

“I Will Not Give You My Ancestral Inheritance”

I Kings 21:1-19; Matthew 5:1-16

Pentecost Sunday

The Kirkin’ o’ the Tartan

Matthew 5:1-16

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

- ³“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- ⁴“Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
- ⁵“Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
- ⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
- ⁷“Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.
- ⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
- ⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.
- ¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- ¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you
 and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
¹²**Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,
 for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**
- ¹³“You are the salt of the earth;
 but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?
**It is no longer good for anything,
 but is thrown out and trampled under foot.**
- ¹⁴“You are the light of the world.
A city built on a hill cannot be hid.
- ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket,
but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.
- ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others,
**so that they may see your good works
 and give glory to your Father in heaven.”**

I Kings 21:1-19

Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. ²And Ahab said to Naboth, “Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money.”

³But Naboth said to Ahab, “The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.”

⁴Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, “I will not give you my ancestral inheritance.” He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.

⁵His wife Jezebel came to him and said, “Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?” ⁶He said to her, “Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, ‘Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard for it’; but he answered, ‘I will not give you my vineyard.’”

⁷His wife Jezebel said to him, “Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.”

⁸So she wrote letters in Ahab’s name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city.

⁹She wrote in the letters, “Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; ¹⁰seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, ‘You have cursed God and the king.’ Then take him out, and stone him to death.”

¹¹The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. Just as it was written in the letters that she had sent to them, ¹²they proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the assembly. ¹³The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite him; and the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, “Naboth cursed God and the king.”

So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death.

¹⁴Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, “Naboth has been stoned; he is dead.” ¹⁵As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, “Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead.”

¹⁶As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

¹⁷Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: ¹⁸Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. ¹⁹You shall say to him, “Thus says the Lord: Have you killed, and also taken possession?” You shall say to him, “Thus says the Lord: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.”

The Sermon

We walked into the nursing home, my two older brothers and I, young men at the time, each of us on the way to starting our own families.

We were there to see our grandmother, the woman who, in the early 20th century, came with her husband to America from Serbia (in what used to be Yugoslavia) as Zagorka Josifovic. Her first name was Anglicized to Cora, and she took her husband’s new last name when he was adopted at the age of 30 by an American farmer named Dan Grogg. So Zagorka Jovanovic Josifovic became Cora Grogg.

To my brothers and me, she was Maw-Maw, our fiercely loving grandmother.

She retained her heavy Serbian accent her whole life, and to this day, when my brothers and cousins are saying something nice to each other—the rare occasions when we say something nice to each other—we sometimes slip into her Serbian accent.

There was a thing they did in the old country where, to avoid a blessing turning into a curse, if you said something nice about a person, you were supposed to kind of spit it out right after you said it—I guess so traces of it wouldn’t go bad in your mouth.

“Say, you look pretty good, ptha ptha ptha.” You know, now that I think about it, I’m assuming they did that in the old country. Maybe Maw-Maw was just spitting on us.

Not likely, because she was, to us, the embodiment of unconditional love. I remember one starry night when I was four years old; my Dad and I had driven the four hours from the town where we lived to the farm in Indiana where she still lived after all those years, and when we came up the gravel lane and stopped in front of the old farmhouse, those sturdy, Serbian arms reached through the open car window and lifted my four-year-old self all the way out of the passenger seat and held me tightly, with bounteous love animating her voice and her eyes and her strength.

Zagorka’s love seemed to be some ancient inheritance from the old country, it was deep, and intensely loyal, extended generously, shared unconditionally, with absolutely everyone, except Croatians, Albanians, Russians, Montenegrins, Macedonians, Turks, Slovenians, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Romanians, Greeks, Ukrainians, Germans other than Lawrence Welk and those she knew personally, Serbian Communists, and any woman character on TV modeled after Jezebel. Which, at the time, seemed like it was pretty much every woman character on TV whose last name was not Walton.

In real life, though, and in person, she was generous and gregarious and loving to everyone, and though she would raise a hand to God to tell us that America was the best country in the world, her Serbian accent was an ingrained part of her character; it was part of who she was.

But now, as my brothers and I entered the facility and made our way down sterile hallways, we knew this would not be like all those Christmases around the tree, or the long summer days on the farm in Indiana, or any of the times in more recent years when we had gone over to her place for Sunday dinner, and she had fed us like kings while we deferred to her as the matriarch of the world.

The Maw-Maw we knew was slipping away.

It wasn’t a particularly good visit, and afterward, we left in silence. After a few minutes, Tom said he’d gone alone to visit her recently, and when he got to her room and told her who he was, she looked at him without recognition before turning away and saying, “I don’t know you—you’re not mine.”

Of course, we knew that wasn't Maw-Maw. We could expect that woman to sit up and celebrate our presence about as much as we could have expected somebody with broken arms and legs to run up and give us a hug.

But it did kind of make each of us wonder: now that the time for benedictions and valedictories was over, what was the message that she had passed on to us? What was the ancestral inheritance which the Lord forbid she would ever have sold or given away before she had handed it on to her descendants?

Our lives stand for something; they mean something. Even if we have failed to do what we intended to do, even if we have fallen short of being the people we know we were created to be, our lives are a testimony to our descendants—whether family descendants or church family descendants or cultural descendants.

Whether we mean to hand it on or not, each one of us is the steward of an inheritance that has come from those who came before us, and will be passed on to those who come after.

One of Frederick Buechner's questions for Lent asks, "If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less?"ⁱ

What are the moments from your life that inform who you are now? Was there someone who taught you, by what they said or the way they lived, what was important to them, that has become important to you—and that you would pass on to the people who come after you?

By the grace of God and the generous compassion of Montreat Presbyterian Church, I was able, for much of last month, to be at the bedside of my 21-year-old son in a hospital room in Brussels, where he was being treated for a collapsed lung that occurred in the middle of a week of solo traveling.

For eight miserable and profoundly disheartening days before Vivian or I could get there, during which time no one including the doctors had any idea how long the ordeal would go on, he was alone. This church said, "Get over there, we can figure out the details later; just pack a bag and get there."

And I remembered when I was about 7 years old and in the hospital for two weeks with acute appendicitis. My parents had separated at that time, but worked

together, as good parents do, taking turns to stay with me. And I remember one morning when my Dad and I spent a full hour, before he had to go off to work, watching the sun come up through the window in my hospital room. Not much was said, but it was one of the most important hours of my whole life.

What is your ancestral inheritance, that you mean to hand on to those who come after you?

God chose us in Christ, says the New Testament letter to the Ephesians, “before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love.”

The decorated astrobiologist Robert M. Hazen has written, “In the beginning, all space and energy and matter came into existence from an unknowable void: nothing, then something.”

“That moment of creation,” he wrote, “remains the most elusive, incomprehensible defining event in the history of the universe. It was a singularity, a transformation from nothing to something that remains beyond the purview of modern science or the logic of mathematics...”ⁱⁱ

“Our universe did not suddenly appear where there was only vacuum before,” he clarifies; “for before the Big Bang, there was no volume and no time. Our concept of nothing implies emptiness. Before the Big Bang, there was nothing to be empty in.”ⁱⁱⁱ

God chose us in Christ, says Ephesians, “before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before God in love.”

Our inheritance originates before our birth; predates our ancestors—and their cultures; predates life on earth; predates the time when darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God—*ruah*, the Holy Spirit, which Christians the world over celebrate today, Pentecost Sunday—swept over the face of the waters, and God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.^{iv} *Bang!*

In 2004, archaeologists identified tartan-like materials, at least 2600 years old, which had been found in a salt mine in Austria.^v They were a remnant of a people called the Celts, who lived in Central Europe several centuries before an angel came to a young woman named Mary, telling her she had found favor with God and bearing strange news.

Some of them migrated east. There's still an instrument in the Balkans—in Serbia it's called a *gajde*—which is a bag made from a goat's hide, with a long pipe that provides a drone and a smaller pipe for playing the melody.

Others traveled west as far as they could go, and settled in the North and west of Britain.^{vi}

In the first half of the 16th century, when the Protestant Reformation was starting to rattle cages all over Western Europe, a young Scottish priest named John Knox drank from Calvin's cup in Geneva and established his own place at the forefront of the burbling foment in Scotland. Like all the Reformers, Knox embraced and fiercely propagated the issue of God's absolute sovereignty, with its obvious implications in worship and major ramifications for all of human life:

You cannot buy God's vineyard at any price.

Nor may the Church sell God's vineyard at any cost—because God's vineyard is created to bring forth a particular kind of fruit, not just whatever produce suits the whims and tastes of the day or the culture. Our ancestral inheritance is designed to produce a very specific crop.

That crop is the world-changing love of God as fully embodied in Jesus,
 a love so definitional that it is synonymous with God (I John 4:8-16),
 a love so all-encompassing that it
 allows us to bask in our families and friendships
 and put up with our church families,
 a love that sees all people as people
 and not just as trees walking (Mark 8:23ff),
 or anything less than the image of God in all people
 and empowers us to love even our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

We are to bear this fruit in the world in the same way that the Church in the old Book of Order was “called to undertake this ministry even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ.”

So we have a heritage of tartans and bagpipes and kilts, and the sovereignty of a God whose grace alone procures our salvation, and a missionary zeal, and the

assurance that the Church is reformed by the Spirit and is always being reformed by the Spirit, thank God.

Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. And Ahab said to Naboth, “Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden; I’ll give you a better vineyard for it; or, if you prefer, I can give you its value in money.”

And Naboth said to King Ahab, “The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.”

Ahab stomped home, sullen and resentful. And Jezebel came to him and said, “What are you so depressed about?”

He told her the offer he had made for Naboth’s vineyard, and how Naboth had responded. And he pouted.

And she said, “Are you the king, or not? Get up! *I’ll* give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.”

Surely Naboth knew what he was up against.

Always there will be Ahab, right next door, close enough to peek over the fence,
 possessed of threatening power and tempting wealth,
 foul-tempered and pathetic when you don’t give him what he wants;
 who likes what your inheritance looks like, but has no idea what it means;
 who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing;
 who wants to have your precious, natural, God-made, fruitful vineyard,
 but to repurpose it as a vegetable garden, to suit his own private wishes.

I was walking with some international missionary friends on a July 4th week-end in Texas, and we found ourselves in front of a large church whose denomination I have conveniently forgotten. Where the church’s lush property met the sidewalk, there was a statue of Jesus.

And on this sweltering July 4th, somebody had inserted, into the space between his arm and his body, an American flag, making it look like Jesus with his beatific face was almost swooning over the red, white and blue, proudly carrying it into battle on the nation’s behalf—repurposing Jesus from judge of all the nations to flag-bearer for the United States.

Always there will be Jezebel, able and driven and ruthless,
capable of astonishingly effective schemes
with profoundly little interest in humanity.

I am struck by the regularity with which I read a church article or hear a speaker discussing what may happen if this or that segment of the Church is made unhappy. There's the threat that they will leave the body, so there is the emotional anguish and the philosophical problem of the schism, the deliberate disunity. But the warning is almost always punctuated by something like this: "You'd better not do anything to make them unhappy, because when they go, they'll take their purses and pocketbooks with them."

Which seems to throw theology out the window. If the importance of the preservation of our unity is primarily a monetary consideration, then it makes people only as valuable as their money, a philosophy that has nothing to do with the True Kirk, the body of Christ.

And anyway, the business of the Church is not to make consumers happy, but to make consumers disciples.

Always Ahab and Jezebel will be there with their threats and their temptations.

Even in the most exemplary churches, who bless their communities and the world with the service that Christ commanded, God can be treated as the embarrassing aunt or uncle we hope won't come out into the living room while we're entertaining company.

Even the most dedicated servants of the Word are vulnerable. They fear for their safety and security; they worry about how the bills are going to get paid.

It's one thing to say, "The Lord forbid that we would abandon, give away, surrender, or sell out our ancestral inheritance." It's another thing to say it to King Ahab's face.

In gratitude, we celebrate—and pray for the strength to emulate—those who have done it before us.

In our worship today, we observe a ceremony whose purpose is the kirking of tartans, not the tartaning of the kirk.

The Kirk does not have a need for tartans, or flags, but only the Holy Spirit.

We are here to submit ourselves,
 and the memories that define the narrative arc of our lives,
 and the symbols of who we understand ourselves to be,
 to the authority of the God who judged Ahab
 for coming into the vineyard and claiming it as his own.

We are poor in spirit; we mourn; we are meek;
 But we hunger and thirst for righteousness,
 We intend to be merciful,
 We long to be pure in heart,
 We are called to be peacemakers,
 And we are ready to be persecuted for righteousness' sake.

We were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world
 to be holy and blameless before God in love.

For everyone in this room, and all God's children in heaven and on earth,
 each of our lives means something.

What is the inheritance of which you will have been steward
 before handing it on to those who come after you?

When the time for valedictories and benedictions is over,
 What is the message which God forbid you would ever have given up?

Keith Grogg
 Anderson Auditorium
 Montreat, NC
 May 24, 2015

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 82-83.

ⁱⁱ Robert M. Hazen, *The Story of Earth: The First 4.5 Billion Years, from Stardust to Living Planet* (New York: Viking, 2012), 7ff.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hazen, *Story of Earth*, 7ff.

^{iv} Genesis 1:2.

^v Retrieved from a third party referencing Jeffrey Banks & Doria de la Chapelle, *Tartan: Romancing the Plaid* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007). See also E.J.W. Barber, *Prehistoric Textiles: The Development of Cloth in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages with Special Reference to the Aegean* (Princeton, 1992).

^{vi} Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Celts: A History* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1998), 197-221.