

“Are You in the Market for a New Heart and Spirit?”
Sermon by Lisa Crismore
John Knox Presbyterian Church – September 27, 2020

Ezekiel 18:1-4; 25-32

The word of the Lord came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge”? As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine; it is only the person who sins that shall die...

Yet you say, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? Therefore, I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

You all know what a proverb is, right? It is a little saying that is generally true or gives advice. Help me finish these, if you know them. Do you think they are true or have merit?

- “Give a man a fish, he can eat for a day. Teach a man to fish, he can eat for a life time.”
- “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.”
- “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.”
- “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.”
- “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.”

I think you will agree that some are helpful and some not so much! You can see why God is upset when he goes to have a word with his prophet Ezekiel. God is not happy with the prophet and the house of Israel for using the proverb – “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.” It was no doubt that this is how the people felt in exile. The parents and grandparents had disobeyed God and defied the law of their creator (eaten sour grapes), which is what sent them into exile. Why were the children, who were born during the exile, being punished for the sins of their ancestors? This would definitely set ones teeth on edge!

I am sure we can all relate to this. Have you ever had to suffer because of someone else's poor choices or actions? I remember in grade school having all metal silverware. By the time my children got into school, they had to have the plastic sporks, which would sometimes break and end up in their food. This was due to some of the children throwing the metal ones away, flipping the forks so they would stick to the ceiling or taking the silverware home. This is really not fair as the whole school suffers because of a few student's actions.

When I was working at FedEx in Recruitment, there was going to be an audit of hiring files. Since they are a transportation company, the government would do the audit. We had been told by management to go through the past seven years of files, see if anything was missing and fix what we could. Our Chicago office, did not do it and they had a lot of files. This came to the attention of my manager. He requested myself and three others be sent to the home office for a week to do the pre-audit of the Chicago files. We would morning, noon and night! This was a week of putting my work on hold and a week away from my family. Was this fair?

In society, we have experienced this horrible pandemic. Covid-19 was caused by a poor decision of others wherever in the world it happened (possibly China). We find ourselves pointing fingers and wanting to know who did this to us. Our people in nursing homes are wondering why they are not permitted outside their building. We hear of people still getting sick and over 989,000 have died in the world. It is no doubt that we may reach a million soon! I have been thankful that everyone here at church is very thoughtful in wearing a mask. However, I have gone to stores where people have stopped wearing the masks. Some of my friends, who live outside of Marion County complain about wearing the masks. No one can deny that this whole thing is unfair!

As we point fingers in whatever is unfair and unjust in our part of the world, God says, "All lives are mine, the parents and the children. All of your lives are mine! God loves and cares for everyone. Only the person who sins will die! You will be held accountable for your actions **not** the actions of others.

God is saying look at yourself. You belong to God. I belong to God. We all are God's own children and each of us are held accountable for our sins. Because while we are pointing fingers at others, we should first point the finger at ourselves. We need to look and see what we are doing in the unjust or unfair situation. None of us are without sin.

God says, "You are calling me unfair. I believe it is you are the one that is unfair!" This life we have is all about making choices. We chose how we will live out our faith in God. If one seeks out unrighteousness and turns away from the law of God, there will be death in the end. But, if one turns from their unrighteous ways and follows the law of God, there will be life.

Tim Cargal, who is the associate of the Commission on Preparation for Ministry at the General Assembly level, asks, "Is this passage more about God's judgment or God's grace?" (Feasting on the Word - Year A, Volume 4, 2011, Timothy B. Cargal, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 99). It is clear that God makes it clear that we are to choose righteous actions according to God's law or there will be death to us. But, the fairness is that God's grace allows us to get up every single day and start over with a fresh slate. We have a choice every day of how we are going to live by God's law and have a new life in Christ. Christ offers us a new heart and a new spirit. That is truly grace and more than fair! Or is it?

I will never forget my CLP class, which began meeting in January 2002, which was shortly after 9/11. We were talking about the abundance of God's grace and how we can never measure it. I remember our leader, Carol McDonald asked, "How would we feel if when we got to heaven we would see Osama Bin Laden?" You could hear the gasp of everyone's breath of how could God ever allow that to happen. So, is grace fair?

If we ever find out who the person or persons are responsible for Covid-19 after years of investigation, they will go on trial and be punished for their crimes. If they repent, turn from their ways and follow the law of God, do they deserve to live? Is that fair?

God's abundant love and grace is hard to fathom and tough to wrap our head around. But when we are on the receiving end of starting fresh with a new life and receive the gift of a new heart and a new spirit, there is nothing better.

We recently adopted a dog through a rescue three weeks ago. Our Hazel is five years old. Her owner, whose health had declined, could no longer take care of her. They gave her up at Animal Control where Dog It Dig It Rescue came to get her. She has a new life with us and it has been wonderful to see her bond with our family. God has given not only her new life but my husband and I have truly received new life and joy from our new pet.

It is clear that grace can be difficult but repentance can be difficult too. Repentance is about realizing our sin against God, making a commitment to turn from our old ways and changing our behavior. Change can be really tough!

I appreciate what Ruth Bader Ginsberg said, "Real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time."

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When it comes to this, I am reminded of an example that Pastor Jerry Deck from Zionsville Presbyterian Church used in a sermon about change. Jerry was living in Scotland at the time (I could relate to this because I went to school in England.) In all of Great Britain, the traffic travels in the opposite direction as we do in the United States. So, you had to think twice before you crossed the street on foot. You could not do what you had been taught since you were a child, which was look "Left - then right - then left again. If it was clear, you were safe to go." If you went with that rule, you would be ran over by a car. You had to change your way of thinking and look "Right, then left, then right again." In the beginning, you really had to think about it as it could be a matter of life or death. Right? As this change of thinking and action was repeated, it became a new behavior!

As you look at yourself, where is God calling you to change? Are you in the market for a new heart and a new spirit? Here the words of our God, "Turn, then AND live."

Thanks be to God. Amen.