

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 Pastor Bill Uetricht 10/01/17 Pentecost 17

I am finding a new country song by the Brothers Osborne to be somewhat funny and particularly poignant. Here are some of the lyrics:

Blame the whiskey on the beer
Blame the beer on the whiskey
Blame the mornin' on the night
For whose lyin' here with me
Blame the bar for the band
Blame the band for the song
Blame the song for the party that went all night long

But it ain't my fault
No, it ain't my fault

Blame the heart for the hurtin'
Blame the hurtin' on the heart
Blame the dark on the devil
Blame the devil on the dark
Blame the ex for the drinkin'
Blame the drinkin' for the ex
Blame the two-for-one tequila's, for whatever happens next.

But it ain't my fault.
No, it ain't my fault.

Blaming...it's a human preoccupation. The Bible understands that. The Book of Genesis tells us that one of the first consequences of sin is blaming. Adam blames the woman. The woman blames the snake. And we have been blaming ever since. "It ain't my fault."

It's not a surprise that the exiles of Israel—the concern of the book of Ezekiel—are a little put off by Ezekiel's claim that they can no longer use the old proverb, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." They can't continue to blame, in other words. They can't say that it is the previous generation's fault for their exile. That blaming game needs to come to an end, God is telling the exiles today. No longer can they say, "it ain't our fault!"

"Why?" you may ask. I mean, sometimes a past generation *is* responsible. Sometimes what my parents *did* to me helped to create

the dysfunction that I am in. Sometimes we won't *get* ourselves or others, if we don't *get* what has been done to us. Some of us have been really wronged by other people, by past generations.

No doubt, that is true. We will not fully grasp ourselves or other people if we don't identify the pain that has been afflicted on us or them, sometimes through no fault of our or their own. Before I dismiss other people and their struggles, I have to realize that as old Indian proverb suggests: "I haven't walked in their moccasins." Personally, I think that a good and accurate diagnosis sometimes requires us rightfully identifying where blame needs to be placed.

But the trouble with all of this is that sometimes we get stuck there. And I suspect that this is why God in Ezekiel is taking on Judah today, why he no longer wants to hear the proverb about the parents' actions shaping the life of the children—causing their teeth to be set on edge. What happens so often in the blaming game is that it results in our standing still; it leads us to do nothing. Anthea Portier-Young says, that the proverb "had seduced the people of Judah to surrender, to resignation." The exile, she says, concluded that "suffering is the only option and that someone had seen to that long ago."

That's the problem with the blaming game. We adopt what Young calls a "pretense of powerlessness." It ain't my fault, and there is nothing I can do about it. We can't do anything to change what is broken. Oh, it's always going to be like this.

The problem of living within the blame game is that it short-circuits imagination and faith. All of a sudden, we are not imagining a new future, living within a new future. Rather, we are content to live within the dysfunctions of the past, thinking nothing will ever change.

Sometimes I am convinced that although the dysfunction of the past is indeed *dysfunctional*, we cling to it because it is what we know. And what we know is more secure than an uncertain new future.

When I was of college age I worked in downtown Cincinnati in one of the roughest communities in the Midwest. A part of my job at a Lutheran church there included helping to settle a man who had been

released from the mental hospital. We got him in an apartment, and I accompanied him to the grocery store, helping him buy some food that would assist him in beginning a new, independent life. A couple of days later I stopped by his apartment and noted that some of the cans of food had been opened. Obviously, he had taken a fork and spoon and simply had eaten out of the cans, not heating the food up or placing the food in a container in the refrigerator. When I showed up the next day, I was shocked to not find Jim at his apartment. I was worried and so I did some investigative work, only to be disappointed that no one seemed to know where he was. Later in the day, we got a call from Longview State Hospital to tell us that Jim had taken the six or seven mile walk to the hospital and checked himself back in.

Now I am not picking on Jim. He had a horrible mental illness, and frankly, he probably belonged at Longview. But what he did is so symbolic to me of what many of us prefer. Sometimes we prefer the dysfunction or the slavery of the past, rather than the freedom of the future. It's why some folks find themselves making their way back to the prison. It can be why some addicted folks find it hard to let go of the addiction. There's comfort there. It's why some people continue to think in certain ways, even if that thinking doesn't line up with the facts, even if that thinking is out of touch with the modern world, even if that thinking is harmful to their relationships. It's why some folks continue doing the same old same old creating the same old problems. The same old, dysfunctional as it may be, is comfortable sometimes.

But Ezekiel has a sense that the God he worships and lives in light of is a *living* God for whom a new future is possible. "As I live," God says in today's first reading, "the proverb about the children having their teeth set on edge because their parents ate sour grapes cannot be used any more. The blame game is over. I am alive, which means that the future is pure possibility."

All of this is to say the future is not determined by the past. Your future is not determined by what you did in the past or what your parents did in the past. The future of this nation is not determined by

the actions of the previous generations. “It ain’t my fault” is too often an excuse to do nothing. “Oh, there’s nothing that we can do about this toxic political situation we are in. We’ll just continue to think like we’ve always thought, rally our little troops, whine about how awful it is.” We’d prefer to see ourselves as victims, rather than, as Margaret Odell says, “moral agents capable of choosing [our] destiny.”

The God of Ezekiel is oriented toward a new future, toward new possibilities. Note what God says to conclude our reading for today: “Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone. Turn and live.”

Staying stuck in the past is often a matter of death. “It ain’t my fault” often means staying in the place of dysfunction where you have always been. It means wallowing in death. Yet God is not particularly fond of death, which is what I think the resurrection of Jesus tells us: God is not confined by death; God is not in love with death. God is in love with life. So why would you want, as Ezekiel asks, iniquity to be your ruin? Why would you want to stay stuck in a dysfunctional past. Get yourselves new hearts and new spirits. Prepare yourselves for newness, which is where God is. God is out in front, in the future, bringing us into it.

“Once upon a time, a man had two sons. He went to the one son and said, ‘Get to work in my vineyard today.’ The son, dissing his father, said, ‘I will not;’ but later, he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second son and said the same; this son, knowing how to please his father and make him look good, said, ‘Yes, I will go, of course,’ but then did not go. So, which of these sons did the will of the father?”

The one who did the will of the father is the one who actually did what he was supposed to do. His past brought the answer, “No.” But in God, the future is not closed. The future is full of possibility. The future is open, which is what the dissing son trusted. God is a living God. The future can be different. God does not take pleasure in the death of any one. God takes pleasure in people living in abundant life.

So, repent and live. Turn and live. Repentance is not bad news; it's good news. Repentance is about trusting a new, life-filled future. It may not be your fault, but it could very likely be your doggone fault. Whatever it is, it is time to move into the future. It's time to repent, to go in a new direction. God is alive. He is not confined to the past. He's out in the front in the future. Why don't you see if you can start to catch up with God?