

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A, Proper 21)

Lessons for the Day: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Philippians 2:1-18; Matthew 21:23-27

The Buck Stops Here!

September 27, 2020

“The word of the LORD came to me: ‘What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’? As I live, declares the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.’”

“‘Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die. Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? ‘Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make 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, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.’”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

I have always appreciated the Bil Keane comic strip, *Family Circus*. I think I like it because so often I see myself and my family in that strip. As a boy, I could identify with Billy. Billy would be called for dinner, and we would see him wander around the yard, kick a soccer ball; stop to play with a puppy, climb up on the fence to watch a fire engine go down the street. He would splash through a puddle and take the most round-about way of coming into the house. I saw my children in the situations Keane described. But one of my favourite characters was called *Not Me*. *Not me* shows up whenever some mischief has occurred—but which, of course, no one has done. Parents have long known how this works: who broke the vase in the living room? Not me, all the children declare. Who ate the last piece of cake? Not me, everyone says. Each home must be filled with ghosts and goblins who constantly are doing those things that no one else has done.

This is typical movie slapstick. We see a bumbling oaf causing one disaster after another, who always says, “It wasn’t me!” Even when we all know that only he can be at fault, he claims that same defence: “It wasn’t me!”

It is one thing to laugh at the absurdity of such an attitude in a comic movie. But it is unfortunate that people constantly seem to hide behind those words: It wasn’t me! People go on a rampage of destruction, looting and violence, but it wasn’t their fault—it is the fault of a society that is racist. A student cheats on a test, but it wasn’t them—it was the teacher, who wasn’t very good at communicating the lesson material. An employee takes office supplies from work, but blames his pilfering on the company for not paying him well enough. People will do anything and everything to avoid personal responsibility for their actions. The smart thing, we are being led to believe, is to pass the buck and let someone else take the rap.

St. Paul tells us: **“Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.”** (Galatians 6:7, ESV) God is not going to be whitewashed or misled by our vain claims that it isn’t our fault that we do those things that are wrong. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God makes it very clear that he is going to judge each person for their own sin. We may want to pass the buck, but God says, the buck stops here, as He holds each and every person accountable for their own actions. **“The soul who sins shall die.”** Thankfully, God also speaks of life for those who turn from their sin to live in the blessed grace He gives to us through Jesus Christ.

When Harry Truman was president of the United States, he had a sign on his desk—the sign that is on our screen this morning. It simply said, “The Buck Stops Here”. The phrase refers to the notion that the President has to make the decisions and accept the ultimate responsibility for those decisions. We agree that the responsibility and consequences for the decisions of the President or Prime Minister, the team coach or the office manager should rest with them. We recognize that the idea of plausible deniability—the idea that it wasn’t my fault, because I didn’t know what the people under me were doing—is an excuse that should not be acceptable, even if it is often offered as an explanation. But we suddenly feel differently when it comes to our own accountability for our choices, actions and attitudes. We don’t want to be held accountable for our actions and we definitely don’t want to have to experience the punishment that may result from any manner of sins. And so we pass the buck. We blame

someone else. We see that in Adam and Eve, right at the beginning of sin's rule in human hearts. When God asks Adam if he had eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam passes the buck—both to Eve and to God Himself: ***“The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.’”*** (Genesis 3:12, ESV) It was the woman, God. It was her fault! And don't forget, you created her. If she wasn't here, it wouldn't have happened. You can't blame me for this!

The people of Ezekiel's day were no different than Adam. Ezekiel comes with a message of judgment against the nation because of its sin. God was going to deal with His unfaithful people. They have been chasing after false gods, and God was going to let them feel the consequence of their actions. ***Repent and turn from all your transgressions*** was Ezekiel's warning. Let go of the false gods, and the detestable practices associated with those lying religions. Throughout the history of our world, God sends messengers with this warning again and again. “Look at what you are doing”, they say. “Look at how you have sinned against the true God. And turn from your sin that you might live.”

But what do the people say in response to Ezekiel's message? Hey, it isn't our fault. It was our ancestors! They were the ones who started worshipping the idols. They were the ones who taught us all this evil. You can't hold this against us. You're not being fair, God. Blame them! The people tried to excuse themselves by passing the buck—just as people continue to do today. But God doesn't accept this plea. In fact, He says: ***“The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.”*** (Ezekiel 18:20, ESV) God says that the buck stops with the one who commits the sins. We are all answerable before Him for the deeds we have done in this life, whether they are good or bad.

I suppose it is only natural that we want to pass the buck in light of the judgment that goes with sin. God is very precise, very direct in the face of sin: ***the soul who sins shall die***. That means we all deserve to die. We all deserve God's wrath and punishment, because we—we—have sinned. The death that Ezekiel speaks of is more than just the physical reality of death in this world: it is also eternal death, separated from God in the torments of hell. That death is something to be avoided at all costs. Thankfully, God, in His grace, is eager to deliver us from this death. That is why there is such comfort in the other message that Ezekiel brings the people. He doesn't simply announce death and destruction. He also speaks of the fact that God wants something better for His people: ***“Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.”*** Ezekiel declares in the name of the Lord that there is an answer for the sin that is so much a part of us. There is a hope of restoration in the face of our guilt and shame. It doesn't come by passing the buck, but through an honest admission of our guilt. It comes as we not only feel sorry that we have been caught in sin, but when we are so sorry for our sins that we want to give them up totally and completely. That is what real repentance is—turning from the sin that we no longer want as a part of our life. Repentance means living in faithful obedience toward the God to whom all souls belong.

Each and every one of us is accountable for our own actions. In the sight of God our actions, our attitudes, our words and our desires have been wrong. And, yes, the buck stops with you. If you feel that burden, and I hope that you do, here is the good news: you can't pass the buck, but God can—and He does, as He takes all of our sins and places the guilt and shame of them on His Son, Jesus Christ. The buck should stop with us, but in His great love for us, God takes us to the cross and says to us: the buck stops here. At the cross, all the blame and punishment that should be on us is taken away, as Christ makes full and complete atonement for all our sins. The only one who can say, “It wasn't me!” is the One who accepts the consequences of our sinfulness. As Paul said in our epistle lesson, Christ ***“humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”*** (Philippians 2:8, ESV) He died to free us from the death we deserve. Yet He is also exalted in His resurrection, as He lives to give new life to His people. In the waters of holy baptism, the God of mercy and grace washes away our guilt and shame, and give us a new heart and a new spirit that changes us. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus talks about 2 sons. He urges us to be like the son who realized he was not doing what his father wanted, and who repented—who changed and went and worked in the field. Forgiven and free, we also go out to live as our God calls us to live. We can do those things which are good and right in His sight. In Christ we flee from all the power and influence of sin and evil. You can have life as God wants you to have it—a life with Him forever.

The way to have the life God wants to give us forever is not by avoiding the responsibility we have for our sinful actions. Rather, it comes from admitting them honestly and sincerely—and turning, with the help of the Holy Spirit to the great mercy of God., who gives us forgiveness and life in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Corrie Ten Boom wrote: ***“the purpose of being guilty is to bring us to Jesus. Once we are there, its purpose is finished. If we continue to make ourselves guilty—to blame ourselves—then that is sin in itself.*** God won't listen to excuses. He will not excuse our actions. The buck stops here, with me, with you, for we are sinners. But by faith, we know that God has taken that sin away in Christ. He will forgive—and in His

forgiveness, we can live that wonderful new life that enables us to serve the Lord with gladness, to live in His freedom, now and forever. Amen.