

THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | OCTOBER 1, 2023

EZEKIEL 18:1-4, 25-32 | PSALM 25:5-9 | PHILIPPIANS 2:1-13 | MATTHEW 21:23-32

Rabbi Hillel once said that you should live your life as if the scales of the world were equally balanced between good and evil, and your next action would tip the balance one way or the other.

Of course, by the time we get up to the scale, it looks pretty beat up. Maybe a little rusty. Maybe a little creaky. And make no mistake, it's definitely off balance. When we were born, we didn't arrive into the world as God intended. We came into a world that other people made. So we don't just live with the consequences of our own choices, we also live with the choices of everyone who came before us.

This is true in all sorts of ways, many of which are just kind of bewildering but ultimately harmless. When I show people around our church for the first time, they'll frequently ask things like, "Why is the altar made of stone when everything else is made of wood?" Or "Why are the front doors on the back of the church where no one can see them?" The answer, of course, is because that's what someone decided to do fifty or sixty years ago. What we have is what we have.

But the world we inherit can have more serious problems, too. Think of the ways in which we get stuck with the financial, ecological, or political decisions of those who came before us. Just last week, I was chatting with Pr. Dianne Lewis, the chair of our synod's African Descent Lutheran Association. She recently moved to New Jersey from Washington, D.C. And one of the things we were chatting about was the ways that our church experiences housing segregation. When we gather for synod assembly every year, it's a pretty diverse group of people.¹ But when we go back to our home congregations in our neighborhoods, we become far less diverse. And while some of that is due to our individual choices, a lot of it is because of the decisions made by those who came before us.

We might say that these inherited issues are systemic. We have our own opinions and preferences and desires, but the world we were born into doesn't come with its original factory settings. It comes programmed with institutions and cultures and relationships, many of which draw us away from love of God and neighbor. We're not punished for the sins of our ancestors, but we live in the world that they made.

The people of Ezekiel's time had some sense of these inherited and systemic problems, too. In fact, they had a proverb that they like to say. And this proverb also shows up in Jeremiah, so apparently it was widely known at the time. The NRSV translation is kind of funny², so this is how Bob Alter translates it: "The fathers ate unripe fruits / and the sons' teeth were blunted." In other words, the previous generation did something wrong, and it had a negative effect on those who came after them. Even if the image of eating unripe fruit is a little weird, we could probably get on board with that idea.

But as much as the people love invoking this saying, God detests it. God says, "As I live... this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel." God says, *You need to stop telling yourselves this.* A good question for us to ask would be why?

The problem seems to be less in the proverb itself than in how people are using it. For one, it seems to be invoked mostly as a way to shunt responsibility on to other people people. The people who used this proverb were likely living in exile away from their homeland and looking for an explanation of

¹ Of course, this is somewhat relative since the ELCA doesn't reflect the demographics of the nation as a whole.

² "Teeth set on edge" doesn't make a ton of sense to me.

what went wrong. The proverb gives you an easy answer. Who messed up? Our parents. How did I end up here? Those people messed it all up.

You can see the appeal of this. It means that the world does have problems, but we never have anything to do with them. When I was chatting with Pr. Lewis this past week, I was reminded of another colleague who serves a primarily white congregation that was interested in participating in the bishop's anti-racism challenge a few years ago. But before they signed up, they wanted to be assured that it was only about fixing other people's racism and would not be an admission that their own community might have some things to work on. It's easy to point out other people's failings, less so to reflect on our own.

But the prophet's call to turn and enter newness of life isn't just meant for other people. It's meant for all of us. And that means looking critically not just at the actions of others, but also at our own actions. After all, imagine what it would be like if we began worship with confession and forgiveness, and instead of confessing our own sin, we just complained to God the sins of others. *My neighbor John has sinned against you in thought word and deed... My boss Jane is bondage to sin and cannot free herself.* You can understand why God would tell you to knock it off.

But there's a deeper issue with this proverb, too. And this is the one that's ultimately more important. When you place all responsibility for the world's condition on someone else, you don't just excuse yourself in a self-serving way, but you also take away your own agency and your own power to fix the problem. This proverb is the kind of thing you say when you've given up. When you've looked at the world's problems and thrown up your hands. There's nothing to be done.

There are lots of different words we could use for that attitude. Fatalism. The outcomes are predetermined. Quietism. That it's best to do nothing. And resignation. Our actions don't make a difference.

This is the real problem. It's not wrong to have a critical eye at the actions of those who came before us. In fact, it's extremely important. We can't try to fix the world's problems unless we actually understand why those problems exist in the first place. But to believe that they were the only ones whose actions really mattered? That's not realism. That's not wisdom. That's not intellect. That's living without hope.

And no surprise, it's into that cycle of self-defeating futility that God's word breaks in. "All lives are mine," God declares. The lives that matter, that make a difference, are not just the ones back in the past. But they're our lives, too. God gives us back our agency, our power, our drive for a just world. Just because a problem is systemic doesn't mean it can't be fixed. It just means that it needs a systemic solution. Just because an injustice is inherited from our ancestors, it doesn't mean it has to be passed on to our descendants. There's always an opportunity for change and renewal and healing.

No matter who we are, when we were born, what our station in life is, the invitation of God is the same, "Turn and live." Think not just about the ways our ancestors created death. But think about the ways that, in and through us, God creates new life.

So as we approach that rusty, creaky, out of balance scale that we call the world, don't just curse the people who came before you. But live as if what God does in and through us could make all the difference. Think hope. Think change. Think resurrection.

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