Pentecost 17 Proper 21

September 27, 2020

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

When I was in junior high, there was an incident involving a student. I’ve never been clear on exactly what happened beyond that the teacher had to leave the room, and nobody was watching the class.

There were multiple stories that were shared in the following days. What I know is that a student jumped out the window. The second-story window. And then missed the rest of the school year because he sustained a number of broken bones.

A few days later, my English class was assigned the task of memorizing somethingby the English poet John Donne:

No man is an island, entire of itself;  
every man is a piece of the continent,  
a part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less,  
as well as if a promontory were.  
as well as if a manor of thy friend’s  
or of thine own were.  
Any man’s death diminishes me,  
because I am involved in mankind;  
and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
it tolls for thee.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This was followed by a conversation about individual responsibility and the impact that our actions or inactions, our words or our silence have upon others. It was a challenging lesson for a bunch of teenagers.

This year has done a good job of reminding us that our actions and our inactions, our words and our silence have the ability to impact other people without us even realizing it.

The prophet Ezekiel directed his words at people in exile, a people who were understandably frustrated by the choices that their ancestors had made, choices that they believed were the cause of them having to live in a foreign land.

Their complaint, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" demonstrates their opinion about their circumstances. The sins of the previous generations were the cause for the situation they found themselves in.

No doubt they would have pointed to Exodus and Numbers, where we read that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children to the 3rd and 4th generation.[[2]](#footnote-2)

But God takes issue with their complaint and sends Ezekiel to deliver a message: You don’t get to use the sins of the father as justification for not doing anything. Just because the previous generations had made poor choices didn’t absolve you of doing things to make your situation better. God challenges them, “Cast away from you all the transgressions that ***you*** have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!”

In other words, stop your whining and do something about the situation, because God is going to judge you according to your ways.

We have enough knowledge about how the human body works, how the world works, to know that the sins of a generation have an impact on future generations. Still, “past sin and virtue may shape present circumstances,” but they don’t mean we are without choices about how to move forward. [[3]](#footnote-3)

Ezekiel wanted the people to understand that, while they may not have been dealt the best hand, that didn’t mean they didn’t have a responsibility to do something about their lives. They had an obligation to try to make their world better, to right the wrongs of previous generations, and to try to make things better for themselves and for the community through their obedience to God’s commands.

But rather than trying to do something to make their situation better, the people blamed others and complained that God was not fair.

By calling the people to cast away their transgressions and get a new heart and a new spirit,” God issues a call for repentance.

There’s a story about a woman who was making a roast. Her young daughter watched as she cut the ends off the roast and set them aside before placing the roast into the pan. Her daughter asked why she had cut the ends off. Her mother said, “Because that’s what your grandmother did, and her roasts always taste good.”

When the little girl asked her grandmother why she cut the ends off, her grandmother said, “because my mother did it.” So the little girl asked her great-grandmother who said, “because our oven was tiny and my roasting pan was too small for the roast.”

We can easily get trapped into thinking that the way things are is the only way they can be. For the people Ezekiel spoke to, they were in exile and they couldn’t fix that, which somehow convinced them that they didn’t need to do anything to remedy the injustices and disobedience that Ezekiel was concerned about. Other people were responsible for their situation.

They were right that other people were responsible for them being in exile, and those previous generations should have been the ones to suffer for their sins. But “the relationship between cause and effect among generations” isn’t quite that simple.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Our actions and our inactions, our words and our silence have repercussions now, but they can also have repercussions for the future. It’s not always easy to see their effect, or to imagine what the future impact will be.

That’s why our obedience of the great commandment is so important. We are inextricably tied together, as John Donne reminds us. No person is an island, completely able to remove the impact of their actions from those around them. How we live affects others.

Through God’s abundant mercy, we are forgiven for the times we fall short, the times we stray from the path God would have us follow. But even God’s mercy does not keep us from experiencing the impact of our sins.

May we be mindful of our need for repentance and open to the new heart and new spirit God would plant in us so that the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and the works we do in the world may be pleasing and acceptable to God.

1. *Diversions upon Emergent Occasions,* John Donne. 1624 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Exodus 34:7; Numbers 14:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Connections* Ezek. 18 Anathea Portier-Young [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Preaching the Old Testament*, Ronald J. Allen & Clark M. Williamson, 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)