

SETTING OUR CHILDREN'S TEETH ON EDGE (Ezekiel 1-4,25-32)

“The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” Isn’t that a homey little proverb – one that probably needs some unpacking?

Eugene Peterson translates the proverb in a way that’s a bit easier to understand: “The parents ate green apples, the children got the stomachache!”

However you say it, the ancient Israelites got the message. The Ten Commandments spell it out: “I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation” (Ex. 20:5; Deut. 5:9). That’s clear enough. No metaphor that needs to be explained.

It’s bad enough to be punished for your own sins. If you’ve got to worry about your parents and grandparents and great grand parents and great, great grandparents, you don’t stand a chance.

But that’s exactly what the Israelites believed. And it wasn’t just a family thing involving parents and children. The Israelites believed in collective responsibility and punishment generally. The whole community was apt to be punished for the sins of a few or even of one, especially if that one was the king. 2 Kings (24:3-4) says Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians because of the sins of bad old King Manasseh 50 or 60 years earlier. That would be like blaming today’s Great Recession on President Eisenhower or President Truman, depending on your own political persuasion. .

Come to think of it, that does have a certain appeal. Let’s not blame ourselves; let’s blame someone who’s long gone and not around anymore to defend himself. That could work for just about any problem. It’s not our fault; some other dude did it.

I don’t think the idea of collective guilt and punishment made the Israelites feel real good about themselves, though. There is a downside. You can be as good as gold and Wham! out of the blue you get hit for something your great grandmother did. What’s the use even trying to be good if you’re going to pay for the sins of your ancestors? That’s a recipe for despair and hopelessness and fatalistic resignation.

That must have been how the Israelites who were hauled away to exile in Babylon felt. What did we do to deserve this? It was bad old Kind Manasseh. Those exiles were the ones quoting that proverb about sour grapes because it was their teeth that had been set on edge. And those are the very people Ezekiel is speaking to, the very people he’s trying to encourage, the very people he’s trying to buck up and give a glimmer of hope.

We’re going to ban that proverb, Ezekiel says. It doesn’t apply because that’s not how God works. God doesn’t punish us for something our parents did. God judges each individual according to what he or she does. So if things aren’t going so good, don’t think you can pass the buck to your parents or grandparents

and play the innocent victim. Look in the mirror if you're looking for someone to blame. That's Ezekiel's message.

I don't know what I was thinking when I picked this reading for today's lesson. It's one that's intrigued me for a long time and I even wrote a paper on it in an Old Testament class. I'm sure that had something to do with my choosing it. Unfortunately, that paper is long gone – and probably didn't say anything worth putting into a sermon in any case. What I discovered this week thinking about this text is that it's one thing to write an academic paper on it and another thing to write a sermon on it.

This is a hard text for preaching because the question of responsibility isn't an either/or thing. It's not all collective responsibility or all individual responsibility. There really is some truth to the sour grapes proverb, despite anything Ezekiel may say. We do pay for the sins of our parents and grand parents – to the third and fourth generation and beyond.

Consider what has been called “America's original sin” – slavery. The first African slaves were brought to the English colonies in 1619, a long time ago. But aren't we still paying the price for that sin almost 400 years later? Slavery's offspring – racism in subtle and not so subtle forms – is still with us and isn't likely to go away anytime soon.

Does that mean we can simply put all the blame for today's racism on the slave traders who brought the slaves here in the first place? What about the Founders who had a chance to deal with slavery in the Constitution and who punted instead? Maybe we should blame them. Or the Ku Klux Klan that refused to accept the outcome of the Civil War and terrorized freed Blacks? Surely they're to blame.

And yes, they are to blame, all of them. But what about us? Don't we have some responsibility, too? We can't let ourselves off the hook by simply blaming it on previous generations. We may have inherited the problem, but we've also inherited the responsibility to do something about it.

Or what about the plight of Native Americans? You may have read or at least heard of American Indian author Vine Deloria's book *Custer Died for Your Sins*. That's a pretty broad indictment of American policy past and present. But having seen firsthand the present-day consequences of that policy, “sins” isn't a bad word to describe what we've done to Native Americans. Their teeth are still set on edge.

William Faulkner said, “The past is never dead. It's not even past.” And isn't that true. Actions have ramifications that keep going on and on – for better and, all too often, for worse. We are still paying for the sins of our ancestors from generations past.

It's one thing to look back and lament the bad choices our parents and grandparents made. But what about the sins we're committing today that our children and grandchildren will pay for thirty or forty or fifty years from now? Will they look back and shake their heads at our folly and curse us for our lack of responsibility?

Someone writing on the *Sojourners* magazine blog warns about the I.B.G. syndrome. I.B.G. stands for “I'll Be Gone” and in some ways it's the flip side of

the sour grapes proverb. I.B.G. says that by the time it all hits the fan, I'll be gone anyway, so why should I care. Consequences? What consequences?

That attitude goes a long way toward explaining how our economy got to be in such a mess. How many traders at Lehman Brothers were thinking about the retirement income of clients who entrusted their money to them to manage and how many were only thinking about what they could make for themselves on the next day's trade?

As the saying goes, we're mortgaging our children's futures to pay for our own folly of the moment. And we're doing it in so many ways.

When it comes to the earth's natural resources, we tend to ask, "is it profitable today?" not whether it's sustainable in the long run. Thomas Friedman asks, "What if the crisis of 2008 represents something much more fundamental than a deep recession. What if it's telling us that the whole growth model we created over the last fifty years is simply unsustainable economically and ecologically and that 2008 was when we hit the wall – when Mother Nature and the market both said: 'No more.'"

And the Anglican bishop of Liverpool puts it in terms Ezekiel would have understood:

Just as we look back on previous times with incredulity and wonder how people, especially believers, could have not only condoned but succored the slave trade and slavery, so in later years I think subsequent generations who will live consciously with the reality that the earth is not a limitless larder, will find it difficult to understand how we could have described ourselves so uncritically as "consumers."

The prophet Ezekiel told the Israelites in exile in Babylon to forget that sour grapes proverb and take responsibility for themselves. And that may have been the right thing to say to them. But it might be a good idea if we revived it today, not to shift blame to our parents and grandparents, but so our children and grandchildren won't someday say it with us in mind.