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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
9/28/2008, Pentecost 20A  
Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32, Psalm 25:1-8, Philippians 2:1-13, Matthew 21:23-32,

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This sermon is about the perpetually complicated matter of fathers and sons.

<sup>28</sup>“What do you think? A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ <sup>29</sup>And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he repented and went.(Matthew 21:28-29, RSV)

To some degree, you and I are both of these sons, and, alas, both them are a heartache for the father. The first son refuses the call of his father to work in the vineyard. Later, he repents and goes, but in going, he cannot undo his initial unkindness to his father. That unkindness is done and accomplished. All he can do now is go forward in obedience to the will of his father, and bless him, he does so. As for the second son, he is not a man of his word. Surely, his father, along with all fathers, wanted his son to be a man of truth, but on this occasion, at least, he is false. He charms the old man with promises to go, but he does not go.

Times can be tough, as our times are tough now. You do not want to go through times like these or through life in general imposing or receiving blows from your family. Your father, your son, your mother, your daughter: these could well be among your most precious possessions, and they are worthy of unwearied kindness and honesty.

It is easy enough to criticize the second son, for no one likes a hypocrite. No one likes the person who uses language as if it is a weapon of defense—someone who creates space in his life by manipulating others with his words. Deception is not a strategy destined for a long run. Eventually we lose confidence in the one who misleads us. The father might linger a long time in hope that his son will become a man of truth, but each deception is a blow against the old man. Maybe it was no accident that the old man went to the first son *first*. Sad experience might have taught him that his first son might be stubborn and unkind, but at least he might actually work in the garden, while the second son might talk a good game, but not do it.

So, the second son is a pretender. We can quickly summarize our appeal to him. Cease your deceiving. Become a man of truth. Learn the habits of letting your yea be yea and your nay be nay. Let your word be like iron. Permit it to bind you and do not try to slip away from it. The world will love you more if you deceive it less.

So much, then, for the second son. Become a man of truth. But, I feel that though we might like the first son better, we should not praise him overmuch. He speaks his mind, and we can admire him for his honesty, but not for his piety. His father wants him to work in the vineyard, but he refuses. He does not deceive his father, but bluntly refuses him. Later he repents, and goes ahead and does what his father had asked him to do. But note that word: later. “Later he repents.” Later he honors his father in the good, old-fashioned way of obeying his father. But that was later. Meanwhile he has gone for some stretch of life in a state of disobedience to the Fourth Commandment. And he had no assurance that he would live long enough to set things right. He had no assurance that he would even sustain the desire to set things right.

What I want us to see is that word “later” exposes the one who delays to suffering. Moreover, it exposes his family to suffering too.

The words of this morning’s Psalm could be prayed by many a Christian who regrets that he put off till later his walk in the way of the Lord. Psalm 25 is the prayer of the one who has regrets, sorrow for refusing to go and work in the vineyard as his heavenly Father asked. And so, the middle-aged saint thinks back to the years of disobedience and cries out to the Lord:

<sup>6</sup> Remember not the sins of my youth and | my transgressions; \*  
remember me according to your love  
and for the sake of your good- | ness, O LORD.

For such a one of troubled conscience there is the consolation of the Gospel: with the Lord there is forgiveness and plenteous redemption:

<sup>3</sup>If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? <sup>4</sup>But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared. (Psalm 130:3-4, KJV)

Have no doubts about that. The LORD is willing to forget the sins of our youth. Still, your parents and anyone who loves you would urge you away from the sins of your youth. For those sins carry momentum with them. They shape your soul in ways that you might not even recognize. They say to you that sin is not so bad, you have done it before and so you can do it again. Put more positively, even as a youth, you can fight the good fight, and in fighting it, you are strengthening your soul for some good fight in your future.

The Psalmist here is bold enough to ask for divine forgetfulness. He does not ask simply for forgiveness, but forgetfulness. “*Remember not* the sins of my youth and my transgressions.” He asks that his sins might be lost in the sea of God’s forgetfulness.

Better yet, he asks that the Lord would remember him not according to anything about himself at all, but according to a much better standard: that the Lord would remember him according to *the Lord’s* love and for the sake of *the Lord’s* goodness.

The Psalmist who prays that the Lord would not remember the sins of his youth has regrets. He is sorry now that he transgressed the will of his father. For in such transgressions, he now sees that he hurt himself and perhaps also those the Lord had entrusted to him.

<sup>1</sup>We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain...behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation. (2 Corinthians 6:1-2, KJV)

*Now*, now is the acceptable time! Later might also do, but you have no assurance of that. And meanwhile, why would you suffer? Why would you build up in your biography deeds of disobedience?

There are white-haired saints of the church who could testify that they do not regret their coming to the Lord, but regret only their delay in coming. The delay promised fun, but left them feeling that they had not yet found their path in life. After all, we could heap up gold and silver around us. We could pile it up and make a kind of fortress around us.

But that is a poor substitute for the inner conviction that we are living for the Lord and are glad to wait for the crown of glory from him.

Each of this morning's Bible readings seems to be about fathers and sons. They could just as well be about mothers and daughters. They concern the relationship between the generations.

Our reading from Ezekiel starts off with a saying afoot in Israel—a saying about the children suffering for the sins of the fathers: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the *children's* teeth are set on edge.” This saying deeply grieves the Lord, for it accuses him of injustice. And so the Lord protests:

<sup>3</sup>As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. <sup>4</sup>Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine...(Ezekiel 18:1-4, RSV)

Even the worst of fathers, I bet, has in the beginning held his little ones in his arms and resolved with all his heart to be a good father. Even the worst of Dads has yearned or even prayed that the little ones would be spared the sins and vices to which he himself has succumbed. We have wrestled in fun with our children, rolled around with them on the lawn or on the living room floor. We have hoped and prayed for the flourishing of our children. We have knelt on the pew kneelers over and over again on Sunday mornings and confessed that we have not been as good a father as we should have and have asked for God's help to do better.

The Lord promises through his prophet Ezekiel that he will not hold the children responsible for the sins of mother and father. And we are grateful for that, most certainly. We do not want our children to suffer for our sins. Yet we know that this is a complicated world, and that our children might indeed suffer because of our sins. They will not suffer the *guilt* of our sins, but they might suffer the *repercussions* of our sins.

We are not machines. We are not simply born into families, raised to a certain maturity, and then psychologically and spiritually free to leave mother and father behind, as if we are on our own now and will no longer be influenced by our parents. No, many of us are blessed by our parents to some degree and haunted by our parents to some degree.

Yet, our First Lesson promises us that *our* soul belongs to God — not just the souls of mother and father, but also our souls belong to God. He holds us blameless for the sins of our parents and we have a new day ahead of us regardless of our past or our parental homes. We are innocent of the sins of our parents and we are responsible for the innocence of our own souls, one by one. That is the lesson of our First Reading, from Ezekiel 18. It is the lesson of individual responsibility for the state of our souls.

In a way, the pinnacle of our readings about fathers and sons is this morning's Epistle Reading. I mean Philippians 2. Here we read of a Son who not only resolved to work in the vineyard, but who actually did the deed. His Father so loved the world that he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life. So, the Father sent his Son into the world, and this Son both consented and went. He went forth into the vineyard, though it was a very hard vineyard. In the end, it meant death for him. Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, as Adam of old had grasped after divinity. Rather, he emptied himself, become one with us in the vineyard, and died there.

This obedient Son is our hope and our model of the Godly life. He is our hope, for how could the one who loved so much fail to be kind to us who turn to him, whether we have been good or bad sons and daughters so far? And he is our model of the Godly life for he did not cry “later,” but “now” — now is the acceptable time, now is the time entrusted to us to turn even more toward our Maker, even Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory, now and forever. Amen.