

Epworth Chapel on the Green
October 1, 2017
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
Psalm 25:1-14
Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:28-32

Our Old Testament lesson from Ezekiel contains a quote or proverb that one might still hear spoken today. The proverb goes: *the parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge*. Or, as the NLT renders it: *the parents have eaten sour grapes, but their children's mouths pucker at the taste*.

We may never have eaten a sour grape or know exactly what it means to have our teeth set on edge, but we get the gist of the proverb: *children suffer the consequences of their parents' actions*.

This proverb has a ring of truth to it. Who among us has not mourned a parent's limitations, or struggled against some lingering psychic injury from your childhood?

The context of this proverb, as Ezekiel quotes it, is that he is writing to exiles, those who have been in captivity for some time, and whose captivity is the result of the disobedience of their parents and grandparents. This proverb is probably being used by the exiles to exonerate themselves of any responsibility for

their current situation. In their minds, they are not in exile through any fault of their own, but rather are suffering for the sins of their parents and grandparents.

And in some ways it's hard to find fault with the argument that children usually do suffer from their parents' mistakes. This attitude was deeply embedded in Israel's life. They had this inter-generational sense of guilt and punishment when it came to God's justice. In Exodus, in fact in the Ten Commandments, God is described as One who "visits the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation" (Cf. Ex. 20:5; 34:7).

And although we are not as quick as we once were to attribute children's suffering to the hand of God, we do recognize the impact of family violence on subsequent generations. After all, it's the stuff of southern novels and the bread and butter of psychotherapists.

The problem begins when God rejects this proverb outright: "As surely as I live," says the sovereign LORD, "you will not say this proverb anymore in Israel. For all people are mine to judge -- both parents and children alike. And this is my rule: The person who sins will be the one who dies."

You may have noticed that our reading transitions from verse 4 to verse 25, omitting vv. 5-24. But those verses are important, because in them Ezekiel deconstructs or dismantles this proverb. In a series of legal rulings describing the deeds of a righteous father, his wicked son, and the righteous grandson, Ezekiel

argues that a wicked son does not benefit from his father's righteousness, nor does he jeopardize his own son's chance at life.

If, for example, the righteous grandchild is free to change course once he sees and understands the consequences of his father's wickedness, what about the wicked themselves? Are they doomed to suffer punishment for past wickedness?

No, says Ezekiel. Even the wicked may turn from their wickedness, change course, and live. Because all life belongs to God, even the lives of the wicked, the future remains open, not only for children of bad men, but also for the bad men themselves.

This, then, produces the reply in v. 25 that "It's not fair," or "The Lord is not just."

As we saw last week, there may be an element of truth to this accusation, in the sense that God's wisdom and ways are ultimately beyond us, beyond the comprehension of our finite minds.

But God won't have any of it. God throws their accusation right back at them. By what logic, by what standard, God asks, would human beings prefer a fixed destiny of suffering to the freedom of being able to repent, to change course, and thereby to gain life? They want to see themselves as *victims*, children suffering for their parents' sins. The problem with that, however, is *that if you*

remain a victim of someone else's actions, it also renders you helpless to move into new patterns of life.

So, while the people scratch their heads and say, "God's not fair," God is scratching His head and saying, "Why would you choose to remain victims? Why would you choose a fatalistic proverb, when I am offering you new life and a new direction?"

This choice is brought fully before us in our Gospel lesson, where Jesus tells the parable of the two sons who are instructed to go and work in their father's vineyard. They are not helpless victims. They are graciously empowered with choice. And because of that, they are graciously held responsible *to choose*.

And what is true of them is also true of tax collectors, prostitutes, priests and princes. And it's true for you and me. *We may carry around a lot of baggage from our past, but we are not hopelessly or fatalistically doomed to repeat it.* We may bear scars of pain inflicted on us by our parents and grandparents, but we are not doomed to inflict that pain on our children and grandchildren.

If anything -- and if I hear Ezekiel correctly -- God offers us grace to break those cycles of pain and to begin new patterns of being and doing.

As we prepare to come to the table this morning, I want to remind you that you are not your past. You are not a prisoner to the past, and the way things have been in the past does not inevitably make them a part of your future. For God is

extending His hand to us, and saying to us: *turn, choose, live!* God is extending His hand to us and saying: *let loose, forgive, let go!* God's hand is extended to us this morning in the tangible stuff of bread and wine.

So reach out and take the grace He offers you. And go forth with joy, with the assurance that it's never too late to have a new beginning.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.