

20th Sunday after Pentecost
Texts: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
Matthew 21:23-32

St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.
September 28, 2008
St. Peter's 256th Anniversary

“It's All Their Fault”

Okay, we don't mention names and we do protect confidentiality, but when clergy get together, we talk! We share concerns, joys and sorrows, and things that our parishioners say and do. One pastor shared the story of someone who had slipped a church bulletin under his office door. When he spotted it after the morning worship service and saw some notations on it, he assumed that the writer had jotted down an announcement or a date to be included in the newsletter that was to go to press Monday morning.

Reading the note scrawled across the ritual, he knew it was meant, not for the newsletter, but for him. "Garbage!" the note read. "This is garbage and we will not tolerate any more of it. That note of judgment was not aimed at the service in general, but only part of it. The unidentified writer was neither disagreeing with the interpretation of Scripture, or with any of the content of the sermon, or even the hymns selected for the service. The note was written across the congregational prayer of confession and certain phrases of that prayer were underlined.

The pastor said, "I was not too surprised because, since coming to serve that congregation, I had heard rumblings about those confessional prayers; they were too specific, too pointed. The prayer that morning went like this: O God, your will and purpose for us is far finer, far greater, than we ever dared to hope. What bothers us deeply is not so much our sin, but our shabbiness; the poor use we have made of great gifts, the talents squandered, the resources unrealized. We apologize for being so unbusinesslike about the business of living; for being so slipshod about the act of living. We beg your pardon for being satisfied with getting instead of getting on; for lazy prayers and slack speech; for half-hearted friendships; for tired marriages. We think with shame of uninvested wealth, of physical and mental and spiritual capital that promoted nothing but our own security, and brought nothing into being. We ask forgiveness for silly sins like vanity, for weak sins like self-pity, for shoddy sins like self-indulgence. But above all, we pray to be pardoned for our lukewarm commitment to Jesus Christ; for living, not by his truth, but by our own preferences. Help us to commit our lives to the Lord of life, to his way of thinking, acting, and being.

It seems this church member was a bit upset that the pastor was saying they were being "self-indulgent." They weren't taking life seriously, their prayers were - "lazy." Talents are squandered and potential is not being reached. No wonder this member was upset! Aren't the prayers supposed to be for the homeless, the hungry, those suffering around the world? How dare the pastor make the prayers about our disappointments and failures! Now it's getting a little too personal. It was offensive enough that his parishioner wrote: "Garbage! This is

garbage and we will not tolerate any more of it."

I do not often preach about the Prophets. Back in the Old Testament their message was usually one of Doom & Gloom, and Ezekiel didn't seem to be much different. When Jerusalem was captured by Babylonian forces in 597 B.C., the city was left intact, but the king and certain other leading citizens were taken to the captors' homeland. Among those refugees was a young priest named Ezekiel. While exiled in Babylon, Ezekiel saw a vision of God during a thunderstorm. He was commanded to tell his people what God intended to do with them and why.

Up until the time of the second Hebrew deportation to Babylon and the destruction of the temple in 587 B.C., Ezekiel chastised his people for their unfaithfulness to God and foretold the doom of those remaining in Jerusalem and the land of Judah. So Ezekiel gives them a message from God, the message we read in today's Lesson: "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? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live."

The covenant between God and his people had been broken. God had been faithful and the people had been unfaithful; therefore, destruction was inevitable. The Hebrews thought that their suffering in exile was the result of another generation's unfaithfulness to the covenant with God. They repeated the proverb, "The parents ate the sour grapes, but the children got the sour taste." They thought of themselves as innocent victims, and were trying to shift the blame for the tragedy of exile to the previous generation. God, speaking through Ezekiel, says, "You will not repeat this proverb in Israel any more. The life of every person belongs to me, the life of the parent as well as that of the child. The person who sins is the one who will die."

In other words, God is saying that we will not be punished for the sins that were committed by someone else. Whew! Aren't we glad that we aren't going to be held responsible for the sins of our parents, or our brother or sister? You know, that's the least of our problems. We have enough of our own sins to worry about. In fact, more than we would like to admit.

This past Wednesday in our Adult Catechism Program, we looked at the 10 Commandments. In our study we realized we break more of them than we would think. Taking the name of the Lord in Vain? I hear that done even here at Church. I've been to Choir Rehearsals, Committee Mtgs., Council Meetings, Catechism Classes, and just walking down the hall where people just nonchalantly use the Lord's name in vain. Most people denied ever breaking Commandments #5. You all remember that one?!? Well - maybe not? Thou shall not Kill.

Well if you view it as murdering a person, perhaps not. But according to Martin Luther, each time we gossip about someone, or tell an ethnic joke, or criticize a person, we have killed a

part of that person's self-esteem. Or we spread a rumor and kill someone's integrity. There are more ways to kill part of a person than with a gun or a knife. The loose tongue and be a very dangerous weapon. And what about "Thou Shall Have No Other gods?" What were you doing the last Sunday you skipped church? Was it a household project, a Sports Event, the kids little league, or the comfort of the bed? Whatever it was, if you did it instead of worshiping God, you placed it as a higher priority than God. Coveting our neighbor's stuff, not honoring our parents, bearing false witness - even a little? We all break the laws of God - even if only a little. But we don't want to own up to them, not specifically. We do all this stuff, then at night in our prayers, when we remember to pray, we say, "God, please forgive me my sins." What if God said, "Which ones specifically?" Would we be comfortable listing them?

Keith Miller, an Episcopal layman, wrote a number of books on commitment. In the book entitled "The Second Touch," he tells how sharing himself with his family through prayer led to a kind of openness. For a long time he and his wife had a standard prayer ritual with their children at bedtime. It consisted of "Now I lay me down to sleep," followed by all of the God blesses.

One night Mr. Miller was going through this ritual with his five-year old daughter when he realized he wasn't praying at all with his child. They had never heard any confession or petition from him about the things that were real in his life. The next evening he came home irritated about something that happened at work, and at the dinner table he took out his irritation on the family, yelling at his wife and the children. That night, as he was tucking the same five-year-old into bed, he began the prayer. "Dear God, forgive me for being so fussy at dinner tonight." There was a kind of awed silence. Then very quickly, his little girl went through the familiar "Now I lay me" and the usual God blesses. The next night it happened that Mr. Miller was again irritable when he came home and showed his irritation at dinner. As he was having his nightly ritual with his daughter, he prayed, "Dear Lord, forgive me for being so cross again tonight and help me not to be fussy. I really don't want to be that way. Please help me to try hard not to be." There was the same silence. Then, with eyes clenched shut, his little girl very quickly prayed: "Dear God, forgive me for peeing out in the backyard under the tree last summer." That was real confession for that five-year-old, and as specific as her father's.

God knows the sins we have committed. By not naming them before God, they are not going to go away. The Israelites that Ezekiel were not willing to take ownership. They wanted to say, "We are being punished for the sins of our parents." They were saying, "It's all their Fault!" And God was saying, "No. Take responsibility for your own actions. You are being punished for your own sins."

Take responsibility for your Actions. If you choose not to come and worship God, there may be many "reasons" but it was your choice to do something else instead. If you use God's name inappropriately, it's your tongue, not someone else's, who is saying the words. The Prophet Ezekiel is saying, "Take Responsibility!"

Even today's Gospel Lesson from Matthew, Jesus tells a story where one son, although maybe not honoring his father as much as he should, was the one who showed responsibility. There is a story about a group of military leaders who succeeded in building a super computer that was able to solve any problem large or small, strategic or tactical. These military leaders assembled in front of the new machine for a demonstration. The engineer conducting the demonstration, instructed these officers to feed a difficult tactical problem into it. The military leaders proceeded to describe a hypothetical situation to the computer and then asked the pivotal question: attack or retreat? This enormous super computer hummed away for an hour and then printed out its one-word answer . . . YES. The generals looked at each other, somewhat confused. Finally one of them submits a second request to the computer: YES WHAT? Instantly the computer responded: YES, SIR.

The Pharisees, like these generals, were accustomed to people saying "Yes, sir" to them. They were the religious authorities. They were used to being treated as such. But there was a new teacher in town, a teacher who was threatening their authority. The Pharisees feared Jesus' popularity, his ability to heal and to perform miracles. In their eyes, Jesus was leading people away from the religious traditions that defined the Jews. The Pharisees wanted to expose him as a fraud. It was in this context that Jesus told a story about a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, "Son, go and work today in the vineyard." The boy immediately said, "No." later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to his other son and said the same thing. This one answered, "O.K." but he never got out to the vineyard. Then Jesus asked a simple question: "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Then Jesus delivered the punch line, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

So which are we? Are we the ones who say, "Yes heavenly Father, we will work in your vineyard." Then we go off and do other stuff? Or are we like the son who says, "No, I won't go." But we have a change of heart, accept our responsibility, and go into the vineyard?

In the Old Testament, when you broke a Commandment of God, you were often stoned to death. And Ezekiel warned the people of Israel that they, not their Parents, were responsible for their sins. It was they who would be punished. But fortunately for us, Jesus tells his Heavenly Father that instead of punishing us, he will take the responsibility for our Sins. Jesus could have hung from the Cross and said: "IT'S ALL THEIR FAULT" - and he would be right. He's right that he was crucified because of us. And because of the love of God, he wouldn't have done it any other way. Christ took responsibility for our sinfulness. Let's at least take ownership of those sins so we can show gratitude for Christ's sacrifice for us.

When I was writing my sermon this week I had to respond to a member's e-mail, and I

closed by saying, "I'm going to go back to writing this week's sermon." Well a few minutes later I received another message from them that said: "Just write some crap about how God is like the stock market, and if we don't take care of the investments God made in/with us, it will crash and we will all have to pay." As I read that I thought it's kind of appropriate. Back in Biblical times God's investment in humanity took a deep dive and the market crashed. But God provided a Bailout - a Bailout called Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was sent to a failing world to prevent it from becoming totally worthless.

God made an investment in each one of us. God invested within each of us talents and resources that are to be used and developed. Our responsibility is to put those gifts to work, and give God a return on the investment. Here we are celebrating 256 years as a congregation. We look back at the faithfulness of the many generations who have brought St. Peter's to where it is today. We give them a lot of credit. We also wonder why they didn't perhaps do more, and might want to cast some blame. But in the eyes of God, in 2008 it doesn't matter what they did back in 1778. St. Peter's is here for the people NOW.

There's something to be said in the saying, "What have you done for me lately?" God wants us to heed the words of the prophets, and to be like the son who doesn't only give lip service and SAY he's going to work in the vineyard. He wants us to be like the one who goes to work in the vineyard. So take Responsibility - get specific when confessing your sins - Obey the Commandments - Take what God has invested in you and make it Grow - and continue to share the life, love and joy of Jesus Christ with others. Amen.