trouble

When we covet it is impossible to welcome; impossible to be grateful; impossible to love, impossible to be faithful...

Yup, Ahab really forgot the whole deal, if he ever knew it. And the ancient author of Kings made it pretty clear how he was going to end up.

This lack of hospitality, welcoming, compassion – creeps into institutions and groups, as well. Many of our churches have sent out messages to many people that they are not welcome simply because they are people who are gay or lesbian.

“Don’t be who you are,” some say, “and then you can be a part of our **our** church. As a gay man, it seems as crazy to me to stop being who I was created and born to be, just as crazy as it seems for anyone to demand the same from Ahab in giving up his birthright.

Faithfulness is not only welcoming the others into our lives as Christians but faithfully being who God has created us to be. It’s always a process, and it is a *little windy path* sometimes, but it is never endorses covetousness or exclusion, which to me are much the same.

And Jesus sure makes it clear about the role of motivation in being welcoming...

In this morning’s reading, he upends those who invited him into their home, in this case, the dreaded Pharisees. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the Pharisees invited Jesus into their homes for the fame, attention, “name dropping” it might provide them. You know, “Jesus ate here!” They coveted his name, and power, and the privileges and status it might bring them through association.

Then there is the woman, the sinner, common person like you and me, working at trying to move more closely to God in her life. She breaks ointment over his feet, is overcome with his presence, embraces him with kisses, and asks nothing – but seeks to welcome him into her life in the whatever ways she could. His presence was all she needed to know. You could almost hear her with a nearly inaudible sigh of relief, “Welcome, Jesus.”

And Jesus lays it on those whose motives were otherwise:

I entered your house; *you* gave me no water for my feet  
*You* gave me no kiss  
*You* did not anoint me

But *she* did all these things.

And Jesus says to her, your *sins* are forgiven. The distance between you and God has been removed. All because you were faithful to your birthright of hospitality and generosity. All because you opened your heart to me and others.

Welcome back, he might have said. Welcome back...to where you belonged long before your arrived.