

Near King Ahab's palace, there was a vineyard owned by a man named Naboth. Ahab had designs on that vineyard. He noticed that it was particularly fertile and decided it would make an excellent vegetable garden for the palace. Ahab approached Naboth with an offer he was sure Naboth could not refuse. He offered to buy the vineyard at a good price or trade for a better vineyard. Ahab explained, "Your vineyard is close to the palace and I want to use it for a vegetable garden."

But, Naboth was not about to sell or trade his vineyard. He said, "I inherited this vineyard. It has been in the family for years. No way will I give it up. The Lord forbid that I should let you have it!" Ahab was so upset he went home and pouted. He was depressed, angry, lay down on his bed, faced the wall and would not eat. Talk about maturity!

Ahab's wife, Queen Jezebel, went to him and asked, "Why are you so depressed? Why won't you eat?" "Because Naboth won't let me have his vineyard," he whined. "Well," she stormed, "are you the king or aren't you?"

We need some background on Jezebel, who was quite a woman! In order to strengthen diplomatic relations with Phoenicia, Ahab had married Jezebel, the King of Phoenicia's daughter. Jezebel moved right in and began making plans to take over the country. A huge temple was erected in worship of the god Baal and the goddess Asherah. Jezebel then imported 400 prophets from Phoenicia and supported them with federal grants! When some prophets of the Lord objected, she ordered them killed. Her intent was to destroy Israel's identity, beginning with its religion.

Jezebel was the power behind the throne, with a henpecked, weak husband as the king. Actually, they were a good pair; they deserved each other. They were the type of couple about whom it has been said, "It's a good thing they married each other rather than ruining two homes!" Jezebel talked Ahab out of his childish tantrum over Naboth's vineyard by saying she would take care of the matter. She hired two scoundrels to testify that they had heard Naboth blaspheming both God and the King. Naboth was found guilty of blasphemy and treason and was stoned to death. Jezebel told the king, "Naboth is dead. Now go and take possession of the vineyard."

But, the shady deal had not gone unnoticed. There was only one prophet left in Israel who was faithful to the Lord, a man from the country, a man out of nowhere, by the name of Elijah. He had long been criticizing the government, but had not yet been caught by Jezebel's S.S. troops. The Lord said to Elijah, "Go to King Ahab. You will find him in Naboth's vineyard about to take possession of it. Give him this message: In the very place that the dogs licked up Naboth's blood, they will lick up your blood; and furthermore, the dogs will eat the body of Jezebel." Both of Elijah's prophecies came true. Both Ahab and Jezebel met violent deaths.

Elijah's message to Ahab is a message for our time as well. You may take something; but you may not necessarily have it. You may take something; but it may never really belong to you. You may take, but it may never really be

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yours. Ahab took the vineyard, but he never really had it, as he incurred God's judgment. We heard in the Epistle lesson this morning from Paul's letter to the Galatians, "God is not mocked. No one makes a fool of God. person will reap exactly what is planted." Jezebel may have attempted to take an entire nation, but she never had it. God, through Elijah, had the last word.

The European colonial powers attempted to take most of the world for themselves, but they never had it, and most of the empires have vanished. The Soviet Union has yet to learn this lesson. The Dutch and the British took South Africa, but do the whites have it? Bishop Tutu, the black Episcopal bishop of South Africa, when visiting San Francisco, said, "When the missionaries came, we had the land and they had the Bible. The missionaries taught us to pray and when we opened our eyes, we had the Bible and they had the land!" But, history is not yet finished with South Africa and it is a hotbed of discontent today.

"Taking is at the root of most crime," writes Glendon Harris, "taking under the delusion of getting something. But criminals don't get, they just take. The thief takes money, but doesn't have wealth. The rapist takes a body, but doesn't have love. The murderer takes a life, but doesn't have revenge. The addict takes drugs, but doesn't have relief."

We live in a culture that is enamored with taking. Sylvester Stallone has made it big financially with his series of macho movies--Rambo and Rocky. The disturbing aspect of these films is the idea that anything can be settled through violence and force--that it's just a matter of "taking" control through one's fists or a semi-automatic gun. It's a matter of "manhood," a manhood displayed through muscles and machine guns. When the United States tried to show its manhood by taking Vietnam, Norman Cousins wrote:

The trouble with the manhood game is that it is played at the expense of man. The inevitable result of a competitive display of national manhood is to create the stage and the occasion for an ultimate assault on human life. There is a wider, positive definition of manhood that takes in more than just raw force and the will to use it. Manhood has something to do with maturity, the comprehension born of experience, and the capacity for making moral judgments.

Jesus was tempted to take. After his baptism, he went into the wilderness for a time of self-assessment, a time to look within himself, get in touch with God, and decide on his life mission. The devil met Jesus there, as the devil meets all of us when we begin to explore the meaning of our lives. The devil offered Jesus three temptations. First, he said, "Turn these stones into bread." He tempted Jesus with materialism. Certainly Jesus, with his talents, charisma, popularity with people, ability to tell stories and hold people spellbound, could have been rich. He could have sold anything! Certainly Jesus could have had financial success, or could he?

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For the second temptation, the devil took Jesus to the highest point of the temple and said, "Throw yourself down and let the angels catch you." Dare God to protect you. Certainly Jesus could have found security and avoided his death. He wouldn't have had to die on a cross if he had taken fewer chances, treated the rich and influential with a little more tact, and played it smarter. Jesus could have found security, or could he?

For the third temptation, the devil took Jesus to the top of a high mountain, showed him the kingdoms of the world, and said, "If you worship me, all this I will give you." Jesus was tempted to take power. Jesus could have taken control of the world. Jesus could have had wealth, security and power, but could he?

No! Jesus might have been tempted to take wealth, security and power, but he could never have had them. Jesus knew he could not have wealth, security and power because of who he was and why he was here on this earth. Wealth, security and power were not within the province of his mission. That's the difference between taking and having. Wise is the person who knows what he/she can have. Mother Teresa receives the admiration of millions because of her identification with the poor of Calcutta. Some say, "Think what she has given up in order to live on behalf of the poor." But, did she give up something she could never have? Mother Teresa knows her mission; nothing else matters. She could never have anything but her mission.

A man had a wife who was a bedridden cripple. He faithfully took care of her for fifteen years and then met an attractive widow. Without intending it, they fell in love. But, they did not ask the wife for a divorce, nor did they have an affair. They looked beyond the fulfillment of their immediate desires and decided not to see each other any more. The man said to his minister, "We knew it would be impossible for us to walk to happiness over another person's heart." They knew they might try to take a new life together, but they knew they would never have a new life together. They knew the wisdom of A. E. Housman's statement, "The house of delusions is cheap to build but drafty to live in." They knew the wisdom of God's word, "You will harvest what you plant."

You can take, but only that which fits your mission can you really have. I firmly believe that the most critical task in your life is to discover your mission. I believe that God placed you on this earth at this time and place for you to grow and to serve. There are specific attributes of love you are expected to learn. There is a specific task--a ministry--for you to do; perhaps it's to be a pastor, or a Sunday School teacher, or a youth worker, a musician in a choir or orchestra, a dancer, a good neighbor, an honest business person, a peacemaker, fighter of oppression, or to help people where you are. God has placed you here, redeemed you through Jesus Christ, called you to a ministry, given you a mission, and empowers you with the Holy Spirit, and gives you what you can have.

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In the final analysis, we really own nothing. Everything belongs to God. We are placed here to be the caretakers, the managers, the stewards of God's possessions. We humans—even nations--will never own the land--possess, have the land--for it belongs to God. The air, water, resources, earth belong to God. God in his grace gives you what you can have. God may grant you wealth, security and power, but only in order that you may do his will. God gives you wealth so that you may share it with the needy and financially support the church in doing God's work. When you think you can take wealth and keep it, it will never be yours, but fall through your fingers like sand.

How tragic if you reach a point in your life when you look at all you have taken, and realize you have nothing. Jesus said, "What does it profit if you gain the whole world but lose your soul?" (Matthew 16:26) What sense does it make for you to take, trying to fill the emptiness in your heart, trying to stuff yourself with materialism, wealth, security, and power, only to find that you never had them, only to find that you have ended up with nothing. How tragic! Look at the examples of Ahab and Jezebel who took whatever they wanted and ended up with nothing but violent deaths.

Don't spend your life trying to take what you will never have. Give your life to Jesus Christ, receive your call to ministry, do the will of God, and God will give you what you can have.