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I will tell you the story of a vineyard other than what we read in today's Gospel. There was once a beautiful vineyard right beside the palace of King Ahab. King Ahab coveted his neighbor's vineyard, and so one day he went to his neighbor Naboth and asked him to give him his vineyard in exchange for a better vineyard, or even for money. The king wanted Naboth's vineyard for a vegetable garden since it was so close to his palace. Naboth only had to name his price. But Naboth refused to sell because the vineyard was his inheritance, having been handed down from generation to generation to him. And so, King Ahab returned to his palace depressed and sulking. He thought of himself as a great king, and yet he laid in his bed with his face to the wall and refused to eat. Finally, his queen, Jezebel, came to him and after asking why he was in such a fit learned of Naboth's refusal. He whined to her that Naboth refused to give him his vineyard. And Jezebel said to him, *Are you not the King of Israel? Arise, and eat, and I will give you the vineyard of Naboth.* Jezebel went and wrote letters in the King's name commanding that there be proclaimed a feast and to seat Naboth in the place of honor, and then to find two men to accuse him of blaspheming God, and then carry Naboth out and stone him. The noblemen of the city did as Jezebel had written, and Naboth was falsely accused of blasphemy and was stoned. Once King Ahab heard that Naboth was dead he immediately went and took possession of the vineyard. Ahab and Jezebel would have gotten away with it, had not the Lord told Elijah the prophet to go and say to him, *Hast thou killed and also taken possession? In the place where Naboth died shall you also die...and the house of Ahab shall be no more.*

I tell you this story of Naboth's vineyard because the story of the vineyard is a recurring theme throughout the scriptures, and each story of the vineyard, whether it be Naboth's vineyard, or as found in the prophet Isaiah, or the different versions of the vineyard parable as told by Jesus, all point to the same lessons. These lessons challenge what we think of God and of His Kingdom, just as the Epistle and Collect for today do. In this short season of *Gesima-tide*, we turn from focusing on the revelation and manifestation of Jesus Christ to the world, to the revelation and manifestation of Jesus Christ and His Kingdom to us. We are invited to learn how the Kingdom of Heaven works, which might seem difficult because the lessons this morning seem to contradict each other.

First, we hear in the Collect that uncomfortable phrase about us being *justly punished for our offences*, even though we have asked God to *favorably*

*hear our prayer*, and all so that we might be delivered by His goodness. We are delivered by God's goodness, and then St. Paul seems to say its not just God's goodness that delivers us, but that we run the race set before us, *run that ye may obtain*. Remember the prize to the fastest runner is not a crown of laurel leaves that will wither and rot, but an incorruptible crown. We might have heard those words *incorruptible crown*, and thought immediately of crowns of gold, or the crown of life. But then we are presented with yet another facet in the Gospel, in which it does not matter all that much about running or endurance, but that we agree to work in the vineyard for a penny, regardless of when our shift started. Those who went into the vineyard to work at the beginning of the day, and those who began to work at the end of the workday, all receive the same reward. As one can imagine this causes quite a problem among the workers for those who began work early that morning believed they should have earned more money.

Even though these lessons seem opposed to each other, they have much in common. The Collect is correct, we are deserving of punishment, our pride and vanity too often frustrates our ability to receive the Grace of God. And yet it is by His goodness and mercy that He has delivered us from what we truly deserve, it is by His goodness that He invites us to run the race, to receive the incorruptible crown, and even to work in His vineyard, the Kingdom of Heaven. It is by His goodness that He agrees to reward us a penny, that often overlooked and taken for granted symbol of Eternal Life, regardless of how long we spend working in His vineyard, if we finish the work that He has called us to do. Likewise, we are to run the race that He has set before us. The goal is to run the course and to finish the race, *know ye not that they which run in a race run all*. And we quickly learn that to run the race, we must give up that which is going to hold us back and drag us down. We are reminded that *every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things*. As we hear in the Epistle to the Hebrews, *wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily best us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us*. The workers who came early to the Lord's vineyard, and King Ahab, in the story of Naboth's vineyard, were rebuked for not laying aside their greed, covetousness, and resentment. They had no reason to be jealous of each other, just as Ahab had no reason to be jealous of Naboth. Both men had received the inheritance of their fathers, Naboth a vineyard, and Ahab the Kingdom of Israel. But for the workers and for Ahab it was not enough. Likewise, we are reminded that we must lay aside whatever may hinder us from our work in the vineyard and run to the Kingdom.

Speaking of King Ahab, we left him with the words of the prophet Elijah ringing in his ears, *Hast thou killed and also taken possession? In the place where Naboth died shall you also die...and the house of Ahab shall be no more.* We might think that the judgment pronounced by God upon King Ahab was justice for the evil of allowing the murder of Naboth. The Scriptures even go further and say, *But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up...and he did abominably in following idols.* If anyone was to be justly punished for [their] offences, it was certainly Ahab for we cannot imagine such a character having any place at all in the Kingdom of Heaven, but this is not the end of the story. For the rest of that story reads; *And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly.* The notorious King Ahab repented, fasted and prayed, and did penance for his sins, and God heard his prayer. Then *the word of the Lord came to Elijah saying, seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? Because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the [judgment] in his days.* And even though it would not last, even King Ahab, who there was none like unto in wickedness and idolatry, was invited to run the race God had set before Him, and even to work in His vineyard for the reward of eternal life. *So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.*