

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21)

LIFE IS UNFAIR

Ezekiel 18:1-4, [5-24], 25-32

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Analysis by Peter Keyel

The word of the LORD came to me: 2 What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? 3 As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. 4 Know that all lives are mine; 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. [5 If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right—6 if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period, 7 does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, 8 does not take advance or accrued interest, withholds his hand from iniquity, executes true justice between contending parties, 9 follows my statutes, and is careful to observe my ordinances, acting faithfully—such a one is righteous; he shall surely live, says the Lord GOD. 10 If he has a son who is violent, a shedder of blood, 11 who does any of these things (though his father does none of them), who eats upon the mountains, defiles his neighbor's wife, 12 oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore the pledge, lifts up his eyes to the

idols, commits abomination, 13 takes advance or accrued interest; shall he then live? He shall not. He has done all these abominable things; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon himself. 14 But if this man has a son who sees all the sins that his father has done, considers, and does not do likewise, 15 who does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife, 16 does not wrong anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, 17 withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no advance or accrued interest, observes my ordinances, and follows my statutes; he shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live. 18 As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, he dies for his iniquity. 19 Yet you say, "Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?" When the son has done what is lawful and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. 20 The person who sins shall die. A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own. 21 But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. 22 None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live. 23 Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? 24 But when the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live? None of the righteous deeds that they have done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which they are guilty and the sin they have committed, they shall

die.] 25 Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is unfair." Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? 26 When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. 27 Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. 28 Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. 29 Yet the house of Israel says, "The way of the Lord is unfair." O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? 30 Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. 31 Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? 32 For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live.

(Author's note: I have included verses 5-24 for a broader picture. While some may feel that these details distract, they do make God's Law explicitly clear along with the attendant death sentence. It also hints at the Promise found in vv. 23 and 24.)

DIAGNOSIS: The Ways of the House of Israel Are Unfair

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Self-Righteousness

The children pay for the sins of the parents. Or in the proverb

quoted by the prophet, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” The nice part about paying for the sins of others is that it distracts from one’s own sins. When we focus on the sins of others and the effect these sins have on us, we build up our own righteousness by comparison. THEY are doing wrong. THEY are not doing what is right in the sight of the LORD. Of course, being the devout Jew/Christian/whatever, we can graciously bear their sins because we’re better than they are and we’re better than our parents. It’s why each generation makes progress on making the world a better place, after all.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Desiring Justice*
Closely tied to focusing on God’s Law, and others’ failures to live up to it, comes a desire for justice. Those who do wrong must be punished. Justice must be served. Parents ought to be responsible for their children and children should be responsible for the parents. Not only are we children better off, any sins we do have must be the iniquity of the parents. They failed to raise us right, it’s their fault. We couldn’t be wrong. But those other wrongdoers should be punished. Justice is the only way to have a fair society, especially when justice means punishing someone else. But of course, we technically agree with punishing ourselves if we ever stepped out of line. Justice must be fair, after all.

Yet here, the prophet lays out God’s ways, and they contrast with our ideas about justice. Two parts especially are not easy to take. “Only” the person who sins will die. That’s easy if one is sinless, but the rest of the pericope is about how, if the righteous man stumbles for even a second, he’s as good as dead! It’s also not fair because not all wrongdoing should be punished by death. Yet at the same time, God won’t remember the sins of one who turns from wickedness? That is hardly fair, and does not follow the system of rewards and punishments we call Law. That

means those wicked others might get away with their crimes. They will be allowed to persist in their evil and making life worse for everyone else. We reject God's ideas of justice because they are unfair. That also means God's Laws are unfair. How can we trust an unjust God?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *It Is Only the Person Who Sins That Shall Die*

God has a lot to say about this problem—that we don't trust God and that we prefer our laws to Gods. God starts with this: "As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel," "know that all lives are mine... it is only the person who sins that will die." "Is it not your ways that are unfair? Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways," and "Why will you die?" This system of rewards and punishments isn't going to end well for us or Israel!

Whether or not God's Law is unfair, it does mean the end for us, even if God indicates that this end is not what is desired for us: "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone," says the Lord GOD, "Turn, then, and live." Yet we confess that we cannot turn from those ways (and we claim we can't because of someone else's sin, see Step 1), and we're stuck at "only sinners die."

PROGNOSIS: The Way of the LORD Is Unfair

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *They Shall Not Die*

Although we cannot solve this problem, God can and does. God comes down to earth as Jesus Christ and lives among us under God's Law. It's not only the sinners who die to God's Law, but also Jesus. God's desire for us to live is shown in the death and resurrection of Jesus. God's Promise is that, turned from their wicked ways, sinners will live. The Good News is that the wicked can and will be saved by God's "unfair" ways.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Desiring Mercy*

Jesus clothes us in his righteousness. The worries about and the thirst for judgment are no more. The pericope captures what this righteousness means: "Repent and turn from all your transgressions... Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!... For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live." Despite the fact that these statements sound like commands in the English, these commands are much like the ones Jesus once gave to a paralytic "Take up your pallet and go home." These are not things we must do to earn our reward, but ways in which our faith will respond to God's new, unfair way of saving those who deserve death. The new spirit and new heart are not things we purchase or obtain on our own, but expressions of new trust in God's ways.

This new-found trust in God's ways is showing mercy instead of justice. Instead of desiring punishment for those others who have done wrong, we share in God's desire that all may live. The system of rewards and punishments we call Law is left behind, exchanged instead for trust in God's promise of mercy in Christ.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *God's Righteousness*

Without our reliance on the system of rewards and punishments, it is no longer about bearing others' sins to prove our superiority or pointing our fingers at others' lack of righteousness. We don't have to be better than everyone else, more devout than everyone else, or more of a martyr than everyone else. We turn, and live in the righteousness God has provided for us in Jesus, using those gifts of new spirit and new heart. Where others do lay their sins upon us, we are now free to share God's righteousness with them, giving them the righteousness that exceeds our own and truly healing that sin.

In so doing, we can help them also turn in faith to live.