

# "Justice or Mercy?"

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

September 28, 2014

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

*What do we want? JUSTICE! When do we want it? NOW!* That chant is used in many protest marches and movements. It sounds pretty good. We DO want justice and we want it quickly. It only seems right. Everything should be done fairly, correct? That's in our best interest, isn't it? Who wouldn't want justice? We all want justice – except when we are guilty. For if we are guilty, then justice works against us. And we can't have that. We have to have something else.

What gets us off the hook of justice? Why, blaming someone else, of course! The “blame game” is as old as sin itself. After Adam and Eve sinned by eating the forbidden fruit, neither admitted their sin and submitted themselves to God's justice. Instead they blamed. They blamed each other. They blamed the snake. They blamed God. None of it was their fault.

The same attitude is taken by the people of Israel in our text for today. As they sat in Babylon after being exiled from Israel, they were musing about how unfair God was. After all, when they lived in Jerusalem, they had worshiped the true God. (Nevermind that they had also introduced the worship of false gods into the Temple itself.) They followed all the temple rites and rituals. (Never mind that many of them had chosen not to participate.) As long as they were the chosen people, had the Holy City of Jerusalem and had the Temple, they were going to be all right.

Then the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar came, destroyed Jerusalem, and took the people off into exile in Babylon. Did this inspire them to admit their sin and repent? Not at all. The people in exile with Ezekiel repeat the popular proverb: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.” There must have been an old wives' tale that, if you ate sour grapes, then your teeth would be “set on edge” (become dull). The proverb means that the children suffer for the father's actions. The people are using that proverb to complain that they are suffering

judgment (their teeth set on edge) because of the sour grapes (the sin) that their fathers chose to eat. Their complaint to the Lord implies that His judgment is patently unfair and He is to blame for his enactment of such inequitable justice.

Before we criticize Israel's ignorance of their sin, their failure to repent, and their responsibility for God's judgment on them, let us consider how often we do the same thing. How often don't we blame something or someone else for our actions? We blame our circumstances. We fail to do something God commanded, but we had a good reason for doing it, as if an explanation for our behavior absolves us from responsibility for it.

We blame our weaknesses. We do something wrong – clearly against the will of God – and the best response we can come up with is, "I couldn't help myself." This is not taking responsibility for our actions, but renouncing responsibility for them. We are not admitting our sin, but justifying it.

Sometimes, we use the same argument from the proverb. We are being punished for someone else's actions. We did something wrong because we are genetically predisposed to do that. We did something wrong because we were in a bad environment. We did something wrong because we were raised wrong. Just like with Adam and Eve in Eden, the final responsibility and blame for our actions rests with someone else. And ultimate responsibility rests with God for having made us that way or put us in a position to sin.

What is the Lord's response to the exiles in Babylon and to us today? First of all, knock it off with that proverb. The Lord says, "This proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel." In other words, stop blaming others and stop blaming the Lord for your sin and the consequences of that sin. The Lord doesn't want to hear it.

And, secondly, the Lord says, "You think MY way is not just? It is your ways that are not just. If you want justice, I'll give you justice." Everyone is held accountable by the Lord for their own actions and will be judged individually based on their actions. You get no credit or blame from anyone else. In other words, you won't be punished for anyone else's sins and, at the same time,

you don't get to blame any person, any circumstance, any genetic or medical condition, any environment, or anything else for your sins. God will judge each one justly and fairly.

The Lord says, "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." God is holy and must punish sin for He cannot tolerate it in His presence. To ask that He do so is like asking someone who is deathly allergic to some food to just try a bite. There's a lot of talk today about "zero tolerance" for this or that thing. God has a "zero tolerance" for sin. "The wages of sin is death, (Rom. 6:23) God says and everyone who does sin will receive the same wage regardless of race, age, gender, creed, sexual preference or country of national origin. There's the justice and fairness we wanted, right?

The Lord goes on to say, "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." Have you ever noticed how often people want to judge their relationship God on the basis of the past? They will say, "I was raised Lutheran. I was confirmed. I used to attend church." People think God will look favorably on them because of their past. Under perfect justice, the Lord will judge you and me on what we have done, not on what we used to do. Your past cannot help you.

Your past doesn't forever doom you forever either. This is a good thing. The Lord says, "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." Under perfect justice, your background doesn't penalize you. You are judged on the basis of where you are at at the time of the judgment.

So, do you still think you want justice? You've already earned the death penalty under justice for your sin. Can you turn away from sin, not only in your deeds but in your words and your thoughts, and do what is right all the time? Stripped away of all of our excuses and blaming, justice is a very frightening thing. Once, in a courtroom, a man stood before the judge, pleading for his life. He had been sentenced to death for murder and was giving an impassioned speech about how he had been brought up wrong, lived in poverty all his life, and never had a fighting chance. "All I want," he said,

“is justice!” The judge looked at him square in the eye and said, “Son, what you want is mercy and that’s something this court is unable to provide.”

Although we talk about justice, especially when someone has wronged us, what we really want – really need – is mercy. Someone who is just a judge is required to judge justly. He is bound by the Law and its consequences. He cannot show mercy.

The Lord is our holy judge. He must judge justly. He cannot ignore sin or abandon His holiness in judging His creatures. But He can also show mercy by doing something extraordinary. He can take the place of His creatures under that complete justice.

The God who requires death as the judgment for the sin of humanity came to this earth as a human and took on humanity's sin. He became "the soul who sins", not because he did sin but because He took on the sins of those who did. In doing so, under God's justice, He deserved to die and He did. The Creator of life pursued death for the sake of His creatures. He went to the cross with our sin and for our sake.

We often think of the cross as just a religious symbol. It is so much more. At the cross, God's justice and God's mercy intersect.

It was on the cross that God's justice was meted out. All of God's wrath and all of God's punishment was poured out upon that cross. It should send a chill down your spine every time you see a cross because it is the punishment for your sin.

Yet, at the same time, it was on the cross that God's mercy was given. For you were not the recipient of His wrath. You did not receive the punishment your sin deserved. God received it. Jesus Christ, true God and true man, took upon Himself your sin, endured God's wrath against it, and took God's punishment for it for you and in your place.

Amazing! God is the Judge and Punisher of all sin and God is the Victim and Receiver of all punishment for sin. And we are the beneficiaries of that action. Jesus is judged guilty and condemned. We are declared to be not guilty and are saved. God's justice is served and God's mercy is given. As the Bible says, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21)

All of this is declared to be true and acceptable by God in Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Jesus did "what was just and right" in fulfilling all of God's justice in our place. Therefore, He was raised from the grave and returned to life. The verdict has been accepted. In Him, we are not guilty. We, too, shall be raised from our graves and returned to life that lasts forever.

In the meantime, Ezekiel says to the exiles waiting to return to the Promised Land and to us waiting to receive our Promised Land in heaven, "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!" And, while those are actions which we seem to take, they are actually gifts given to us by God – repentance and a new life – through His Word and Sacraments. His Law drives us to repentance. The Good News of Jesus gives us a new heart and spirit. We receive them by faith. We carry them out in the power of the Holy Spirit. He who gives them to us will complete them in us. St. Paul's confidence is ours as well when he wrote, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6)

To paraphrase the slogan I began with, our chant should always be, "What do we need? MERCY! When do we need it? NOW!" You have that mercy because Jesus Christ took your place under God's justice. That means forgiveness and a new life. You have that mercy now. You have that mercy forever. Amen.