

Sermon: The Way of the Lord

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Matthew 21:23-32**

A few weeks ago, I said that we hardly ever read Ezekiel during the church year, and I wasn't kidding. But here he is again as an alternate reading in the lectionary. We should be safe now until the end of November.

Our call to worship today is based on Psalm 25, which pairs with Ezekiel in the lectionary. A moment ago, we prayed these verses together:

O my God, in you I trust; [...]

Do not remember the sins of my youth;

according to your steadfast love remember **me**,

for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

The psalm reveals the gist of what Ezekiel is telling us: the past is done and gone. Today, everything is fresh and new, something the ancient Egyptians also believed: that every time the sun came up in the morning, the world was literally *new*. But there was a persistent worry, a kind of conventional wisdom, that our children will have to deal with the sins we commit today. This thought is expressed in the Book of Lamentations that:

'Our ancestors sinned; they are no more,

and we bear their iniquities.' (Lamentations 5:7)

Today, the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel that 'it is only the person who sins that shall die.' As Jonah learned last week, we can choose how we want to live. We're also learning that divine punishment does not last forever, but God's steadfast love does.

Ezekiel, Israel's sentinel, quotes God who quotes a proverb from Jeremiah, Ezekiel's near-contemporary, who preached in Jerusalem with the remnant of Israel who didn't get exiled to Babylon. In Jeremiah, we read:

[The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when] they shall **no longer** say:

'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.'

But all shall die **for their own sins**. (Jeremiah 31:29-30a)

In Ezekiel, God seems a little miffed, asking: ‘Why are you still repeating this pithy little proverb as if I wrote it?’ It’s true the parents may once have eaten sour grapes and the children probably did suffer for it, but this isn’t about fate. This passage refutes the idea that God’s punishment spans generations.

Now let’s look at Matthew’s Gospel.

In terms of the church year, we are far from Easter and still two months away from Advent, but here we are, dropped into the middle of Jesus’ final week in Jerusalem. And people are still questioning his authority. It’s as if the jealousy, the suspicion, and the resistance to Jesus never ends.

When the chief priests and elders – the best of Jerusalem’s society – challenge Jesus, he at first gives them no answer at all. As it turns out, his answer becomes an extended challenge that develops as Jesus tells one parable after another, with each one illustrating an arrogance toward, and rejection of, leadership. We’ll be talking about those parables for the next three weeks.

In today’s reading, when Jesus entered the Temple, the chief priests and elders came to him as he was teaching. Matthew’s Greek is somewhat flexible, allowing us to read this in several ways. It could be that the chief priests and elders came to Jesus *because* he was teaching, meaning his teaching might have been one of the ‘things’ they were upset about. But is that it? Is that enough for them to get so angry?

So we have to back up a little to get some context. What other things has Jesus been up to since he came riding into town on a donkey with the people shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David?’ (Matthew 21:9) There has to be more to it.

Well, there was that incident with the money changers in the Temple. That didn’t go over well. Then he healed the blind and made the lame to walk, again in the Temple. And then some children also cried out ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’ – in the Temple. All of this made the chief priests and elders angry, because all they saw was some country bumpkin doing all these things *in the Temple!* Jesus was directly challenging *their* authority, and they didn’t like it.

Why should anyone listen to Jesus and his teachings? In whose world do the righteous live and the wicked die? The wicked trample on the righteous day in and day out. Jesus himself would soon be killed by the unrighteous.

By what authority do the wicked do these things? In the parable, the two sons make their choices, just as the wicked choose to be wicked and the righteous choose to live according to God's laws. It's not just tax collectors and prostitutes getting into the kingdom of God; everyone who repents and puts their faith in God get in too. We just won't see this particular group of chief priests and elders, that's all.

What causes us to change our minds? What propels us to open our hearts, and be transformed? What blocks us from allowing this change?

It's not easy to change our behavior. For most of us, change doesn't happen overnight. It can take months, even years. Last week in Nineveh, the king repented immediately when he heard Jonah's proclamation, yet Jonah gave him 40 days to come around. Maybe the king used all 40 days and that counts as being 'immediate.'

What matters is making the commitment to change, and then doing the work.

By asking the chief priests and elders, 'What do *you* think' about the first parable about the two sons, Jesus puts them in a position where they have to answer. He frames the parable around the figure of John the Baptist, a prophet they didn't believe; nor did they repent when they saw the truth about John. Imagine how they reacted when Jesus told them – society's best – that the tax collectors and prostitutes – the worst and the lowest – will go into the kingdom of God ahead of them.

The chief priests and elders had neither made the commitment to change nor did they feel they had any work to do – they were the top. No worries for them.

But Jesus had plenty to say about the subject of authority, and in the course of three parables, he reveals that he does what he does as the Son of the Father, and that his authority is given by the Father. How do we respond to that?

To Ezekiel, the exiles complain that the way of the LORD is unfair. There they were, suffering in exile, their Temple and their religion both destroyed. It's not fair. And God said, 'Really? I will judge you according to *your* ways, not by what your ancestors did or didn't do.'

A few weeks ago, when we last read from Ezekiel, the LORD said, in chapter 33, 'As I live, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live' (Ezekiel 33:11a). Today the LORD said, 'I have no pleasure in the

death of *anyone*; turn, then, and live.’ Is God being unfair, or gracious? This, for God, is about life and grace, and how to get both. And only God has the authority to grant it.

God has overturned the ancient, accepted rules of personal retribution as we humans have understood them. According to Jesus, God the Father has given him the authority to overturn corruption in the Temple; heal people in the Temple; teach in the Temple; and be recognized as the Son of David in the Temple. According to Jesus, God has given him the authority to be gracious.

Now what if we read Lamentations in the opposite way? It’s a two-way street. What if the verse said, ‘our ancestors lived *righteously*, and are no more | we bear their *grace*?’ Would that be fair and reasonable? Are we willing to make that bet with our ancestors?

And why drag our ancestors into it at all? It’s far easier to make our own decision to accept Jesus and his teachings, and then to go and do what he taught us. Jesus wants our lives. He wants us to respond to his call to faith in him, and faith in the Father who sent him. Our response begins with taking a seat at the Table, practicing radical hospitality as we share the meal.

Amen.