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**Legacy of Love**

1 Kings 21:3

I am grateful that some of you were able to get acquainted with my mother during the five years that she lived in Springfield. People who knew her often commented about her sense of humor. She understood clearly that this part of her personality was a gift from her father. He grew up in South Carolina and was a true Southern storyteller. Most of all he loved to tell humorous stories about his own family. One story my mother often shared took place when she was about four years old. She and her older brother had been less than truthful with their mother and they knew they were in big trouble. Their mother was very upset and announced that when their father came home a severe punishment would be administered. They spent all day dreading their father's arrival and expecting the worst.

Finally her father came home and the moment of truth was at hand. Many years later my mother wrote about what happened next:

When mother told him what happened he couldn't work up much ire because he was in such a good humor. So he just picked up grocery sacks lying on the cabinet and put one over each of our heads. He said he didn't want to look at children who would fib to their mother. We thought that was a lark and were relieved to have such fun punishment. We began to lick our tongues on the sacks, and finally they poked through. (I'm sure my brother suggested this). We were tee-heeing and having a big time. Dad got some quinine, and as our tongues stuck out, he put some of it on them; when the taste came through to us the boo-hooing started. He wouldn't let us take the sacks off, and I'm sure he always considered that his greatest joke. He told and re-told the story many times.

This story, which took place almost ninety years ago, is very much alive in my family today. It is a gift passed on from one generation to the next. It is part of a legacy of love.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of 1 Kings we encounter a man who was formed by a similar legacy. Naboth's legacy is represented by a piece of land that has been part of his family for many generations. It is a vineyard which has sustained his ancestors for centuries. This piece of land is an indispensable part of Naboth's family story. It has always been understood as a gift from God. It is a sign of the grace which God has extended to Naboth and his family. Naboth knows that this vineyard is not a commodity which can be bought and sold. It is a part of God's legacy of love. Naboth understands that he is called to pass on the family land with the family story to future generations.

King Ahab does not understand the legacy of love. He is a worshiper of baal. Baal worship is about control and manipulation. Participation in the ritual practices of baal is supposed to provide the worshiper with abundant crops, healthy children, and all the good things of life. When Ahab realizes that Naboth's vineyard is adjacent to his property he sees an opportunity for expansion. It is a situation that he can manipulate and control for his own benefit. He makes Naboth a generous offer for the vineyard. Naboth can have money or another nice piece of land. And he can enjoy the prestige of having "done a deal" with the King.

When Naboth refuses the offer of the King, Ahab is distraught. He cannot understand how Naboth can say no. He believes that everything and everyone has a price. He has extended himself far beyond what should have been needed to meet Naboth's price. But it is all to no avail. In Naboth Ahab is confronted with the kind of faith that a baal worshiper cannot understand. Naboth knows that he is not in control of God's gracious gifts any more than he can control who his ancestors are. Naboth understands that the legacy of love has a powerful claim on his life. All he can do is receive that legacy and respond with gratitude.

A similar theological contrast unfolds in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's gospel. Jesus is the dinner guest of Simon the Pharisee. Simon is a man of high social and religious status. The fact that he has chosen to socialize with Jesus indicates that he recognizes Jesus' potential as a future leader. It also reflects Luke's point of view that Jesus and the Pharisees were not always at odds. But Simon's positive impression of Jesus begins to change when a woman of questionable reputation gate crashes his party. She is a person of low social and religious status. It is scandalous that she is present at such an event. But her behavior toward Jesus is even more scandalous. She goes to great lengths to bathe and anoint Jesus' feet using her tears, her hair, and perfume. This level of physical contact with a woman of the street would have made a first century audience very uncomfortable.

Simon sees in this incident an indication that Jesus does not measure up as an authentic prophet. A true prophet would have taken control of the situation and not allowed it to become a public relations disaster. A true prophet would have recognized immediately the damage that such a woman could do to his reputation. Simon's interpretation of this event demonstrates that he does not understand the legacy of love. The woman knows that the greatest scandal is that God's love has come to her. The extravagance of the love that has been given to her means that she cannot help responding with extravagant gratitude. Like Naboth she knows she is not in control. Her only option is to pass on the legacy of love that has reshaped her life.

Tom Long tells of a seminary student who learned about the legacy of love from his father who is an inner city pastor. The young man was home for Christmas vacation. He and his father spent an afternoon talking about ministry. He shared with his father what he was learning in seminary. His father talked about the challenges of ministry in the inner city. It is a ministry which requires trusting God with all those things we cannot control. As the conversation continued late into the afternoon they decided to get some fresh air by walking around the neighborhood. As they walked they continued their conversation about ministry.

After walking some distance the father said, "It's almost dinner time. Let's call and place an order for pizza to be delivered to the house. By the time we get home it will be there." They walked to the nearest pay phone. There a homeless man was blocking their way. He said, "Can you spare any change?" The father reached deep into his pockets and held out two handfuls of coins. "Here, take what you need," he said to the homeless man. "Well then, I'll take it all," said the man who was surprised by the extravagance of the gift. He swept the coins into his hands and began to walk away.

The man had not gone very far when the father realized that he no longer had any change with which to make his phone call. He called out to the homeless man, "I was going to make a phone call at this pay phone, but I have given you all my change. Could I have a quarter?" The homeless man turned around and walked back to the father and son. He extended his hands and said, "Here, take what you need (*Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2007, page 56)."

The generosity of God is like that. It takes us to a place where we are no longer in control. All we can do is respond in gratitude to the One who says, "Here, take what you need."