

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 Pastor Bill Uetrict 9/25/11 15 Pentecost

The father eats sour grapes, and the son's teeth are set on edge. The baby boomers eat sour grapes and the folks from generation y have their faces distorted. The World War Two generation partakes in bad grapes and the faces of the boomers pay the price for the choices of the WWII generation. (Various people were selected to enact this proverb.)

It's an odd proverb, but it was one that the exiles of Israel—folks being forced to leave Israel and enter Babylon—were repeating all the time, so says the Book of Ezekiel. The message and the sentiment really are quite clear: Mom and Dad ate the little green apples, and the children got the stomachaches. The baby boomers ate the jalapenos, and the millennials got the indigestion. In other words, we are paying the price for the actions of our ancestors. On the one hand, and this is bad enough, we are suggesting that we aren't responsible for what is happening to us. Our parents and grandparents are to blame. We're going off into exile because of what our parents did. Don't talk to us about *our* responsibility. Don't speak to us about the part that we play in all of this. Don't confuse us with our own need to change, to repent. It's our parents who ate the sour grapes. And isn't it true that the sins of the fathers and the mothers are visited upon the people of the third and fourth generations to come?

But there is yet another element to this proverb that is destructive and probably the stronger emphasis of the Ezekiel text. This is the "on the other hand." If the sins of the fathers and the mothers are visited upon the next generation, then I suppose there really is nothing we can do about our situation. Change just isn't possible. Why repent? Why change? Why make a difference? There

really is nothing we can do. You know, I was victimized when I was a child. I guess the consequences of that victimization are just my lot. Look at what my parents did to me! How can I be any different with my kids? It's in our genes, you know! I was abandoned when I was a kid. How can you expect me not to have abandonment issues when I deal with you? My parents had poor communication skills. How can you expect me to be gentle and warm when I talk with you?

The baby boomers really gave us a raw deal. I mean, look at the divorce rate among the boomers. So many of us millennials grew up in broken and dysfunctional families! Are you surprised that so many of us lose ourselves in alcohol or technology? Heck, do you really think that we ought to know how to relate to people?

Our family has always been the kind of people who keep a distance, who are suspicious of other people, who always think that we don't quite fit in, who avoid risks whenever we can. And you want us to mix with people, go to a different service, sit in a different seat, reach out and welcome people warmly. Are you crazy? What's done is done! Who we are is who we are! The rich have always been rich. The poor have always been poor. Politicians are always going to be crooked or preoccupied with power. Life is always going to be about who has the most stuff. An unjust world will always be unjust. Things aren't going to change. Repentance isn't possible. Our parents ate sour grapes, and our teeth will be forever set on edge.

If I am at all honest, I have to admit that I understand the perspective of these exiles. I have lived for over 50 years, and some of the changes that I wanted to see have come into existence, but most of them haven't. I have been a pastor for 26 years and some of the people I have pastored whom I thought would change with a little

tweaking, a little encouraging, a little buffing up, haven't. I can't give the exiles of Ezekiel such a hard time. I have found myself saying too often, "You can't teach old dogs new tricks."

But God has a different perspective, Ezekiel says. God seems to think that repentance is possible. "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to *your* ways," not the ways of other people, not the ways of the generations before you, *your* ways. "Repent." You can repent. You can change from *your* ways. It is possible. Change is possible. And if you don't change, your lack of change, your iniquity, will be your ruin. The path that you are on is not going to bring you what you want. It is bringing and will bring you ruin.

Cast away from you all your transgressions; get open heart surgery done and get yourself a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? Why will you remain in the mess that you have been living? Why will you continue living with that edge, with that anger? Why will you continue seeing the world through the eyes of rejection? Why will you stay stuck in the ruts that your wheels have been spinning in for too long? Why are you going to allow the violence that has shaped you shape the children you are privileged to parent? Why will you continue to take the easy way out, risk very little, connect only to the people who keep your little world safe? Why would you allow alcoholism in the family only to mean more alcoholism or untreated alcoholism? Why would you want to be satisfied with a world that is leaving far too many people behind? Why will you die, O house of Israel, fellow Muskegonites, residents of the United States?

And here is the really good news: "I [God] have no pleasure in the death of anyone." God is not after the destruction of people, their ruin. God doesn't get his jollies out of seeing people reaping the

consequences of their sin. God wants life for people. Our God is a God of compassion. Our God is a God of grace. Our God is a God of forgiveness, of new chances. So, therefore, turn! You can turn. You can change. Life is beckoning you.

Kathleen Norris tells a wonderful story in her book **Amazing Grace** about a time when she was teaching Catholic young people about the Psalms. She says that young people are often shocked when they discover the honesty of the Psalm writers. And so she would give them the opportunity to write their own honest psalms. She writes:

Children who are picked on by their big brothers and sisters can be remarkably adept when it comes to writing cursing psalms, and I believe that the writing process offers them a safe haven in which to work through their desires for vengeance in a healthy way. Once a little boy wrote a poem called "The Monster Who Was Sorry." He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him; his response in the poem is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: "Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, 'I shouldn't have done all that.'"

Norris goes on to say:

"My messy house" says it all: with more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage **and also gave him a way out**. If that boy had been a novice in the fourth-century monastic desert, his elders might have told him that he was well on the way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish

to dwell?

Our God is gracious. Our God is loving. Therefore, repent and live. Change is possible. The house can get clean!