

Message for August 28, 2022

Ezekiel 18:1-4

All I can do is plead either tiredness or stupidity. Every morning I set the table for breakfast and one morning when I reached into the cupboard for the vitamins, I knocked out a bottle of sinus medicine. The top came off and the pills were everywhere! There were some on the floor, the counter, and there was even one on top of the orange juice jug! I wasn't mad but I was certainly irritated because this most certainly wasn't how I wanted to begin the day, picking up all these little pills!

"Look", I said to Susan, "the last person who used this didn't put the lid on properly!" Quite reasonably she pointed out that that last person was almost certainly me, but what was my immediate unthinking response? "I don't think so!"

Now in all honesty, it is almost certain that the last person to use it was me but when I think about it, what I find interesting is my unthinking and almost automatic reaction; to claim that what had happened wasn't my fault. This however almost seems to be a basic part of our human nature, to deny responsibility and blame someone or something else when something goes wrong. We can think of one of the very first stories in the Bible for example.

All of us of course are well acquainted with the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and how they were allowed to eat anything they wanted to with one exception. Inspired by the serpent though, Eve ate the forbidden fruit. She then gave some to her husband and he ate it. Later when God asked what was going on, Eve's response was to blame the serpent saying that it was all its fault! When Adam was questioned, he started passing the blame around too. He said that it was the woman's fault since she had given it to him! Then he even implied that it was all really God's fault since he had created the woman in the first place! If the consequences hadn't been so tragic, the story of Adam and Eve would actually be rather humorous with no one accepting responsibility for their actions but instead falling all over themselves to blame someone else. But the story of Adam and Eve is, unfortunately, in many ways our story. This is to say, how often do we act like Adam and Eve? How often when we make

mistakes or do something wrong, do we offer excuses or try to pass the blame? But while we may think and act this way, God doesn't approve of it.

The prophet Ezekiel lived at the time of the great Babylonian crisis. Like his fellow prophet Jeremiah, Ezekiel too warned the people that they were going to be crushed by the Babylonians as a punishment for their sins. Naturally many of the people didn't like this message and offered all sorts of arguments as to why it would never happen. To start with, they said that since they were God's people nothing bad could ever happen to them. Others argued in a similar vein that even if they weren't perfect, they were still the descendants of Abraham, Moses, Ruth, and other great heroes of the faith. If only because of their ancestors, God wouldn't let anything bad happen to them. Other people though took the exact opposite point of view and argued that everything bad in life was their ancestor's fault. They had simply inherited the mess and were prisoners of history. Quoting a popular proverb of the day, they said: "The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge". Yet others even used Adam's argument and said that since God had created them as human beings, how could he blame them if they were less than perfect? Ultimately everything wrong in the world was God's fault and God's responsibility!

For his part Ezekiel rejected such reasoning altogether. He insisted that in the end it didn't matter who their ancestors were or what they had done. What mattered was what they themselves had said and done. Don't blame your ancestors, the world around you, or even God himself for your mistakes! Whether they wanted to or not, they had to accept responsibility for themselves. In short said Ezekiel, they had to act like mature adults instead of children.

There are many things in life that we have little or no control over. Genetics for example dictates such as the colour of our skin and eyes. We inherit such things and there is little or nothing that we can do about them. To a point we are also impacted by history too. Decisions made years ago by the people who have gone before us can and does have an impact on us today. To use one example, for various reasons the federal government set up the residential school system over one hundred years ago and many denominations, including our own, agreed to operate them. The schools themselves are now a thing of the past but even so, as we all well know, we are still living with the horrific consequences today. Or to use another example,

decades ago it was decided to move our drug making plants offshore. Then when the pandemic struck, the government was left scrambling to obtain access to vaccines. Even in our own personal lives we can't avoid the consequences of our past. Decisions made years ago about such as whether or not to marry, whether or not to stay in school, and where to work can still have an impact on our lives decades later.

Truly, whether it be as a church, a country or as individuals, we cannot fully escape the consequences of the past. If we want to, we can blame those who have gone before for whatever is wrong in our lives. Like Adam and the people in today's lesson, we can even blame God himself for creating a less than perfect world. And yet as today's scripture passage reminds us, God rejects such reasoning altogether. Yes, while we are influenced by the past, we are not helpless prisoners of it. We most certainly should not just blame history, God, or even the people around us for our mistakes, failures, or shortcomings. In fact we don't even need to do this. We don't because, as the gospel tells us over and over again, we are free to live our lives and make our choices knowing that we can and will be forgiven when we do make bad ones. Consider this short story from years ago.

According to John McNeill, a great Scottish preacher of years gone by, a farmer once caught an eagle while it was quite young. The farmer tied a rope around one of the eagle's legs and kept it in the barnyard along with his chickens. The eagle, not knowing any better, grew up acting like a hen, scratching and pecking at the ground. This majestic bird that was meant to soar in the sky above seemed to be content living the life of a lowly hen. Then one day the farmer was visited by a shepherd who urged him to let the bird go. The farmer agreed and cut the tether. The eagle however just kept on pecking away, looking at the ground. The shepherd then picked the eagle up and set him on the stone fence. For the first time in months the eagle looked up and saw the expanse of the blue sky above. He then spread his wings and, with a tremendous leap, soared away acting like an eagle once more.

Now this, McNeill said, is an analogy for us and our lives as God's people and the disciples of Christ. When we unthinkingly and wrongly blame others for our mistakes, failures, and shortcomings, we are so-to-speak acting like chickens. But God did not create us to be chickens, pecking and scratching at the ground. Rather God has created us to be like eagles, free to soar, free from

the mistakes of our past. God has created us to live our lives secure in the knowledge that when we do mess up, we can and will be forgiven and freed to try again. There is no need for us to act like immature children blaming the past, others, or even God himself for all that is wrong in life. Rather, secure in God's love, mercy, and forgiveness, we can act like mature adults, free to make our own decisions and accepting the consequences of our choices. This is the good news and promise of the gospel. This is the good news and promise of Christ crucified and risen.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer this summer day. We thank you for the precious gift of this day, and your very creation itself with all of its beauty and goodness. We thank you for the life-sustaining rain after the dryness of the past two months, but also pray for those such as in Texas and Arizona who went from one extreme to another, from drought to disastrous floods.

We thank you for this summer season, even as it starts to slowly wind down and the days grow shorter. Looking ahead to next week's Labour Day weekend when so many will be traveling, we pray for the safety and well-being of all.

We give you thanks for the mysterious wonder of life, and we give you thanks for the life that comes to us through you, both physical and spiritual. We thank you for your love made known to us in so many different ways but, above all, we thank you for your love made known to us through your Son's life, death and resurrection. In response to all that you have done and made possible for us, help us to live lives of gratitude. May we do our best, secure in your love and forgiveness when we fail, to make the lives of others and the world around us all the better for our being a part of it. Help us to take responsibility for our actions and decisions; grant that we may act like mature adults rather than children.

We offer up our prayer this morning for all those who hunger for food, justice, or peace.

We pray for the sake of peace in the many troubled places of your creation, and we especially pray for the people of Ukraine as the war continues with no end in sight.

We pray for our own nation and society as concern continues to rise over our ailing medical system, and for the well-being of all who work in it, struggling to care for both themselves and for others.

Be with, bless and keep us all. We ask this in your Son's name. Amen