

*How Much is Enough?*  
1 Kings 21:1-10, 15-21a  
The Reverend Graham Ford  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
June 13, 2010

Drill, baby, drill.

Three words that originated as a partisan plea. Three words that, regardless of party loyalty, reflect our national ethos. Three words that, in retrospect, were a chilling premonition.

Drill, baby, drill...and so we did.

And on Earth Day 2010, we made the earth bleed. Slicing open a vein that continues to pour poison into the Gulf.

How much is enough? It's a question that has no easy answer. It's said that when Nelson Rockefeller was asked "How much is enough?" he replied "Just a little bit more..."

The oil gushing into the gulf is the physical embodiment, the greasy judgement, of the way that we all say, just a little bit more. As 6% of the world's population, Americans consume around 35% of the world's energy. That's an abstract number. The blobs on the beach, the oil soaked birds, those are concrete. Those are the icons of an ecological disaster that begins as a theological question...

How much is enough? This uncomfortable question confronts us in Scripture this morning.

In the story we find King Ahab in his vacation palace, his place in the Poconos. He spies a small vineyard that he wants to convert into a vegetable garden-right away something is awry.

As one scholar so eloquently notes "In Ancient Israel, anyone who would trade a vineyard for a vegetable garden is an idiot". Vineyards thrived. Vegetable gardens were for show. Vineyards provided wine in a region with unsafe drinking water. Vegetable gardens were nostalgia for Egyptian captivity. But King Ahab, who has everything he could ever need, wants just a little bit more. He wants Naboth's ancestral inheritance, he wants Naboth's Vineyard,

It might help to have an image of this scene: If you've had the pleasure of seeing the animated movie *Up*, you know what Naboth looks like. If you haven't seen *Up*, you must put it in your Netflix queue today. In the film there is a grandfather, looking a bit Dr. Carter in a few years. His is the last home on a block that has been bought and developed. It's his treasured land, his modest home. He refuses to be bought out by the faceless corporation.

The Naboth in our story refuses to give up his land because literally, God forbids it. As spelled out in Torah, his ancestral inheritance is not for sale.

Remember that Ahab is the King of Israel. He has one job. He is the one charged with upholding God's law. But he wants a little bit more. And after Naboth rebuffs his offer, Ahab sulks off to his room, like a grumpy teenager, because he cannot get what *he* wants. Instead he lets his wife Jezebel do his dirty work for him.

She takes his royal seal, instructs the elders to bring up false charges, has Naboth stoned to death for blasphemy. Just like that Ahab has his little bit more...

But it comes at a cost.

Elijah, God's prophet, brings the word of judgement even before Ahab can begin the vineyard remodeling. Elijah relays this message: "I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, I will bring disaster on you."

Ahab stands in judgement for his greed.

It's an ancient story, but one that we know all too well...

Naboth is the little guy, he's the fisherman in the Gulf, who's land and livelihood has been threatened by the recklessness of the powerful.

Ahab is the giant corporate entity that always gets what it wants. The one who handles complaints like the BP rep who helpfully noted that: "Louisiana isn't the only place that has shrimp."

Our sympathies are with the powerless, our anger burns at those we hold publicly responsible.

But if we are honest, more often than not, we are the ones who are in Ahab's position. A position of privilege, power and possession. And even then we want just a little bit more.

Our lives are marked by this desire for just a little bit more.

By almost any measure we are more comfortable than anyone in human history. And yet this high level of health and prosperity seems to have little correlation with personal satisfaction.

Our stuff is not making us happy.

The cause has been described as a pandemic of affluenza. Affluenza defined as the painful, contagious, condition of overload, debt, anxiety and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.

The dogged pursuit of more. Like Ahab, one more vineyard will not be enough, theres always a little bit more to be had.

I'd suggest that it is our affliction with affluenza, rather than the greed of Big Oil, that is responsible for the environmental disaster in the gulf. Endless growth has been the goal. Not sustainability. The desire for a little bit more pushes us to ever more extreme measures to fuel endless growth.

This is an ecological disaster that demands a theological response.

The good news, and there is good news here, is that there is antidote for the condition: We have a Gospel message that says, you are not defined by your stuff, you are defined solely as a beloved child of God. How much is enough? Being a child of God is all the enough one should ever need.

That sounds very nice, but it's no easy task. To seek more and more to give us a sense of self, stems from fear and not faith as Susan so powerfully preached last week. Fear that God is not enough.

And so we need each other in this task.

We need to be the Church together to resist the dogged pursuit of more.

And here is where it gets tricky. We need to be the Church and yet what happens when the church itself is marked by the dogged pursuit of more?

That only makes sense. We bring our lives together here and living on and around the Mainline that means a culture of “too much”. It means racing through a frenetic church calendar, piling on new programs, panicking at dips in attendance or budget, and meeting after meeting after meeting. It means we stay intensely busy because if we stopped... there could be some hard questions.

We have come to that time. We will soon be asking these hard questions: Who, as a church are we right now? Who is God calling us to be?

And as we, as you answer those questions, I believe that you will face this choice: you can be a community of conformity or you can be a community of resistance. A place obsessed with the dogged pursuit of more or a space blessed by the countercultural pursuit of enough.

Conformity or Resistance.

It's a critical choice because here at Bryn Mawr the question in your individual and collective lives is not if you will wield power, but how will you use it?

Will you conform or will you resist?

In my two years I have had the privilege of seeing resistance in action. I think of the legacy of Richard Shaull, living between two worlds and asking this his adopted community of faith how you might respond on behalf of the oppressed.

I think of these words that he wrote: “... Jesus announces that the poor and the outcasts are the ones who will sit down at the banquet table of the Messiah. It is they who hunger and thirst after justice and eagerly anticipate the dawning of a new age. Only as those of us on top come to share their perception, their yearning, and their struggle can we also be included”<sup>1</sup>

Dick Shaull knew that this Gospel message, of concern for the oppressed, the Judgement that Ahab receives, is a political message in the truest sense of the word. If the Gospel is true, it should make a difference in our individual and corporate lives.

I think of BMPC member Wendell Potter featured in the Current Issue of *Presbyterians Today Magazine* who resisted by asking “How much is enough?”. Mr. Potter, the former chief spokesman for Cigna testified before the U.S. Senate about what he saw as a lack of transparency in the health insurance industry. He is quoted as saying “I talk extensively about the use of fear by corporate interests and

1 Richard Shaull, *Heralds of a New Reformation: The Poor in South and North America* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985), 83.

government,” “They know people live fear-based lives ... Special-interest groups use fear to get people to think in a certain way. This contributes to them having inadequate information about their coverage and about the practices of the industry that make our health-care system increasingly inequitable. He goes on from Senate testimony to Personal testimony: “I absolutely had an experience of evangelism,” Potter says. “I heard the truth of this good news that set me free. For the first time in my life, I am getting out of my self-interest and self-focus, of living only for me and those close to me.”

I think of our taskforces: Hunger, Peacemaking, Environmental Justice all asking how much is enough? How many missed meals, how much gun violence, how much drilling and slashing of the earth is enough?

These are not simply political and environmental questions, these are deeply theological concerns that arise from the Good News we have come to believe is true. We care for our neighbors and care for creation because Jesus gave us more than enough. We don't have to be afraid to share, we are invited to be freed by faith and not bound by fear.

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian is in a unique position to leverage large resources for tremendous good. Recall that Ahab, in his position of power, privilege and possession, is only there to protect and uphold those who were without power- when he failed to do so, he stood in judgment.

To survive and to thrive, BMPC must continue to defend and befriend those who are on the underside. That's where Jesus promised to be, with the Naboths of the world..because like Naboth our Lord was an innocent man sentenced to die on charges of blaspheming God and King. Naboth had a vineyard, Jesus was the True vine. Naboth sat between two scoundrels; Jesus hung between two thieves. Naboth once alive was dead, Jesus once dead is now alive. That is the Gospel news that will free Bryn Mawr for faithful service.

And as you move into God's good future, I transition out of this transition into ministry. I am so grateful for your love, support, challenge, patience and prayers that have allowed me to grow into this strange and wonderful calling of ordained ministry.

As I leave I am excited for you. There is new energy here, this is a new time, and I believe God is at work in ways we are just beginning to see. In the many, many meetings I've sat in on during my two years, I've learned that sometimes the best role for a Resident to play is to ask questions, so I leave you with these...

Will you use your power, prestige and possession for your own glory or will you be faithful stewards of all these things that are on loan from God?

Will you conform by accepting the status quo or will you resist by seeking transformation and justice for the oppressed?

Will you cry “Drill, baby, Drill”, or will you say...“enough”?

Amen.