

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32     Bill Uetrict     9.23.26     Pentecost 18

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not,’ but later he *changed his mind* and went.”

“For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him, and even after you saw it, you did not *change your minds* and believe him.”

The words “changed your minds, change his mind, change our minds” kept coming into *my* mind after I read the texts for today. The call from all the readings seems to be about getting a new mindset, changing our minds. And I must admit, I am not sure that I like that invitation. You know, I don’t like to change the tire on my bike. I don’t like to change passwords on the computer. I don’t like to change my locker in the locker room at the gym. And I really don’t like changing my mind. It has served me well for a long time. Why do I need to change it?

God in Ezekiel is calling for a change of mind in our first reading for today. The exiles of Judah have gotten used to a little proverb that has been going around and has shaped their minds. The proverb goes like this: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” In other words, the parents have done something that has had a terrible effect on the children. The parents’ sins are visited upon the children. The children are the victims of what their parents did. The Baby Boomers can blame their WWII-generation parents. The Millennials can blame their Baby Boomer parents. After all, as the Bible says, the sins of the fathers will be visited upon the fourth and fifth generations to come.

You see, the exiles of Judah find themselves in a rather bad situation. They have been scattered all over the place, causing them to wonder how they got there and who is to blame. And blaming is a

human preoccupation. Someone else has caused this mess, they conclude. Oh yes, our parents and grandparents.

This conclusion isn't always wrong. Children often do suffer from their parents' mistakes. Dysfunction can be systemic. That is, it goes up the family tree. It is not unusual for alcoholic children to have come from alcoholic parents or grandparents. It is not uncommon for abusive people to have been abused by their parents. There are legitimate victims in life. Many children have a right to sit in the therapist's chair and unload what horrible things the previous generation inflicted on them.

Yet, Ezekiel doesn't want to stop there. He wants the exiles to quit living on the basis of excuses. He wants them to change their minds. It's time for them to take responsibility for their own actions, their own situations. But for some reason, they prefer the proverb to God's invitation to life. They would rather rely on the excuse that the parents have eaten sour grapes and set their children's teeth on edge than face their own culpability, name their own guilt.

I said on Facebook the other day that anger is a means for some of us not to deal with our guilt. If I can get angry at other people, at the generation that preceded me, then I don't have to face *my* brokenness, what *I* did or continue to do. Sometimes it's easier to be angry than it is to be guilty. It's less vulnerable.

Margaret Odell says that the exiles who hang on to the proverb prefer "a fixed destiny of suffering" over the freedom of repentance. We prefer the mess over the vulnerability of admitting we were wrong, that our minds and hearts need to be changed. But God says that that proverb needs to go. Not taking responsibility needs to go. Playing the victim needs to go. "As I live, says the Lord, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel."

After all, says God, all lives belong to me, the righteous and the wicked. Because all lives belong to me, even the lives of the wicked are an open book. I am the God of possibility. I have no pleasure in the death of anyone. Even the wicked can turn. Even the wicked can change their minds and move in a new direction. I, God, in case you don't know, am gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. I really am not a scorekeeper. Repentance is possible. In fact, it is preferable. There is life after guilt. And frankly, that is our fear, that there isn't.

I know that it's not easy to swallow your pride. I know that it's not easy to admit that you were wrong. I know that is scary territory. But trust me. There is life after guilt. There are all kinds of possibilities when you come clean, when you change your minds about yourself, others, and the world.

My observation is that the depth of relationship that develops when you are vulnerable enough to take responsibility for yourself is incredible. Just ask those who are in twelve-step programs about this. What ties people together is not all the things that they got right, but what they got wrong. What links them is their admission of this truth, their humility.

Our second reading for today is all about developing a new mindset, one rooted in humility. Paul says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but humbled himself, emptied himself, taking the form of a slave."

Now Paul has a reason to point to the emptying of Jesus. He is trying to raise funds for the sake of the poor in Jerusalem. But I don't think that this is manipulation on Paul's part. His focus on Jesus' humility and his journey to the cross permeates his writings. His, without a doubt, is a theology of the cross, which sees God as

connected deeply not to the successes of life, but to its failures, and which is convinced that humility, not power mongering, is at the heart of the life shaped by Jesus. Humility faces life for what it is. Humility embraces the vulnerability of admitting that you were wrong. Humility entails working on our salvation with fear and trembling, recognizing that ultimately it is not we who bring new life to ourselves, but God who is at work within us. So in other words, it ain't all up to us, which gives us a lot of freedom, freedom to let go, freedom to be humble, to change our minds.

It is the son who changed his mind who is commended by Jesus today, the son who is vulnerable enough to swallow his pride—he initially said “no” to his father—to do what he said what he wasn't going to do. Jesus' reference here obviously is to the people of his time who appear to be the mistake makers, the folks who initially seem to get it wrong, the prostitutes and the tax collectors. You would think that they would be the ones who would receive Jesus' condemnation. But no! Who gets Jesus' critique? The ones whose religious surety prevents them from realizing that they have issues and that they need to move in a new direction, the ones who think they don't need to change their minds.

Before I sit down, I think I would do well to make one additional point about this changing your mind stuff. Biblically, especially in the Gospel of Matthew, changing your mind is not simply a cognitive matter, a matter simply of your thoughts. You can change your thoughts and not change your behavior. That is not the desire of Matthew's Jesus. The son who changed his mind went into the vineyard to work. He didn't simply have the thought, “Well, I guess I can work.” No! He worked. He did what his father told him. Jesus in Matthew says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who *does* the will of my Father in heaven.”

Changing your mind often means changing your behavior. They go hand in hand. You think differently, and you act differently. Who knows which comes first, changed thoughts or changed behavior? The psychologists can argue about that. But this I do know: changing your mind means changing the way you act. It is not enough to say, I'm thinking differently and still act in the same old, destructive way. Changed thought means changed behavior.

And get this. Changed minds and changed behavior are good news. There is life after guilt. Life doesn't have to be the same old same old. Because all lives belong to God, the God of possibility and resurrection, new life bursts forth when we are humble enough to leave behind our stubbornness and change our minds.