2014

Proper 21 • Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32 • September 28, 2014

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol40/iss3/14

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This emphasis on Yahweh’s merciful pardon is the beating heart of this pericope. See also Psalm 103:11.

Third, Yahweh’s thoughts and ways—especially his mercy—are beyond the full comprehension of men. Some suffer longer under Yahweh’s chastening yoke. Others have an easier path. Yet mercy is the final word for his people . . . inexplicably so beyond the observation that “God is love” and that “Yahweh delights to show mercy.” Job certainly struggled with the inscrutability of Yahweh, yet acknowledged his goodness in the end. The gospel reading for this Sunday, the vineyard workers hired at different times yet all paid a full wage (Mt 20:1–16), captures God’s surprising and irrational mercy beautifully.

Ultimately, the thoughts and ways of God are no mere abstractions, whether goodness, justice, or mercy. Rather, they find incarnate expression in a person: Jesus, God’s beloved Son. He is the Λόγος and the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus is the higher way and thought of God. In him the mercy of God for sinners finds its ultimate expression and rationale. It is by the nail-marked hands of Jesus, ultimately, that the vineyard workers are beckoned to the vineyard and recompensed beyond their merits. In the life, death, resurrection, present forgiveness, and coming kingdom of Jesus we see just how wondrous are the thoughts and ways of our God, and just how far beyond our own thoughts and imagining (Is 64:4; 65:17; 1 Cor 2:9)! So let us sinners forsake our own ways and thoughts, and return to our God and his ways. For he will have mercy on us and forgive us abundantly. And his thoughts and ways—expressed in his word and especially in his Son—are just plain better than ours!

Thomas Egger

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The Just Way of God

“The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” This phrase leads Yahweh through Ezekiel to address Israel’s whining as they blame Yahweh for their woe and suffering in the destruction of the land and in the exile under Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar. The preacher is encouraged to give attention to the rhetorical structure of the pericope that reconstructs a conversation between Yahweh and Israel through Ezekiel, although decidedly from God’s perspective. The rhetorical structure provides a potential pattern for preaching the text.

In 597, King Jehoiachin, the nobility of Judea, and much of the populace are taken into exile and resettled in southeastern Mesopotamia. Significant destruction of Jerusalem and the land of Judea occurs at the hands of the Babylonians. And the people in exile with Ezekiel are repeating the popular proverb: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”1 They 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 Yahweh implies that God’s judgment is patently unfair and Yahweh is to blame for his enactment of such inequitable justice. Yahweh’s response through Ezekiel is to prohibit the use of the proverb (v. 3). Yahweh affirms his just ways proclaimed in Deuteronomy 24:16: “Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.” All creatures belong to God and God holds all accountable. Yahweh judges the sinner. “And the soul who sins shall die (v. 4).” Ezekiel unpacks Yahweh’s assertion in verses 5–24 (not in the pericope) by way of specific examples of God judging sinners for their personal sins alone. Yet, Israel continues to complain that the Lord’s ways are not just (v. 25). Israel perceives that sinners are not judged by Yahweh for their own sins and that the punishment that befits justice actually does not fit the crime. So the Lord tells Israel that their ways are unjust and that he will judge them according to his way. He invites them: “Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin” (v. 30). In the end, he pleads for Israel to have a new heart and spirit, to turn and live since Yahweh has no pleasure in anyone’s death (vv. 31–32).

Preaching this pericope according to its rhetorical structure would entail focusing upon the way of the Lord: Turning from sin and death to life. This Old Testament reading highlights the fundamental issue of human responsibility for living that is contrary to God’s will and design (sin). The cry of injustice is on the tip of the tongue of every sinner. The preacher should consider leading the hearer to perceive how they impugn God by representing his way as unjust. When justifiable lament turns to blame, then the sinner’s true love is manifest: love for the self. And love for God above all things is ruled out. For the sinner has now blamed God as the source of his trouble and woe. For us, the children, our teeth are set on edge, because our fathers (and fellow human beings) have eaten sour grapes. The judgment of God for the sin of others appears to have fallen on us, since we appear to be suffering the consequences for their sins. The particular consequences will depend upon the nature of the sin and the experience of sin and its consequences in each community in which God’s people live. Yet, the preacher proclaims, “Hear now, O church—is it not your ways that are unjust?”

Rhetorically the preacher would then turn, as Ezekiel did, to make the call: “Repent and turn from all your transgressions. Make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit.” The crucifixion of Christ manifests the impossibility: we cannot repent and make ourselves new. Who can follow the just way? Who can create a new heart and a new spirit for herself?

Yet, Ezekiel does not end in despair. Yahweh does not delight in death (2 Pt 3:9). God desires that we live. So how do we repent/turn/die and then live? We repent and live through the promise of the word of God in the name of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38–39). “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). The preacher should proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins through baptism and daily confession and personal absolution—a new heart and a new spirit to the people of God.

Endnotes


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The gospel reading for this Sunday from Matthew 21:23–27 (28–32) focuses on the issue of responsibility through the chief priests’ and the elders’ questioning of Jesus’s authority and the parable of the two sons which highlights that the true Son is the one who does the will of his father, even if he didn’t at first.

Given this rhetorical emphasis, it might make sense to place the general rite of confession and absolution after the sermon, following Saxon Lutheran practice. The rite could include portions of Ezekiel 18 in the versicles in dialogue fashion leading to confession or in the confession itself.

Proper 22 • Isaiah 5:1–7 • October 5, 2014

Maybe you’ve walked through a garden and seen these words, “The kiss of the sun for pardon, the song of the birds for mirth, one is nearer God’s heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth.” If you enjoy gardening, you know it’s not quite as idyllic as Dorothy Francis Guernsey’s poem suggests. Have you ever gotten poison ivy or chigger bites; had the shock of seeing a snake or had your back thrown out in the garden? Maybe there’s more to God than sunshine and singing birds. Indeed, the garden teaches you about both the magnificence of creation and how sin has corrupted God’s creation.

Today’s text is about a vineyard—not a garden—but the appeal of gardens and vineyards is similar. The text tells us that the Lord loved the vineyard he planted. Read verses 1 through 4a. But now comes a twist; things aren’t so idyllic in the vineyard. “And he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.” Wild grapes, weeds in the garden! Did you ever plant something in the garden that turned out so bad that you uprooted it? “And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard,” the Lord announces beginning in verse 5. Read verses 5 through 6. It makes you think twice about being “nearer God’s heart in a garden.” Jesus used the image of a vineyard in today’s gospel, Matthew 21:33–46. A man planted a garden and rented it out to tenants. But when the owner sent servants to collect the rent, the tenants killed the servants. In exasperation, he sent his son, and they killed him. Jesus asked his hearers what the owner would do. “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons” (21:41). Looking for grapes, precious grapes, the owner instead got wild grapes, and they killed his son to boot.

This text isn’t about vineyards or gardens. It’s about the people of God, ancient Israel and you and me today. Go back to Isaiah 5 and read verse 7. God loved his Israel, his “pleasant planting.” He planted them to do good works, specifically to bring justice and righteousness to all people, but they gave him “wild grapes.” Their works were bloodshed and outrages. Today you and I are God’s people, his “pleasant planting” by baptism into our Lord Jesus and the Christian faith. Why did God plant that vineyard in Isaiah? Why did God bring you into the church? Because he loves you. The church is his planting, his vineyard. It’s not really “our” church. And God does the work for his church. Like preparing a vineyard or garden, he plants us by baptism and he lovingly grows us by his teaching and preaching and supper. It’s his work in us, and in return he looks for us to produce “grapes,” good works for his delight. This pleasant planting of the church is all centered in Jesus, the beloved Son who died, rose, and gives us his Holy