

Sept. 27, 2020
Christ the Servant, Reston
Pentecost 17
Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Honk if you've heard this illustration before: The guy pulls up to a red light behind a van with a bumper sticker which says, "Honk if you love Jesus." So, the guy honks. A lady with her hair in curlers sticks her head out of the van window and says, "Can't you see the bleeping light's red?!" Then there are the competing bumper stickers: The fundamentalist had one which read, "In the event of rapture, this car will be driverless. The Lutheran then put one on his bumper which said, "In the event of rapture, can I have your car?"

Don't you wonder what God thinks of bumper sticker theology? I didn't think I liked the concept very much until I came across a couple which actually made me think as I sat there at the red light. There was the one which said, "I support the separation of church and hate." I liked that one. Another said, "My God is intelligent enough to design evolution." I was still thinking about that one when I arrived at work. Then there was another which said, "Religion. You can't start a war without it." I'm *still* thinking about that one!

What do you think God thinks about bumper sticker theology? We have a clue in this morning's Old Testament reading from Ezekiel. While they didn't have bumper stickers in Old Testament times, they had popular short sayings which were passed around verbally, the way we might tweet one another today. There was one which God really didn't like at all. It got under his skin something fierce. The ancient tweet said this: "The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge."

Now, I like proverbs which make you think and that one makes you think. “The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” We live in Loudoun County. There are a lot of vineyards there. Many are mom and pop operations. I am imagining Mom and Pop Vintner wandering up and down among their vines tasting their grapes. The Vintner children are playing inside the restored old Virginia farmhouse. The parents pop some good-looking red grapes into their mouths and bite down. But the grapes are sour! Inside the house the kids pucker up, grind their teeth, make an ugly face, and say, “Ewww!” What does this saying mean: “The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”? And why didn’t God like the saying?

Put simply, it was a belief that children and grandchildren suffer for the sins of the parents. The belief was partially rooted in scripture from Exodus where it says that God will visit the sins of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the 3rd and 4th generations.”

Why were the Israelites tweeting this to each other and why didn’t God like it? Well, Israel was in bondage. They had been force-marched out of their homeland, away from their sacred spaces, to Babylon (present day Iran). How would *you* feel if *you* were force-marched from your home? Well, the children of Israel began doing what you and I do when tragedy befalls *us*. They wanted to know *why* it was happening. There *must* be a *reason* for suffering. They assumed that they, themselves were innocent. If they, themselves were innocent then that must mean two things: 1) They are being punished for sins their ancestors committed and 2) This isn’t fair of God!

We’re familiar with that, aren’t we? Psychotherapy has built a billion-dollar industry on helping people blame things on mom and dad. Why are my teeth set on edge? Maybe because of the deep feelings of inadequacy my

parents instilled in me even before I could talk! It isn't fair! Life isn't fair!! I suffer and I am innocent, so God is unfair! Sometimes we do that with the literal way we think about original sin. God is punishing you and me because two people committed one sin in the Garden of Eden thousands of years ago. "I suffer today because Adam and Eve ate an apple yesterday."

Well, God attacked that bumper sticker theology on both counts. First, he attacked the victim mentality. The proverb had seduced the children of Israel to surrender to their surroundings. "Oh, poor is me! I am a victim! I am so helpless!" If you perceive yourself as a victim it is easy to surrender and very easy to wallow around in your victimhood rather than rally and overcome your circumstances. Because the children of Israel were telling themselves they had no choice in the matter they were not asking themselves what they could do to change. God was furious about that. Don't you wonder if God is furious with us when we adopt a victim mentality? "I am not in control of my life because I am a victim of ... (you fill in the blank.)" "My teeth are set on edge because somebody else ate sour grapes."

The other thing God attacked was the assumption that all this pointed to the basic unfairness of God. I suffer. Therefore life is unfair. Therefore God is unfair. God was saying to them, "You cannot ask questions about my fairness because you don't have the tools to judge my ways, which are mysterious and unfathomable. But you DO have the tools to judge the fairness of YOUR ways. Are YOU fair? Are YOU just? Are YOU faithful?" "Besides," God is saying, "even If you DO judge me to be unfair, you are powerless to do anything about it. But you are NOT powerless to do something about YOUR justice, YOUR fairness, and YOUR faithfulness. If life has given you lemons, go plant a lemon tree."

Change your attitude and change your actions, God says. To quote God verbatim; "Repent and turn from your transgressions." When we hear

God say something like, “Repent and turn from your transgressions,” we always assume he is shaking his finger in the faces of individual sinners. But the farther you go back in the Bible, the less God talks to individuals and the more God talks to groups – nations – Israel in particular. So, when God says, “Change your attitude and change your actions,” in Ezekiel, he is speaking to his chosen people as they huddled together in Babylonian captivity. He is NOT speaking to individuals.

We need to read the Bible more like that. We are always asking ourselves, “What do *I* need to do to change.” But we should also be asking, “What do *we* need to do to change.” What is *our* nation doing which is making God furious? I will let you answer that question for yourselves.

We are a culture which charges prices for things which give life – medicine, food, even water in plastic bottles! What happens when we make people *pay* for these things which keep them alive? Those who cannot afford to pay get less. Life, itself, is cut short for those who cannot pay for food. Just think – *think* – about the concept of setting higher prices on pills which do the most good against the worst diseases. Imagine the guy crawling across the desert, only hours to live. He comes across an oasis. He crawls up to it only to find a man there asking him how much a drink of water was *worth* to him. God says, “Don’t ask me if I’M fair. Ask yourselves if YOU are fair!” Remember – God’s kingdom is inverse. It is not how much value you place on *things*. It is how much value you place on *people*.

I’ll close with another bumper sticker I have seen. It says, “I’ve read the final chapter. God wins.” I like that one. Ultimately, God reigns victorious over sin, death, and the devil. We are given hope because we have been given a foretaste of the feast to come. It may be a hope we bring TO God, but it is certainly a hope we take FROM God’s word: “I’ve read the final chapter. God wins.”