

17th Sunday After Pentecost Reflection

Pr. Nicole Hanson-Lynn September 26-27, 2020

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Psalm 25:1-9

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and the giver and sustainer of our faith, the Holy Spirit.

Last week we heard two texts of cries of “no fair!” and this week, our Old Testament reading continues the theme. The prophet Ezekiel spoke and wrote to a people living in the midst of exile. They turn to the prophet, and they accuse God of being a vindictive god with poor aim. Our ancestors sinned, they say, but yet *we* are the ones being punished. Should we be punished for the sins of our ancestors?

The prophet Ezekiel responds by telling the people that they are asking the wrong question. Through the prophet, the Word of God chastises the people for asking the question. It’s easy for them to see the ways that they are hurting in the moment, and it’s easy for them to look back and name the sins of their ancestors, but it’s not so easy for them to examine themselves and their systems.

“The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” Exodus 34:7 and Numbers 14:18 take this even further. It is not just the children who suffer for their parents’ sins, but out to the third and the fourth generations. But here, God says that is not to be used. I suspect that, like many of us, the Israelites misunderstood the idea in Exodus and Numbers. Because our sins *do* set precedents, habits, traditions, and systems that are sinful. And future generations are trapped in that same web, often blind to the systems around them. It is inaccurate to say that God is vindictive with poor aim; we are *all* broken people, living in a broken world filled with broken systems and broken relationships. Even when we lose sight of our complicity in the brokenness, it is still brokenness.

And God accuses the people; it is not that God is unleashing God’s wrath on an innocent generation. This generation is still living into the broken systems that their ancestors created. We are never as far removed from sin as we might sometimes think.

But the book of Ezekiel tells a wider picture. Taken as a whole, even with the gruesome and troubling parts, the book tells the story of a God who is deeply grieved by the myriad ways that we fail to live into God’s kingdom. God is deeply grieved whenever we choose profit over our neighbors, or our own good over the neighbor’s wellbeing. God is deeply grieved by our broken relationships.

And I don't say this in an attempt to guilt trip anyone, but rather in an attempt to remind both you and me that God feels with and for us.

The book of Ezekiel also tells the story of a God who will stop at nothing for reconciliation. The judgements in the book of Ezekiel are never about God exacting revenge for our hurting God; they are never about punishment for the sake of punishment. They are always about restoration of the relationships that have been broken. And sometimes, when all we have ever known is a system that is broken, restoration feels like punishment. For the Israelites leaving Egypt, wandering through the desert, living free, but needing to rely on God, felt worse than slavery. The people longed to return to slavery in Egypt under Pharaoh. They longed for what they knew. And it took a whole generation to begin to learn what trusting God looked like.

The temptation is real for us, too. To blame sin or discomfort on a previous generation. To place all the blame on our ancestors. To perceive God's reconciliation as punishment. To see a God dying on a cross of all things as foolishness. This past Sunday, some of us had the privilege to learn more about the Doctrine of Discovery, a document written in Christ's name justifying and encouraging the exploitation of people living in the "New World" by European powers. This is a document from 1493 (definitely in the "ancestor" category of time), but its effects continue to shape the ways we think about faith in ways we don't even notice. It has contributed to theologies of the world being something to exploit, to theologies of power being something to exploit. To theologies that God will give us whatever we want so long as we have the power to take it. As Paul reminds us, all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God. But God does not give up on us. God does not walk away from us despite all the ways that we hurt God. God is so committed to restoration that God died on a cross for us, so we could be made new. So we can be restored to right relationship with God. So we can be set free from the invisible power that sin holds over us and live to God.

Announcements

Thank you to everyone continuing their financial support. Your stewardship and discipleship are faithful witnesses in this time.

We still are offering Bible studies with video conferencing and phone options. If you are interested in joining, please call either Salem (906) 932-1510 or Zion (906) 932-1320.

We will be making a Salem and Zion Advent devotional, with a reflection each day from members of the congregation. If you are interested in more information about how you can participate in writing a reflection or if you are interested in receiving the completed devotional, call our offices or contact Pr. Nicole with any questions!

Peace be with you.