

Susanna (NRSV)

There was a man living in Babylon whose name was Joakim. He married the daughter of Hilkihah, named Susanna, a very beautiful woman and one who feared the Lord. Her parents were righteous, and had trained their daughter according to the law of Moses. Joakim was very rich, and had a fine garden adjoining his house; the Jewish people used to come to him because he was the most honored of them all.

That year two elders from the people were appointed as judges. Concerning them the Lord had said: "Wickedness came forth from Babylon, from elders who were judges, who were supposed to govern the people." These men were frequently at Joakim's house, and all who had a case to be tried came to them there.

When the people left at noon, Susanna would go into her husband's garden to walk. Every day the two elders used to see her, going in and walking about, and they began to lust for her. They suppressed their consciences and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven or remembering their duty to administer justice. Both were overwhelmed with passion for her, but they did not tell each other of their distress, for they were ashamed to disclose their lustful desire to seduce her. Day after day they watched eagerly to see her.

One day they said to each other, "Let us go home, for it is time for lunch." So they both left and parted from each other. But turning back, they met again; and when each pressed the other for the reason, they confessed their lust. Then together they arranged for a time when they could find her alone.

Once, while they were watching for an opportune day, she went in as before with only two maids, and wished to bathe in the garden, for it was a hot day. No one was there except the two elders, who had hidden themselves and were watching her. She said to her maids, "Bring me olive oil and ointments, and shut the garden doors so that I can bathe." They did as she told them: they shut the doors of the garden and went out by the side doors to bring what they had been commanded; they did not see the elders, because they were hiding.

When the maids had gone out, the two elders got up and ran to her. They said, "Look, the garden doors are shut, and no one can see us. We are burning with desire for you; so give your consent, and lie with us. If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was with you, and this was why you sent your maids away."

Susanna groaned and said, "I am completely trapped. For if I do this, it will mean death for me; if I do not, I cannot escape your hands. I choose not to do it; I will fall into your hands, rather than sin in the sight of the Lord."

Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and the two elders shouted against her. And one of them ran and opened the garden doors. When the people in the house heard the shouting in the garden, they rushed in at the side door to see what had happened to her. And when the elders told their story, the servants felt very much ashamed, for nothing like this had ever been said about Susanna.

The next day, when the people gathered at the house of her husband Joakim, the two elders came, full of their wicked plot to have Susanna put to death. In the presence of the people they said, "Send for Susanna daughter of Hilkihah, the wife of Joakim." So they sent for her. And she came with her parents, her children, and all her relatives.

Now Susanna was a woman of great refinement and beautiful in appearance. As she was veiled, the scoundrels ordered her to be unveiled, so that they might feast their eyes on her beauty. Those who were with her and all who saw her were weeping.

Then the two elders stood up before the people and laid their hands on her head. Through her tears she looked up toward Heaven, for her heart trusted in the Lord. The elders said, “While we were walking in the garden alone, this woman came in with two maids, shut the garden doors, and dismissed the maids. Then a young man, who was hiding there, came to her and lay with her. We were in a corner of the garden, and when we saw this wickedness we ran to them. Although we saw them embracing, we could not hold the man, because he was stronger than we, and he opened the doors and got away. We did, however, seize this woman and asked who the young man was, but she would not tell us. These things we testify.”

Because they were elders of the people and judges, the assembly believed them and condemned her to death.

Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and said, “O eternal God, you know what is secret and are aware of all things before they come to be; you know that these men have given false evidence against me. And now I am to die, though I have done none of the wicked things that they have charged against me!”

The Lord heard her cry. Just as she was being led off to execution, God stirred up the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel, and he shouted with a loud voice, “I want no part in shedding this woman’s blood!”

All the people turned to him and asked, “What is this you are saying?” Taking his stand among them he said, “Are you such fools, O Israelites, as to condemn a daughter of Israel without examination and without learning the facts? Return to court, for these men have given false evidence against her.”

So all the people hurried back. And the rest of the elders said to him, “Come, sit among us and inform us, for God has given you the standing of an elder.” Daniel said to them, “Separate them far from each other, and I will examine them.”

When they were separated from each other, he summoned one of them and said to him, “You old relic of wicked days, your sins have now come home, which you have committed in the past, pronouncing unjust judgments, condemning the innocent and acquitting the guilty, though the Lord said, ‘You shall not put an innocent and righteous person to death.’ Now then, if you really saw this woman, tell me this: Under what tree did you see them being intimate with each other?” He answered, “Under a mastic tree.” And Daniel said, “Very well! This lie has cost you your head, for the angel of God has received the sentence from God and will immediately cut you in two.”

Then, putting him to one side, he ordered them to bring the other. And he said to him, “You offspring of Canaan and not of Judah, beauty has beguiled you and lust has perverted your heart. This is how you have been treating the daughters of Israel, and they were intimate with you through fear; but a daughter of Judah would not tolerate your wickedness. Now then, tell me: Under what tree did you catch them being intimate with each other?” He answered, “Under an evergreen oak.” Daniel said to him, “Very well! This lie has cost you also your head, for the angel of God is waiting with his sword to split you in two, so as to destroy you both.”

Then the whole assembly raised a great shout and blessed God, who saves those who hope in him. And they took action against the two elders, because out of their own mouths Daniel had convicted them of bearing false witness; they did to them as they had wickedly planned to do to their neighbor. Acting in accordance with the law of Moses, they put them to death. Thus innocent blood was spared that day.

Hilkiah and his wife praised God for their daughter Susanna, and so did her husband Joakim and all her relatives, because she was found innocent of a shameful deed. And from that day onward Daniel had a great reputation among the people.

To Do Justice and Walk Humbly

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: August 16, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Susanna

It's a great story. The story of Susanna. It's a story that we all know. Now, I don't mean that we all know this exact story, for it's somewhat obscure in the Christian tradition. But we all know how it works.

Let me relate a modern day version of it. In a town not far from here, let us call it Houndsboro, there is a football team, let us call it the Northeast Marauders. This team has been incredibly successful for well over a decade. It's coach, let's call him William Belicash, and the quarterback, let's call him Brady Thomas, have been together for all this time. The other teams in the league do not like the Northeast Marauders. After all, the league has instituted salary caps and free agency, and handicapped the draft of new players so that in theory everything should level out. Over time all the teams should succeed about the same.

But down in Houndsboro something crazy has been happening. The Marauders have won their division almost every year. They have won the biggest championship an unheard of four times under Belicash and Thomas.

The other teams, especially the Apple City Propellers, the Grublemore Crows, and The Lilliapolis Donkeys, have been very resentful. Since all teams should be more or less equal, there has to be an explanation. And there are really only two options. Either Belicash and Thomas are better than everyone else or they must be cheaters. You can guess which idea the Propellers, Crows and Donkeys have chosen to embrace.

They have cried out to the league Commissioner Rabbit Badsmell, and all the other owners have cheered them on. Finally, they have all been thinking, the Marauders will get their comeuppance. Belicash and Thomas will get taken down a peg or two, along with their owner, Mac Cheese. Surely, they could find a way to accuse the Marauders of cheating. And so at urging of the league's other owners Rabbit Badsmell began an investigation. In fact, the coach of the Crows, named Hardy Crowbar ironically enough, got the ball rolling. He let it be known that he was pretty sure the Marauders were spreading grape jelly on the footballs Brady Thomas used, which made them easier to throw and catch.

Rabbit Badsmell launched a multimillion dollar "independent" investigation led by an attorney, named B. Done Poorly. Mr. Poorly's months long investigation found that, sure enough, the Marauders were guilty. The quarterback Brady Thomas had ordered the equipment guy to put grape jelly on the balls. They offered several pieces of evidence. In a game with the Lilliapolis Donkeys the referees check the balls at halftime. They had grape jelly on them. Well, some of them did. But so did some of the Lilliapolis Donkeys' balls. And one of the referees was eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich at halftime while he was checking the balls, and he couldn't really remember which balls he was handling while he was eating the sandwich or whether the jelly was strawberry or grape, but he was pretty sure it was strawberry. Anyway, the jelly on the footballs was one piece of evidence B. Done Poorly cited, though he did say he was pretty sure the referee was eating grape jelly and didn't remember correctly. The other piece of evidence that figured prominently in B. Done Poorly's report was that the equipment guy

confessed that he likes peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, too. And in an email his friend called him the sticky wicket, which clearly referred to his job as the jelly applicator, quite likely using a croquet wicket to spread the sticky stuff.

The B. Done Poorly report cited this evidence. And it cited the fact that Brady Thomas wouldn't allow Mr. Poorly to search his house to see if there was any grape jelly in the cupboards. Combined, Mr. Poorly concluded that Brady Thomas was most likely generally aware how the jelly got on the footballs and had some part in orchestrating it, even though the evidence that someone other than the referee put jelly on the ball was flimsy indeed. No matter, the Marauders were fined draft picks and a million dollars and Brady Thomas was suspended for a quarter of the upcoming season. In one fell swoop Rabbit Badsmell accomplished an impressive feat. He made the other league owners happy, he trashed the reputation of the Marauders, Bill Belicash and Brady Thomas, he reinforced the idea that the only way the Marauders won so much was because they were cheaters, and just for good measure he made the team play a quarter of the upcoming season without its star quarterback.

Well, as you may imagine, Brady Thomas appealed the decision. Of course he had to appeal to the person who convicted him to begin with, Rabbit Badsmell. Badsmell was irritated by Brady Thomas's arrogance for even questioning his judgment. Mr. Badsmell heard the appeal and then after what he called "careful deliberation" he upheld all the penalties. And for good measure, he found that Brady Thomas wasn't just most likely generally aware that there was an infraction, like the original B. Done Poorly report stated. Rabbit Badsmell averred that Brady Thomas planned it all out and orchestrated it. Badsmell was particularly upset that Brady Thomas failed to tell the league that his son sometimes ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and that Mr. Thomas was hiding the fact that there was jelly in his house, which he would not allow B. Poorly to search. Badsmell concluded that Thomas was guilty of gross and willful conspiracy to cheat and to undermine the integrity of the game.

I'm pretty sure I've disguised all the identities of the people and places in this little parable, but let me just say, this situation happened not far from where we are right now. Can you imagine?

Well, I hope you've had a little fun with this story. I hope it has amused you to hear it as much as it did me to write it. But, as you might guess, I have a more serious point. In eighteenth century Jonathan Swift wrote a tongue-in-cheek satire called "A Modest Proposal." His modest proposal: to ease the burden on poor families their children could be sold for food to feed the rich. Everybody would win wrote Swift. The poor would be less burdened, the rich would have more food (he even offered up many novel recipes for cooking them), and the children themselves would be spared a life of poverty. Of course, Swift was making a scathing critique of income inequality and the privileges of the rich at the expense of the poor in eighteenth century Britain, a critique that sounds remarkably fresh in the twenty-first century, by the way.

My story, not unlike Swift's "Modest Proposal," or like the story of Susanna in the Bible, is meant to highlight how powerless people are when they face the corruption of justice. The judges in the story of Susanna used their power to attempt to rape Susanna and then again to charge her with a crime when she warded off their advances. Susanna said, "I am completely trapped," and she was. The power of the judges was so absolute that their story was not questioned even by Susanna's family and friends. Only the appearance of Daniel on the scene saved her. In Swift's time the rich could expect to get what they desired at the expense of the poor, for the poor had no power to prevent it. The poor were not really human; they could just as

well be food. And in my little tale, even someone as well-known, wealthy and respected as Brady Thomas was powerless in the face of Rabbit Badsmell's power as the Commissioner.

A columnist wrote recently that Brady Thomas now knows what it feels like for poor people and people of color who face the criminal justice system every day, to have no power to fight the system. In the old TV series *L. A. Law* there's a poignant episode in which Harry Hamlin's character Michael Kuzak is representing a middle-aged poor black woman in a civil case. As you may remember, the law firm in *L. A. Law* was a big, high power firm of incredibly wealthy and successful lawyers. The poor woman in the litigation was offered a settlement. Kuzak, her attorney, vigorously counseled her to decline the offer. He was dead certain that they can do much much better in court. But the woman insisted on taking the settlement. In frustration Kuzak asks her why she would do that when he's sure he can do better for her. The woman answers, and I'll never forget what she said, the woman answers, "Well Mr. Kuzak there's one big difference between you and me. You wake up every day, look in the mirror, and you're sure of yourself. You expect things to go your way. You expect to control your destiny and get what you deserve. And you're mostly right. Me, I wake up every day and look in the mirror, and I'm convinced that today, like every other day, I will be a big loser, that I'll get run over by somebody and I know that I won't be able to do anything about it. And I'm mostly right, too. So, you think the settlement is too small, and we can do better. I think if I don't take it, I won't get anything at all."

Wow. How painful is that? Abuse of power is such a huge problem. Those who are charged with protecting the powerless can, and often do, do the opposite. The corrupt judges in the story of Susanna. The Commissioner in the story of Brady Thomas. The whole system in Swift's "Modest Proposal" and the episode from *L. A. Law*. Lord Acton is famous for saying in the nineteenth century, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." These are depressing sentiments, but the evidence for them is manifold. In the end, I suppose the message is that wherever any of us exercises power in one form or another, even if not on a grand scale, can heed his words and try to not corruption overtake us. Or we can heed those of Micah, with which we began our service this morning: Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly before your God. Amen.