

DAILY DEVOTIONAL SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 26th

Ezekiel 18:19-24 "Yet you say, "Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?" When the son has done what is lawful and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. The person who sins shall die. A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of the parents, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own.

"But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? But when the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live? None of the righteousness deeds they have done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which they are guilty and the sin they have committed, they shall die."

This passage from the prophet Ezekiel in today's scripture reading is from a longer argument between God and the Jewish exiles. The issue is personal responsibility, expressed in a proverb the exiles offer to articulate their view: "The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge." Its meaning is clear: **children suffer from their parents' mistakes.**

As proverbs go, this one is memorable if only because it rings so true. Who has not blamed our parent's limitations or struggled against a lingering psychic injury from childhood? Couldn't we all include a chapter in a "Mommie or Daddie Dearest" book? But what the exiles mean by applying it to themselves is the problem. Not only does it allow them to blame others for their current plight, it also reduces their responsibility in the current situation.

While it is certainly true that the Babylonian exile is the end result of a long series of rebellions, the exiles seem to think they had nothing to do with it. By identifying with the children in the proverb, the exiles cast themselves as innocent victims. Ezekiel urges the exiles to acknowledge their own guilt, repent, and live.

Though the ancient Israelites had understanding of intergenerational responsibility for guilt, here Ezekiel marks a breakthrough to a **higher understanding of individual moral responsibility.** A righteous person can turn to wickedness and lose his/her life; conversely, a wicked person can turn to righteousness and live. Even within a single lifetime, one's past doesn't necessarily determine the future. If the generations are not bound to suffer because of the sins of the ancestors, neither does an individual's past guilt condemn him/her to a life of punishment.

It seems the exiles would prefer to see themselves as victims than as persons capable of choosing their destiny. Don't we, too, want to blame others for our predicaments and release ourselves from the responsibility of difficult decisions? Point fingers at others when it is our guilt that is the issue?

The good news is that God values life above all else: God is open to human repentance, change, and life grounded in truth telling and responsibility for one's faith and actions. Mom and Dad may in fact have made a mess of things, but the children have eaten their fair share of sour grapes. It's time for new fruit. Paradoxically, accepting responsibility for guilt makes it possible to let it go. Repentance is not a matter of bearing guilt as a burden; is the first step toward transformation -- what Ezekiel calls getting a new heart and a new spirit. That's something we -- and our parents -- can rejoice in!

God of grace and mercy: help us admit our faults, accept responsibility for them, and turn from them to lives of grateful faith and loving acts. Give us new hearts and new spirits, in Christ's name. Amen.

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