

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
July 26 & 27, 2014
Paul Tshihamba
Naboth's Vineyard; Ahab's Humiliation
1 Kings 21

Good morning, friends. Welcome to Christ Presbyterian Church. My name is Paul Tshihamba and I'm one of the pastors here on staff. It's great to be with you. If you've never heard the name Hiroshi Fujishige, you're probably not alone. Try saying that five times real fast! You probably never heard of him unless you are an executive at the Disney Corporation, because at Disney, he is legendary and not in a way that you might expect. Hiroshi Fujishige was a strawberry farmer in Anaheim, California. That's what he did all of his life. That's what he knew. That's what he wanted to be, a strawberry farmer. But life never turns out quite as simply as we want it to, especially when your 58-acre farm is right across the street from Disneyland, bordered on all three sides by high-rise hotels. Not when Walt Disney and other developers have offered you tens of millions of dollars over the years to give up strawberries and retire. Not when you say *no* over and over again for decades.

When people would ask him about this, he would say, "You know, it's all too complicated for me. It's just too big for me to understand. If I had more schooling, maybe I might understand all of the deals that they are talking about here, but I don't know. I just don't understand it." He held out until the day he died. They called him the dean of Disney holdouts, a hero to some, a pain in the backside to Disney and others. Side note: on the day he died, his kids cashed in \$50 million.

Speaking of a royal pain in the backside is going to take us to our text for today. Here we are in this series called Hidden Gems where we are uncovering these Biblical truths, these hidden treasures, these forgotten treasures tucked away in the Books of 1st and 2nd Kings. It really should be called Kings and Prophets, I think, because it's as much about the kings as it is about the prophets who either helped the kings succeed or pointed out their flaws. Last week Lee Hanssen introduced us to the very interesting, poignant, intriguing story of King Ahab and a conflicted relationship that he had with Elijah. Ahab was a complicated man. He was smart. He was strategic. He was brave much of the time, and yet he had all kinds of problems. I'm just going to focus on one of those problems today, and that is the problem I'm going to call the grass-is-greener-on-the-other-side syndrome or the if-only syndrome. As we read from 1st Kings, chapter 21, you can follow along in your pew Bibles or on the screen.

1 Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. **2** Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth." **3** But Naboth replied, "The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors." **4** So Ahab went home, sullen and angry because

Naboth the Jezreelite had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my ancestors." He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat. **5** His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, "Why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat?" **6** He answered her, "Because I said to Naboth the Jezreelite, 'Sell me your vineyard; or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" **7** Jezebel his wife said, "Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

Maybe it's my Congolese heritage, but I have this love-hate relationship with material things. Maybe that's just my excuse, I don't know, but I have a hard time getting rid of stuff. Recently I was looking at this shirt in my closet, this red button-up shirt that I just love. [Slide shown.] I've loved it for as long as I've had it. I was thinking that's been about five years or so. At least that's what I was thinking when my wife came up to me one day after seeing me wear it over and over again. She says, "Paul, I hate to break the news to you, but that shirt has been out of style for at least 15 years." I argued the point because I didn't think I had had it that long, maybe five years max. But then I was going through these old pictures, you know how you do that sometimes, and I stumbled on this other picture here and I realized I had had it a little longer. [Slide shown.] This is my 23-year-old son, Jacob Okay, she made the point. Let's move on, right? Anyway, I hate when she's right.

Some people call me a hoarder. I think that Andrea is the opposite. I think she is a serial purger. If something hasn't been used for three months, she tags it for sale or the Goodwill, or if she thinks she thinks she can make enough money, she'll sell it on eBay. I don't have definitive proof of this, but I think she's gotten rid of a lot of my stuff that way. But here's my problem—I want to hold onto the old stuff I have but I also like getting my hands on new stuff. For me it's not just about the new iPhone or the new iPad; it has to be the 128 gigabyte iPad Air with Retina Display. I'm not even sure what that means but I have to have it! I'm sure you've seen me on the news. I'm the guy who spends the night in front of Southdale mall, waiting for the opening day at the new Apple store for whatever it is that they're bringing out this time. You know why that is? It's because that brand new iPhone is going to make me happy for the rest of my life, right? Quiz time: is that true or false?

[All:] False.

Oh, it's easy for you to say when it's about me, right? But when it's your iPad or your whatever-it-is that you're sure is going to make you happy, the new kitchen or the new house or the better job, when it's *your* thing that you are just so sure is going to make you happy, it's hard to see the folly of it. It's the old the-grass-is-greener, the old if-only syndrome. If only I had this or that. If only I were good looking like so and so. If only I were as wealthy as so-and-so. If only I were married. If only I were not married, whatever it might be. If my health were better. If my finances were whatever. If only I were, you fill in the blanks, then I would be happy. Then life would be good and until then, life is not good. Everybody says we just need that one thing. What they really mean is, we just need that one thing *more*. So what's your one thing?

The key to the story that I just read, the story of Ahab, is this vineyard he wants. The problem is that Naboth, the owner of the vineyard, doesn't want to sell. The reason he doesn't want to sell is because way back in the Book of Leviticus, God says that every Israelite should have at least one little small tract of land, one small patch of land, and it should not be sold to anyone outside the family. God says if it is sold, then every 50 years, it has to revert back to the original family.

Just a side note: I think this is a great example of how God's laws were not meant to wreck our lives but rather to enhance them. If this one law had been observed, if this one law had been obeyed, there would not be the poverty in Israel or the social unrest that often comes with it.

By refusing to sell, Naboth is simply obeying God. The real question is, why did Ahab even want this land in the first place? He's one of the most successful kings in Israel's history, at least according to world standards. Biggest palace. He won all of his wars. He's married to the beautiful Jezebel. She is a problem, but she is beautiful. This happens to guys sometimes, you know. Well, anyway, he had everything that he possibly could want except for this peasant's little vineyard and because he doesn't have that, he's miserable. That's human nature. It's the rare person who, when their cup is overflowing, doesn't complain about the size of the cup. Pastor John Ortberg calls it the Happy Meal syndrome. He says that when his kids were really young, they were convinced they had a McDonald's-shaped vacuum in their souls. They always wanted a Happy Meal and, of course, you know what a Happy Meal is. It's just some food and a plastic toy. Some marketing genius at McDonald's called it a Happy Meal; you're not just buying food, you're buying happiness. It's the meal of great joy, right? So he would buy this Happy Meal for his kids and it would make them happy for about a minute and a half and then the happy wears off. That's the problem. You never hear of a young adult coming home from college turning to his parents, saying, "Mom and Dad, remember that Happy Meal you bought me back when I was eight? It has brought me eternal everlasting joy." There's no more need for therapy. Never happens. The happy wears off. We're always wanting something else, something more, and if we don't get it, we're miserable.

So now we look back at poor Ahab in this story. When he couldn't get his vineyard, when he couldn't get his hands on that one thing that he coveted, it says that Ahab went home sullen and angry. He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat. Wow! That's what happens when we live in the perpetual if-only-I-had-this-or-that state. If we always live in that, we are miserable because it's endless disappointment. There's always that one thing that we want. The grass is always greener on the other side until we get to the other side, over the fence, and we realize that it's not grass but AstroTurf.

Ahab whined to Jezebel. She says to him, "What's the matter, sweetie? Why are you so down? Why won't you eat?" He answers, "Because I said to Naboth, 'Sell me the vineyard' but he wouldn't." Jezebel says, "Come on! Look at you. You call yourself a king for crying out loud. My gosh! This is a behavior befitting a king? Get up. Get some lunch. Start acting like the man you're supposed to be. I'll deal with this Naboth." You know who pushes the buttons in that family! We're told what happens next. She asks some elders to get some false witnesses to testify against Naboth and say he cursed God and the king, and they stone him to death as a traitor. Now Naboth's land reverts to the king and Ahab gets what he wants, but at a huge cost.

Here's the problem with the if-onlies. When we start resenting what other people have, it wrecks our relationships. If we start wanting what other people have, whether it's a family member or a friend or a coworker, our relationships begin to fall apart. Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, was talking to a group of pastors once and he asked them this simple question. He said, "Do you think it's possible to be too rich? Is it possible, for instance," he said, "to have a house that's so big that it's sinful?" Most of the pastors said, "Well, yeah, sure!" So then he asked this question. He said, "At exactly what square footage does that happen? How big does it need to be before it's sinful?" There was silence and finally one guy said, "When it's bigger than my house." That's what envy does. We start to resent others. We run over people to get

what we want. We destroy our relationships. So how do we get out of this? What's the way to freedom from this if-only syndrome? The apostle Paul states it quite simply in Philippians 4.

12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation

I don't know about you, but that kind of freedom doesn't sound attractive to me. "No matter what," he says, "I am content." "No matter what," he says, "I have joy." That is absolute freedom. How do we get there? Well, two things for today. The first is gratitude. Whenever I need an attitude adjustment, I have a real simple solution. I just hang out with my friends who are pastors in other churches. That's all it takes for me to realize and remember how good I have it here. We're not perfect here by any means. We have a lot of the same issues that every church deals with and that every Christian deals with. We don't always make the budget. Maybe attendance has slipped this year from last year or the year before. Sometimes people complain about stuff, often for good reasons. But twice a month here at CPC on Tuesdays, the staff comes together downstairs in the Fellowship Hall. We come together for fellowship, for prayer, to catch up with each other, compare notes. It's just a way of listening and getting a feel of the good things that are happening in our community.

It's really interesting because I know how stressed out I sometimes get with all of the things that I just know are not going to get accomplished. I find myself sometimes asking the question, is it the best use of time to have another meeting in what can seem to be a life of endless meetings? Then I walk into that Fellowship Hall downstairs and I remember why I love this place. I remember why I love those Tuesdays. It's because I get to spend time hanging out with friends where we laugh together and break bread together and share stories. We share all kinds of stories. One month it might be about a couple whose marriage has been restored from the brink of divorce. Or maybe one of the pastors talks about receiving an email where someone actually liked the sermon that was preached. Or maybe it's about a person whose life has been transformed by going on a mission trip.

As we do this, as we recount those stories, you can just feel the sense of relief in the room. It's like you're walking through a parking lot with a 95-degree temperature and then walking into an air-conditioned room. That's what it feels like. Life has its challenges, but life is never 100 percent awful...98 percent, maybe, but not 100 percent. What gratitude does is, it focuses us on what's good. It reminds us that even when life is bad, and it is that way sometimes, God is good. Not just sometimes, not just when someone reminds Him to be, not just on special occasions. God is good all the time. Amen!

So what are you truly genuinely grateful for today? Not in some Pollyanna-kind of way, but what are you genuinely grateful for? I can tell you what I'm grateful for. I'm grateful for a ton of stuff. I'm grateful for a spouse, for example, who after 24 years still wakes up in the morning and looks over at me and doesn't think that she made a terrible mistake. I'm grateful for kids who, even though they have gone through their phases, even though they put us through hell during those transitional years between adolescence and adulthood, they love God and are trying to figure out how to make their faith count, in their context, in their world. I'm grateful to be part of this awesome community of disciples where we are doing our best to serve the world, whether it's here in the Twin Cities or around the world in far-flung places. I'm grateful for the 58-year legacy of Roger and Dottie Anderson, who we had the honor of praying with last night as we dedicated Anderson Hall, formerly known as Room 204. You've got to go check it out. It's

amazing! And in my best moments, friends, I'm grateful that God loved me, a sinner, enough to die for me. When I start making that list, I start feeling a lot more joy, a lot less if-onlies, because life starts to feel pretty good. Gratitude! It does the body good.

The second way out of the if-onlies is to define contentment. Don't sell your vineyard for a vegetable garden. Don't sell your strawberry patch for a parking lot. King Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard to turn it into a vegetable garden. Nothing wrong with a vegetable garden but think about it. Vineyards take years and years to cultivate and the older they get, the better they get. Ahab wants to wipe out Naboth's years of cultivating something for short-term gain. That's what the if-onlies do. For instance, if you are single and want to be married, being married is a good thing, but don't get so focused on that that you neglect to invest in the friendships that you already have. That's sacrificing the vineyard for a vegetable garden. Or maybe you really want that promotion or career success so badly that you start working these ungodly hours to the extent that you don't even know your kids anymore. And then when they become adults, they tell you they don't feel close to you. Or maybe they don't do that; they just don't show up for Christmas. That's sacrificing the vineyard for a vegetable garden.

What are the long-term things that can actually make us truly happy? There are a couple of them and both can be boiled down to the word *connection*, connection to God and connection to others in authentic ways where we are accepted just the way we are. God's been saying these things for thousands of years. There is a lot of really good stuff in the Bible if we would only read it and live it, and that's why we're calling this series Hidden Gems. Having that new job, the new house, being better looking, or whatever, it won't make us happy. We think it will but it won't. Connection to God and connection to others where we're loved and appreciated and accepted for who we're are, that's what gives us lasting joy. That's the vineyard. That's the long-term thing. Focus on that and you won't have a string of if-onlies.

For some of you, I imagine this is hard to hear. For some of you, you're in really hard places. There are those things that you're yearning for that just don't seem to be materializing. You've gone through painful stuff, but you get so focused on wanting God to fix that specific thing that you can miss the long-term value of what He's doing through it. May I offer just a couple of action steps as I close, some things to carve out in this week ahead? Can you carve out two hours, it's not much, two hours of your time this week to invest in and to deepen your connection to God and to someone you care about? Have coffee with a friend. Make a date night with your spouse. Spend time imagining Jesus sitting next to you face-to-face just as a friend. That's one thing.

The second thing is to write out a list. Sometimes that's really helpful. It's been helpful for me. Just make a list of the things that you're genuinely thankful for. That picture I uncovered of Andrea and me twenty years ago and that shirt of mine got me thinking about some things. It got me thinking about a time in my life when things were way less complicated, the early years of our marriage when we were in our mid-twenties. Sometimes I refer to those years as the golden years. No kids, no minivan, no mortgage, easy jobs, almost no bills to pay. We ate out a lot. We actually went to Hawaii twice in six months during that time. I mean, it was crazy. But if someone were to come to me today and say, "Hey, if I could use a magic wand and make those golden years permanent, would you want that?" I could say unequivocally with no hesitation that I would never want to go back to those years because then I wouldn't have my kids. I wouldn't have my relationship with you. I feel connected to people that I love. I feel a deep gratitude for the long-term vineyard that God has been cultivating in my life. So I don't need some magic

wand to take me back to those golden years and make it permanent. I'm blessed right here where I am. Now if somebody wanted to give me those golden years for a two-week vacation, that would be fine. You could send me to Hawaii, but just not permanently.

So what are you chasing, just so sure that it is going to make you happy, at least until five days after you get it? Instead, pay attention this week to what you're really grateful for, because you see, by trying to convince you that you can't be happy unless x-, y-, and z-thing happens, what the devil is trying to do is, he is trying to steal your joy. He is trying to steal your inheritance. He is trying to steal your peace and your victory. He is trying to steal your vineyard. Don't let him! Be like Naboth in this story and say, "My vineyard is not for sale. My joy is not for sale. My connection to Jesus and others is not for sale. I will not sacrifice it to focus on some Happy Meal where the desire will not ultimately bring me joy, because I know that even when things are at their hardest, my heavenly Father is going to give me hope. He's going to give me peace. He's going to give me strength and confidence and power and joy and He's going to bless me. Not when I arrive somewhere, not when I achieve something, not when I get this and find that, not some other time, not in some other place, not in some other life, not if-I just-had, not if-I-just-got. My Father in heaven will bless me right here, right now, right where I am. I'm not going to settle for a Happy Meal when I've been given the promise of an eternal banquet. I don't need to go somewhere else to get it because my Father makes house calls. He delivers. As Psalm 23 says,

1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

The banquet that God has set aside for you and for me is a banquet that's prepared out of love and sacrifice. Jesus describes this banquet in the Gospel of Luke when He says,

29 People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God [Luke 13:29].

That is the table that's been set for you and for me. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.