

The Grapes of Math
Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost
October 16, 2016
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Text: Jeremiah 31:27-34

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson – Jeremiah 31:27-34

In the lectionary we started with the prophet Jeremiah in August – and now this is the last Sunday with Jeremiah, 9 weeks – it’s been a good run. At the beginning at Jeremiah’s call we heard that he was to speak a word ‘to pluck up and break down...and to build and to plant’ – later in Jeremiah we heard again: ‘to pluck up and break down...and to build and to plant’ – today towards the end of Jeremiah we hear ‘to pluck up and break down...and to build and to plant’. Jeremiah was a prophet for a long time –over 40 years, through the downfall of Jerusalem and the exile of many of the people to Babylon - and throughout the word from Jeremiah remains consistent in its challenge: things to set aside and things to build. Listen for the word of the Lord from Jeremiah 31

I think this is an interesting thing: Jeremiah 31, v. 29 – “in those days they shall no longer say: ‘parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’” The prophet Ezekiel – a prophet during the same time period as Jeremiah – Ezekiel 18, vs. 2-3 – “ ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge’ – as I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel.” (that’s p.685 in your pew Bible if you’d like to compare ☺) But then you could keep looking through every other page in the Bible but except for those two places – in Jeremiah and Ezekiel in that particular historical time - you’ll find no other mention of this little sour grapes phrase in the whole Bible. I think that’s fascinating – makes me wonder what is going on there - and that’s what I am going to wonder about with you.

“Sour grapes!” – “well that’s just sour grapes!” – that’s an idiomatic phrase most folks are familiar with, right? – it’s about being a sore loser, about blaming someone or something else for your undesirable circumstance. On the internet you can search for the origins of idiomatic expressions such as “sour grapes” – I actually do that sometimes, I mean, why do we say “the whole nine yards”?! (turns out no one knows why we say it!) – and if you look up “sour grapes”, as I did, it points to one of Aesop’s fables: the story of a fox who tries to reach some grapes, and

when he can't get to the grapes, he says "well, I didn't want them anyway, they're too sour!" – sour grapes is about a sore loser – someone who sees him or herself as a victim.

But with all due respect to Aesop, the Hebrew prophets seems to be a source for the 'sour grapes' idiom too. You could get transported back to 7th century B.C. Palestine and say "sour grapes" to someone, and they would have some idea of what you were talking about – although it would help to say it in Hebrew – "boser" - in case you're wondering. "Sour grapes" really does have a very similar meaning then as now, but here in the prophets there is a twist to it. The phrase is more vivid yet: 'you eat sour grapes, and your teeth are set on edge' – kind of gives you the shivers. But it's not just that - it's that 'the PARENTS eat the sour grapes, and the CHILDREN'S teeth are set on edge.' It's a little proverb that gives a calculation about life - life is the sum of what has come before: what the previous generation has done has ruined life for the next – here the bitter whine of sour grapes is that life is already ruined, so there's no point in trying.

Here sour grapes paints a bleak picture of life being determined by the bitterness of what has come before. And of course the bitterness in Jeremiah's time is that these are the defeated people of Israel – they are displaced from their homeland, and living in exile in Babylon– they are a people without political or economic or social status – their lives are determined by forces beyond their control. And why? – because of the parents – the prior generations. It was the disobedience of the people of Israel through history that had resulted in the consequence of defeat and exile - so why shouldn't the current generation see their lives as being about the sour grapes of what has come before?

It seems this little sour grapes idiom has caught on with the people of that day – Jeremiah and Ezekiel both pick up on it - and so using the language of the day, Jeremiah uses this "sour grapes" idea to address what is at stake for God's people in this time. Jeremiah wants to reject "sour grapes" theology – a calculation of life that is fatalistic and futile – but how Jeremiah goes about doing this has quite an interesting start! Jeremiah says here's the good news: you won't die for your parent's sins!...instead you will just die for your own sins! – hooray! And if that seems like less than something to cheer about, that's what makes it important to be aware of the "sour

grapes” mindset of Jeremiah’s audience – Jeremiah speaks a word that rejects a view of life as simply determined by what has come before. And if we keep reading, the good news gets better. Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant, a renewed relationship – of God wanting people to see who God is and who they are as God’s children in a new way: a relationship in which God’s will and way is present within, and in which one lives faithfully in one’s own time and place. It’s a powerful shift – it’s a word from God that is saying something like: ‘deal with your own life – you are known by God and you know God’s way of life to follow – do that in your place and time, and do not live as victims of what comes before.’

On my Plan Calendar that I have from our Reformed Church denomination, Sunday October 16 is designated as ‘Peace with Justice Sunday’ – it’s not an official part of the liturgical calendar, and not a formal focus here at Hope Church for this day (but rather I hope for EVERY Sunday!). But seeing that on the calendar struck me as a particular way to bring this Jeremiah passage into focus on our time – because much of what is involved in seeking peace and justice has to do with grappling with the circumstances, the history of a particular issue. Central to engaging the ways of peace and justice as people of faith are dilemmas like these: how does what has happened before influence the present? what is the power of what we inherit and encounter, and of what we do and choose? how to balance the choices of an individual with the dynamics of a group, of structures and institutions? As I think about those tensions, I’ve certainly come to realize that the power of history is very strong. Think of your circumstances – the impact of your history, of parents and generations before, of events and circumstances that have come before; think of the power of your genes – your genetic make-up, shaping you in countless ways; think of forces shaping the world – the history of cultures and conflicts and religions – of economics and politics. There is great power in what is passed on to us.

It’s one of the vital aspects of seeking justice and peace – the power of history and structures to shape life for good and for evil. But the thing is, when those structures, that power perpetuates injustice and violence, it is often easiest for those with power to ignore or downplay the importance of those dynamics – and in doing so injustice and violence are deepened. And it is

often the case for those who feel the weight of such oppressive structures, the burden of broken history, that there is a tendency to turn to despair and anger. There is in history and structures the power to sour life for many – to experience life as brokenness passed on through the generations. It's just what Jeremiah describes: “the parents eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge” – such bitterness is real.

But Jeremiah also says there is something more – something beyond – “no more shall it be said...”...no more sour grapes. It seems to me the word that we hear in Jeremiah IS a deep understanding of the power of history – AND it is an assertion of the power to live in faithfulness. The prophetic word from Jeremiah is that those with faith in the living God come to understand that one need not only react to or receive what happens – need not only be an effect of the various causes of history and circumstance; faith is the unique human capacity to respond and act - respond with the choice of following God's ways, and act in the ways of justice and peace. Faith is simply and profoundly to live as one held in covenant – to live in relationship with the living God no matter the circumstance. Let's be clear - this is not about rugged individualism, and it is certainly not about blaming victims for their circumstances. This is a claim on life by the living God: in the midst of forces and circumstances often beyond one's control, one can respond in faithfulness as a child of God. And, sometimes, that is simply the choice to keep hope – to not give in to despair – to not live out of cynicism – to keep one's integrity.

How to hear Jeremiah's word about living in the present does have a lot to do with the past that you receive - Jeremiah gives a call both to see the power of history and structures, and to seek the ways that are beyond determinism and despair – choosing the way of life God has provided. It is not a way that is easy or smooth for those in power or those who feel powerless - but it is the way of empowerment that the Spirit of the living God gives to all.

“No more shall it be said that the parents eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge” – what might that sound like in our time?

No more will it be said that we look at a broken world and feel powerless to change it for good;

No more will we use the entrenched power of a few as an excuse for inaction by many;
No more will it be said we look at our lives and have no choice to move toward wholeness;
No more will it be said that your life has nothing to do with the lives of all God's children;
No more will it be said that the ways of violence and war are inevitable;
No more will it be said that hungry children and displaced peoples are acceptable;
No more will it be said that the rich getting richer and the poor poorer is just the way it is;
No more will it be said that your vote doesn't count;
No more will it be said that the choices you make do not make a difference for you or for others;
No more will it be said that the taste of bitterness is stronger than the sweetness of grace;
No more will it be said that people cannot change old patterns into new life;
No more it will be said that injustice is stronger than justice;
No more will it be said that violence is stronger than peace.;
No more will it be said that the world is left to its own demise:
God is present - not sour grapes, but the true vine — the Holy Spirit at work through our
faithfulness and in all people of faith - a vintage of justice and peace in our time and place. Thanks
be to God. AMEN