

Hespeler, 27 September 2020 © Scott McAndless

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32, Psalm 25:1-9, Philippians 2:1-13, Matthew 21:23-32

Like you, I am sure, when I was growing up I just loved my mother's cooking. And one of my favorite things that she made was her rhubarb pie. It was just perfect. Sweet and tasty with a perfect crust on the bottom and the light lattice crust on the top. I loved it.

And my mother tells a story. I have no idea personally whether this story is true or not because I do not recall it, but the story that *she* tells goes like this. The first time I tried rhubarb pie was at somebody else's house and apparently I just went to town on my piece of pie and I ate up all the filling off of the crust. The story goes that I then went to the host and asked if I could have some more rhubarb (or I probably pronounced it bubarb) – if I could have some more bubarb on my wee board.

Like I say, I don't remember anything about that, but the one part that rings true is that I really did like rhubarb pie – still do today. And probably the first time I ever helped out in the garden was when I got recruited to pick rhubarb. I used to love that too and I especially liked the part when you cut the leaf off from the stalk sort of like you were an executioner cutting heads off of criminals.

And I remember one day, when I was picking rhubarb with my dad and he told me that, when he was little, he used to like to go out into the rhubarb patch, grab a stalk and just start eating it raw. And I just wanted to say one thing here today as a kind of public service announcement: I do not suggest that you try that.

There is a reason why rhubarb pie has so much sugar in it; rhubarb is, in fact, one of the sourest foods on the planet. And maybe not for my dad, but for most mortals the reaction to eating anything that sour is quite powerful. I understand that science doesn't even have an explanation for how we react to sour foods, but the reaction is quite uncontrollable as we purse our lips and set our teeth on edge and make the strangest of faces. If you do not know what to expect, chowing down on a raw piece of rhubarb will really shock you.

And I was thinking about eating raw rhubarb while I was reading our Old Testament passage for this morning. In it, the prophet Ezekiel talks about a proverb that he was hearing among the people of his time. It was, to use the vocabulary of our own time, a meme that had gone viral and everyone was saying it.

“What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of



Israel,” Ezekiel asks, “‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’?”

Rhubarb, of course, does not grow natively in the Ancient Near East, but that doesn’t mean that the Israelites did not have experience with sour foods. And they probably all had the experience at some point in their lives of biting into some unripe fruit, like a grape, and having that reaction that is indeed common to all humanity.

But the proverb did not actually have anything to do with unripe fruit. Apparently, this proverb became so popular because it was a way for people to complain about a situation that they thought was very unfair. Ezekiel was a prophet during the time of the Babylonian invasion and exile. During his times, the Kingdom of Judah was destroyed by an invading Babylonian army and most of the leading citizens were carried off into a horrible exile. These were bad times, the kind of times that you would not wish upon your worst enemies. And so people were understandably upset to have to live through all of this. And they also naturally asked why this had happened.

And the main explanation that was offered by many people – and it is, by the way, an explanation you can also find in the Bible itself – was that it was not really the fault of the people of Ezekiel’s generation. They had actually done pretty well. They had reformed the nation, shut down sanctuaries to other gods and pledged to serve only Yahweh, the God of Israel. So God wasn’t angry with them.

God, the explanation went, was actually angry at the people of previous generations who had done bad things and served strange gods. The previous generations had eaten the sour fruit, yet it seemed as if the present generation was paying the price for that, their mouths puckered and their teeth on edge.

Now, the prophet Ezekiel brings all of this up with the people of Israel to tell them that they really shouldn’t be using this proverb, that they really don’t understand what’s actually going on. And we will, in a moment, get into how Ezekiel wants them to see things differently. But, first I want to stop and acknowledge that I have a certain amount of sympathy for the people who are saying this because we have all been there, haven’t we?

I mean, things go wrong in this world. That’s just a basic reality of life. Tragedy, disappointment and failure have happened again and again from the beginning of history and will continue to happen long after you and I are gone. And the impulse that we see in this passage is an impulse that we all have. We want to find someone to blame when things go wrong because that seems to make sense of it all. And, of course, we don’t want to put the blame on ourselves. Often those who have gone before us can make for convenient scapegoats.

For one thing, this is often just basic operating procedure when it comes to political leaders. Governments are generally only too happy to take all of

the credit for the good things that happened while they are in power. If the stock market is up and unemployment is down, they will happily claim credit for that. But we have all heard how they react when things go wrong. “Oh, we had to make these unpopular cuts because of the out of control spending of the previous government,” they’ll say, or, “This bad economy is thanks to our predecessors’ bad trade deals.”

Sometimes they will even do that when everyone knows how utterly ridiculous it is, like, for example, “The previous administration is to blame for this covid-19 crisis because they should have come up with test for this virus that didn’t yet exist while they were in office.” The amazing thing is that it sometimes seems that the more extreme you get with these kinds of complaints, the more people just nod their heads and go along with it.

But I’m not just talking about how this kind of scapegoating is used in politics. It is something that we all do at least sometimes. When it comes to the environment, we blame the previous generation for our pollution problems and for global warming. When it comes to indigenous issues in Canada, we certainly blame so much on the decisions that were made in the past. On an individual level, children are often very quick to blame their parents for everything they feel that they lack. And on a generational level, the millennial generation is only too happy to blame the baby boomers for, well, just about everything.

And the thing is that this is not all without some merit. I mean, there is simply no denying that the events, policies and actions of the past do have an impact on the present. And, what’s more, we can’t just ignore the impact of the past events. We have seen that, for example, in Canada as we tried to deal with indigenous issues.

When the Government of Canada and organizations like the Presbyterian Church in Canada put out a formal apology for the residential school system, recognizing that the system had done generational damage to indigenous communities as well as visiting abuse of many kinds upon individual indigenous persons, a lot of people didn’t quite know what to do with that. How could we apologize for something that we ourselves had not done but that had mostly been done by our ancestors? That is a difficult question, but I think we have seen that willingly acknowledging that difficult past is a necessary part of healing and moving into a better future. So, I would not just dismiss the idea that the people before us could have eaten sour rhubarb and we are the ones who have to deal with puc2kered lips and teeth set on edge.

But Ezekiel does offer us a caution. **“As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel.”** That doesn’t mean that what happened in the past is meaningless or that we shouldn’t think of the consequences, but I think it does mean that we should not be using the past as an excuse. Sometimes we do that. Because, of course, what happened in

the past cannot be changed, we do sometimes let it determine our present and our future. But no, Ezekiel says, we are not merely the victims of the past.

“Know that all lives are mine;” God continues through the voice of Ezekiel, **“the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.”** So ultimately everyone can only answer for their own life, their own choices, their own actions. And I realize that that phrase, **“it is only the person who sins that shall die,”** is a little bit brutal. What it actually means is that God does take our failings and shortcomings seriously. And that death penalty thing, God has demonstrated to us through Jesus, God’s desire to forgo such deadly punishment. But none of that changes the responsibility we carry for our own actions.

And I think that all of this really matters for us today because we are still going around and saying that our ancestors ate sour grapes and that we have had our teeth set on edge. We have allowed the mistakes and missteps of the past to deform our present. The big assumptions of our ancestors – the doctrine of discovery that, our ancestors felt, gave them full right to rule over indigenous peoples, the white supremacist assumptions that were almost invisibly woven into the very fabric of so much of Western society, the exploitation of the natural environment that became the very basis of our entire economy – all of these things are a part of our past and nothing can ever change that.

But one key thing that Ezekiel was saying is that we are not prisoners of our past. We cannot change what our forbearers did, but we can take responsibility for today. We should try and make the changes that we can and, yes, we will no doubt fail and fall short, but what we build will be our responsibility.

And Ezekiel offers us one more promise that we can take comfort in. **“Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and”** God promises through the prophet, you can **“get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!”** All of us, you see, carry around burdens from the past. Some of these are for mistakes, errors, sins and transgressions that we ourselves have committed or sometimes they really have been passed down to us by those who, in some sense, have gone before us. But the grace of God means this: whatever that past may be, you are not defined by it. Your life belongs to God and God gives you the freedom to establish a new heart, a new spirit, by who you choose to be today. That is the good news.

And if you want to munch on raw rhubarb, go ahead - the pursed lips and teeth on edge will just be your own.