

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
9/28/2014, Pentecost 16A
New Creations in Christ

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

My opening text is from our First Lesson, from Ezekiel 18:4. It is a verse that speaks of us belonging to God. None of us is somehow stray in this universe, none of us entirely unconnected or overlooked, for we are looked upon and treasured by God. So, that is the first half of the verse: we belong to God. But also it is a verse that speaks of the individual path we must walk and of our accountability to God for how we walk:

⁴Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as
the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sins shall die.
(Ezekiel 18:4)

This morning's sermon is about the mystery of who we are. Human identity is a complex matter. On the one hand, we are the children of our parents, for good or for ill. On the other hand, we are our own individual persons, free to live before God and accountable to him for the lives we live.

Inevitably we are bearers of traditions. We have received from others images and subconscious notions of what is good and true and lovely in a human life. Instinctively, even before we think, we are inclined to act and respond and lead in certain ways because of the traditions in which we have been raised. But in spite of those instinctive responses, we are under the constraint of Christ, if we be Christians, and no matter our instincts, we are called to be new creatures in Christ. We are called to be a new kind of being on earth — someone who is not captive to our past, but free to follow Christ today. It is as Saint Paul said to the Corinthians:

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old
has passed away, behold, the *new* has come. (2 Corinthians
5:17, RSV)

TEETH ON EDGE

In this morning's reading from Ezekiel 18, the people have a complaint against God. It is a complaint that goes all the way back to the Ten Commandments. At the end of the First Commandment — the commandment against idolatry — the Lord speaks of the intergeneration consequences of sin. The text goes this way:

...I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the
iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the

fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:5-6, RSV)

It is this business of the “third and the fourth generation” that troubles the lonely Israelites languishing in Babylonian captivity.

“But *we* didn’t do it!” we can imagine them saying. After all, the Babylonian Captivity of the Jews lasted a good long time — close to sixty years (about 597 BC – 538 BC). That meant that there was a generation of Israelites who were simply born into captivity. They are not suffering because of their own sins, but because of the sins of their parents.

And so they grumble about it. Our text quotes their saying:

The *parents* have eaten sour grapes, and the *children’s* teeth are set on edge. (Ezekiel 18:2, RSV)

As it turns out, the Lord is offended by that saying and outright forbids it to be repeated anymore by the Israelites. He then goes ahead to speak of individual accountability for sin and for righteousness. “The soul that sins shall die.” The Lord spells this out in detail. This part is left out of our assigned lesson, but let me read it for you anyway:

²⁰The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. (Ezekiel 18:20, RSV)

This is about intergenerational justice. If the children live a righteous life, then the children shall live. They will be pleasing to God regardless of the sins of the parents.

Later in the chapter, the Lord will talk about repentance within our personal lives. There we will hear the good news that just as the sins of our *parents* do not need to ruin our lives, so the sins of our own *personal past* need not ruin us, for we have the chance to repent and mend our ways and to live.

But before we turn to that, let’s linger some with this matter of the sins of the parents.

THE FUTURE SOCIETY

Last week Carol and I attended a benefit supper for a Westchester County organization called “The Future Society,” founded by an inspiring man named Larry Fair. Mr. Fair grew up at the Wartburg back when it was an orphanage. He had a lovely saying about. He said that he “grew up in an orphanage, but was

never made to feel that he was an orphan.” His housemother was like a mother to him, there were lots of other children to play with, and he grew up happy and healthy. He has affection for the Wartburg to this day, and Carol and the Wartburg staff all love and honor him. Mr. Fair has a huge and grand heart when it comes to children. His organization – The Future Society – is highly respected for the work it does with at-risk teenagers in Westchester County.

You might recognize the name of the keynote speaker for the supper: Dominic Carter. Mr. Carter is a political news reporter and was the longtime host of *Inside City Hall* on the cable news station NY1. He no longer has that role, but still he is a popular speaker across the land and he gave a great speech to us at the benefit supper. He said that he has special regard for The Future Society because he was one of those kids — an at-risk teenager when he was young.¹ He grew up without a father. He imagined how his father sweet-talked his mother all the way up to signing the birth certificate, but then he refused to sign and he abandoned Dominic and his mother. Dominic said that when he gets to feeling high-falutin’, he simply takes a look at his birth certificate, sees that blank line for father, and remembers that he had no father. To make things even worse, his mother was a paranoid schizophrenic. It was as if she was gone for years at a time. It was a grandmother, God bless her, who stepped in and helped raise him. So, he grew up in the projects in the Bronx, with many strikes against him, but he ended up graduating from high school and then from college and has made a good career for himself.

Now, when the Lord said that he visits the “iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation,” there is a sense in which that is obviously true. We are indeed the children of our parents, for good or for ill. The conduct of our parents and grandparents has ramifications that can hammer down through the generations. Having good parents is often an advantage in life, and having bad parents is often a big disadvantage in life.

This reality is the flip side of the Fourth Commandment — the one that says “Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother.” The first meaning of that commandment is that children should obey their parents. To use the stirring words of Martin Luther:

Young people must therefore be taught to revere their parents as God’s representatives, and to remember that, however lowly, poor, feeble, and eccentric they may be, they are their own father and mother, given them by God. They are not to be deprived of their honor because of their ways or their failings. (*Large Catechism*, the Fourth Commandment)

But the flip side of this Commandment is that parents are under divine obligation *to be honorable*. On the great Judgment Day, this will be a clear matter

¹ He wrote a book about it called *No Momma’s Boy*.

of examination: “How did we do in our lives as mothers and fathers?” Why is this so important? Well, because the iniquity of the fathers and mothers is visited upon their children. Bad parents are quite a burden in life to bear.

But Ezekiel’s gospel for us today is that we are not responsible for the sins of our parents. They might be the worst people on earth and a disgrace to civilization, but as for us, it is the will of the Lord that we should hold our heads up and live a good life on our own. And one day, that good life will be recognized before heaven and earth and through all eternity. You and I are not doomed by having bad parents. We are free to make something good of ourselves. It might be harder for us than for those who had good parents, but the Lord knows all about that. He knows all about our individual struggles and the strikes against us, and he knows how to give us credit for trying to follow Jesus, even if we should fall short in certain measures according to the standards of the world. We might have been dealt a bad hand in many different ways. But the Lord knows how to judge and weigh those things, and so we should count ourselves free to go ahead and live a beautiful life in his eyes.

Again, so far I have been talking about justice between the generations, arguing that neither the sins nor the virtues of our parents need determine our lives. We each get to live our own lives before God.

FREEDOM TOO FROM OUR PAST

Now, let’s move on to the other part of the gospel in today’s reading from Ezekiel. The good news is that not only can we be free of the iniquity of our parents, but also we can be free of the iniquity of our own past. We can mend our ways and move on. Listen again to how Ezekiel puts this:

²⁶When 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. ²⁷Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life.

This refers to good, old conduct. It doesn’t ask about hopes or dreams or intentions, but about the way we actually live in this world. When the wicked “turn away from wickedness” then they shall live. That is what distinguishes the two sons in today’s Gospel story (Matthew 21:28-32). One of the sons talked a good line, but did not do it. The other talked a bad line, but repented and did what was right. Which one did the will of his father? Why, the one who actually did what his father asked.

ONE SON IN PARTICULAR

None of this would be possible if not for one Son in particular. This Son is Jesus Christ our Savior. He both promised the deed and performed it. Though he

was frightened and sick at heart in Gethsemane, he nonetheless said, “Not my will, but thine be done.” And then he did the deed, all the way to dying on the cross that you and I might live.

If you are a Christian you belong to him. You should let Jesus live in your heart and increasingly control your deeds. You are an inheritor of many traditions, with your instinctive opinions about life. You have your Irish temper or your farmer’s impatience with those who are lazy, or your family’s frugality which makes you Madison Avenue’s nightmare, or your military heritage which makes it easier for you to contemplate dying for your nation, or your gangster grandfather’s fierce determination to take whatever he wanted, or your grandmother’s work as a missionary in Africa that has inclined you to self-sacrifice since you were a child, or your academic ancestors that gave you an advantage in school, or your mother’s alcoholism that so threatens you and all you love, and on and on. But amongst all those traditions, let us not forget the holy traditions of the church gathered around Jesus Christ. You and I are true blue reflections of our past and our heritages. But even better, we are “in Christ,” new creations on earth, people whose truest image of all that is good and true and lovely in life is Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.