

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 Pastor Bill Uetricht Pentecost 17 9/27/20

I don't know about you, but for me these days seem to confront us with so many large issues. A pandemic, forest fires, violent city streets, unjust treatment carried out by the power structure and endured by the power structure, frequent and increasingly intense floods and hurricanes, racism—its reality and its effects. In some ways, it's all very overwhelming. At times, I feel crippled. Is there anything I can do? Do I have any responsibility? Am I or we together at all liable for what has occurred? Or are we just the victims of what people and generations before us have passed on to us?

If these kinds of struggles or questions resonate with you, then the book of Ezekiel is going to speak to you today. This book addresses people who are feeling overwhelmed. They are the first exiles who were forced to leave Israel in 597 B.C.E. when the evil Babylonians began their process of occupying Israel. Ezekiel himself was probably one of the exiles.

These are folks who had to pack up and leave home. And many of them were Israelites who struggled to remain faithful to God in the past, and especially right now in their new, strange, unwanted homeland. But life was a mess. And they felt hopeless about changing anything. It was all too much. They weren't able to make a difference. The generation before them had sinned big time. And they were living in light of what they had been passed on to them. It was true: "the parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

This proverb, strange as it may seem, was being used by the exiles to explain things and also to reduce the exiles' sense of responsibility for what had occurred, and more than that, for what they could do about it, to change the situation, to do what we in the church call "repent." The proverb says that the parents have done something that

has had impact upon the children. The parents eat sour grapes; the children note it in their mouth, on their teeth. God says through Ezekiel that the exiles are not to use that parable anymore because it is stopping them from the repentance that will bring life to them.

Now I have to say that this notion of the impact of a previous generation on a current one is not something worth discarding. Frankly, the Bible itself speaks of the sins of the fathers being visited upon the generations to come. Trauma theorists these days are suggesting that trauma may actually alter the DNA of people who have endured that trauma, affecting generations to come. Generational curses can be very real. Studies of the victims of the Holocaust and slavery reveal that truth.

The Systems theory advocates will help you see the impact of the system that goes back in time on you and the way you live. They will urge you to do a study of your family system back, including previous generations. And such studies often reveal dysfunctions that are not just individual in nature; they are systemic. It's not unusual to find in the previous generations of sex abusers a history of such abuse. It's not unusual to find in the life of an alcoholic a story of multi-generational alcoholism. The disease can be systemic and a family one. It's not unusual to discover within people who have such a hard time claiming their own space and worth a multi-generational pattern of such struggle. Truthfully, this is particularly problematic for me, because sometimes it seems almost impossible to help these individuals change. It's almost as if they have a tape in their brain, and they cannot stop or unwind it. Even if they are remarkably gifted, they cannot get away from the sense that at the bottom of it all they lack worth.

So, I don't think it is totally helpful to abandon the sense that who are is deeply connected to the ones from whom we have come. We aren't islands unto ourselves. We are who we are in part because of

the DNA given us, the functionality or dysfunctionality of those who have come before us. But Ezekiel wants us not to stop there, to set up our house there. He doesn't want us to think that change isn't possible.

God through Ezekiel says: "Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the child." That is to say that every life, every generation belongs to God and thus has an accountability to God. Every generation, every life has worth in the sight of God, which is why God wants God's best for all generations and people. What God wants for all of us is life. "Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone. Turn then and live."

For those of you who have a notion about God that God is at every turn ready to zap you and think that the Old Testament is replete with images supporting that view, you are wrong. God doesn't delight in people having a mess. God isn't sitting around ready to send a lightning bolt on you when you are naughty. What God wants for us individually and collectively is life. And true life, Ezekiel is saying, and actually Jesus is saying in Matthew today, comes through repentance.

So often we think that repentance is such bad news. Do I as an individual want to be vulnerable enough to say that I have messed up? Do we as baby boomers, WWII generational people, Millennials, Generation X'ers want to be vulnerable enough to admit that there is much about our generations that need some cleaning up? Do we as a nation want to be vulnerable enough to say that we have failed, have made serious mistakes? Often not.

Honestly, we work so hard to make sure that we don't tell the truth. We run from the truth all the time, which is what *really* is bad news. Hurt feelings aren't addressed without truth telling. Alcoholics don't get better without truth telling. Racism doesn't disappear without truth telling. Damage to the environment doesn't get better without truth telling. According to Ezekiel, truth telling is not only

possible; it is desirable because it is in telling the truth that life shines forth. Repentance is not death dealing; it is life giving. God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. Repentance and change are possible.

I have to admit that as I have aged, I have become less confident about the possibility of change. Maybe I have become a little more cynical. In my early adult life, I definitely was an idealist who worked hard to bring about change. In college I was a political science major who looked at the world with hopeful eyes, convinced that what was wrong about the world could give way to what could be right. Wars and continuing signs of injustice, war-mongering, and inequality have taken a toll on me. I've found myself saying, "The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." I think I need to stop saying that. It's not helping me, the world I too often grieve over, or the next generation who can be quick to give into despair.

Life can be different. You can be different. I can be different. The world can be different. Repentance is possible. Racism *can* be addressed. The environment *can* be improved. Alcoholism *can* be treated. Self-hatred can be left behind. Women *can* be treated with dignity. Politics *can* become more civil and less shaped by money. We *can* think more communally and less individually. The vulnerable and the poor *can* be taken care of better. Issues around the police *can* be dealt with. Our health care system and how it is paid for can be improved. But all of this will not occur if we are not honest, if we don't stop hiding from the truth, if we abdicate our responsibility and our culpability.

Listen to the words of Anthea Portier-Young: "I ask myself how my community and my generation have abdicated responsibility for our collective choices, adopting a pretense of powerlessness. It is easier to imagine that we can't do anything to change what appears to be broken. What a lack of faith! What a lack of imagination! God calls this

church, this generation, this people to stop making excuses, and stop hiding behind other people's mistakes. We are to turn our honest gaze on ourselves and repent now, making life our ultimate value."

When we live as if what is is what always will be, we act as if God is not living, but dead. The story of Jesus is a story that travels through death, but ends up in life. Resurrection is the end of the story. Life is the goal, and life is what gets us there. Why would we want to die? Get yourself a new heart and a new spirit. Turn and live!