

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 1, 2017, Year A
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“The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are on edge.”

That was an old saying among the Jews at the time of Ezekiel, and the Lord quotes it to Ezekiel in the run-up to today's first reading. What it meant was that the children suffer for the sins of their parents. There's certainly some truth to that. People can often trace personal problems back to childhood experiences-- how they were treated by parents or others, the examples they were given, the difficult situations they may have been stuck with.

And we all suffer from the present-day sins of others. Are you afraid to go out at night? Has anyone ever broken into your home, or dragged your reputation through the mud on social media or in a court of law? Yes, there's a lot of truth in that old saying, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are on edge.”

But God quotes it to Ezekiel not because it was true, but because it can also be untrue. For example-- “my problems are all my parents' fault, I've had nothing to do with them”. Or, “I'm an innocent and helpless victim of – here, fill in the blank with the social injustice du jour-- and so I am due some kind of restitution, maybe a lot.”

It's true that the sins of parents, or the sins of society, can set my teeth on edge, but if I use it as an excuse for my own bad behavior, I'm as bad as my parents, worse for the smug moral superiority with which I condemn them.

God quotes the saying about sour grapes to Ezekiel, and then says, “As I live, there shall no longer be anyone among you who will repeat this proverb in Israel.” (Ez. 18:3)

So, no more “not my fault”, no more “I am helpless and doomed”. In this world we are affected by the behavior of others, but as far as divine justice is concerned, only the one who sins will die. The father will not be charged with the guilt of the son, and the son will not be charged with the guilt of the father.

This is reassuring. I am not doomed eternally for someone's else's wrongdoing, but only for my own; and if I turn away from any wickedness I have committed and do what is right and just, I will live. On the other hand, if I turn away from a life of virtue and do evil, then I will die-- spiritually speaking.

That's the part that causes the protest as today's passage opens. “The Lord's way is not fair!”

“So many good deeds on my record, and I can still be lost?” You hear this all the time.

“I’m a good person. I haven’t killed anybody”, as if actual murder is the only way to reject God, the source of life and happiness. As if people who on the outside are smiling, virtuous pillars of the community can’t have hearts that are selfish.

And this takes us to the Gospel, another parable about working in the vineyard, which is a metaphor for serving God. Instead of the owner hiring workers throughout the day in the marketplace, today he sends two sons. The one has kind of a bad attitude. The first words out of his mouth are an insolent refusal. “No, I will not.” But then he regrets it and does go to the vineyard. This son represents the social and religious outcasts, like tax collectors who collaborated with the Roman occupation so they could enrich themselves cheating their fellow Jews, and like the hangers-on that unscrupulous people with money always attract-- gamblers, drug dealers, pornographers, prostitutes.

Unsavory types, no doubt, but they had gone down to the river to hear John the Baptist, who told them that they were not doomed by their sins, or by anyone else’s, and if they repented and reformed they could be friends of God, even if they never found approval in the eyes of those other people, represented by the other son.

The second son, squeaky clean, polite, polished, devious, calculating, self-serving, the Eddie Haskell of the story. “Oh, yes Mrs. Cleaver, your are so right. I’ll make sure Wally gets that taken care of.” He represents people who trust in the appearance of virtue without being virtuous, who seem on the outside to be faithful servants of God, but inside not really. They presume others to be hopelessly doomed, and take pleasure in the thought; and they presume themselves to be invincibly saved, with great pleasure in that thought.

“Tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of God before you”

Jesus was merciless with the self-righteous. No, I take that back. It was true mercy to stick them with the sharp points hidden in his parables. He befriended outcasts because they were not hopelessly doomed, and he attacked the presumptuous because through their self-deception they could doom themselves.

Jesus was carrying out in his ministry words that God spoke to Ezekiel:

“Do I derive any pleasure from the death of the wicked? Do I not rather rejoice when he turns from his evil way that he may live?”

“Cast away from you all the crimes you have committed, and make for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Why should you die, O house of Israel? Return, and live!” (Ez. 18:23, 31-32)