

**“Sour Grapes”**

**Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32**

**Sermon Preached by Thomas P. Markey**

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It is hard to believe, but September marked my four-year anniversary of working at John Knox. In many ways, it has felt like I have blinked and the past four years have flown right by me. Yet, as I prepared my sermon this week, I could not help but think about all that has happened during my four years at John Knox.

There’s been weddings, funerals, and baptisms.

There’s been deaths and there’s been births.

We’ve seen new members join the church, we’ve watched as many of the youth have become confirmed members of the church, and we’ve also experienced the painful reality of individuals choosing to leave the church.

There’s been power outages. There’s been winter storms. There’s been squirrels that bite into power lines.

We’ve eaten a lot of food. Joined together in fun and fellowship. And we’ve faithfully worshipped together, offering our praise and thanksgiving to the loving and living God.

We’ve given generously. We’ve served relentlessly. We’ve loved deeply.

There’s been “Hellos.” There’s been “Good-Byes.” There’s been “We’ve missed you.” And there’s been “I’m sorrys.”

We’ve laughed. We’ve cried. We’ve worked and we’ve played. We’ve changed and we’ve grown.

It has been a period of time marked by great joy, painful loss, exciting change, and daring risk-taking. We’ve experienced transition and transformation, leading us to continued renewal and restoration.

This is not unlike where we find ourselves located within today’s text. Ezekiel, a Judean priest, who, along with thousands of other fellow Judeans, has been exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon. Ezekiel has been called by Yahweh to serve as Yahweh’s prophet to the exiled people.

As Yahweh's prophet, Ezekiel's task is to offer the two-fold message of Yahweh: "to scatter and to gather."<sup>1</sup> "Thus says the Lord GOD: I will gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel."<sup>2</sup>

And so, in offering this two-fold message of scattering and gathering, Ezekiel takes the time to both reflect on the past, while also attempting to move the people forward into a more faithful and fruitful future.

As we heard read today, in this particular moment of prophetic reflection, Ezekiel explains that a popular and prominent proverb of the time "shall," as God says, "no more be used."<sup>3</sup> This proverb, which states, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge," is the exiled people's way of pointing to the failures and shortcomings of past generations as a way to understand and explain their current situation. As one commentator notes, "This saying tries to explain God in the midst of the unfairness of life and blames God for letting the iniquity of one generation pass over to the next. God is unfair, because God lets an innocent suffer for what his or her parents or grandparents did in the past."<sup>4</sup>

Yet, Yahweh is quick to refute such a theological worldview. "Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine..."<sup>5</sup> All lives – the child and the adult – past, present, and future belong to God.

I must admit, when I received Frank's email on Thursday updating us all about the status of his father, my heart sank. I was unsure of what to do and I was certainly unsure of how to respond. Quite frankly, the idea of preaching today felt daunting. I wondered to myself, what, if anything should I say?

I'm not sure why, we'll say it was a nudging from the Holy Spirit, but I decided that the best thing I could do was to first listen to Frank's sermon from last week.

After listening, I kept meditating on Frank's message. His sermon, which came on the heels of having spent the week in the hospital with his parents in West Virginia, spoke about the generosity of God in the midst of those moments that feel as if God is being anything but fair.

And that's when it happened. As I was pondering the idea of God's fairness versus God's generosity, I was re-reading through the end of today's text. In verse 25 God asks, "Is my way unfair." And then again, in verse 29, God asks, "Are my ways unfair?" In light of having just

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<sup>1</sup> Birch, et. Al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 347.

<sup>2</sup> NRSV, Ezekiel 11:17.

<sup>3</sup> NRSV, Ezekiel 18:3.

<sup>4</sup> Claudio Carvalhaes, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4, 100.

<sup>5</sup> NRSV, Ezekiel 18:4.

read the update on Frank's father, I couldn't help but feel as though the answers to God's questions were a resounding, "Yes. Yes, God. Your ways are in fact unfair." Yet, after having re-listened to Frank's sermon, I knew that to simply dismiss God as being "unfair" was just about the least helpful response I could offer.

So I turned back to his email and I re-read the final paragraph:

*But the other way you can truly show your love and support for us in this time is this: step up. Step forward at this time, not backward. Don't be a shrinking violet. Be more active, not less active. Be a hero, not a heckler. That's what I most need - that's what the staff needs - that's what the lay leadership needs. Step up and be here and live out your faith. That would be the most powerful and meaningful way you can show your love and support for me, my parents, our family, and this church.*

The closing verse of our text today offers a similar charge – "Turn, then, and live." Just as God chooses life for each of us, so too are we charged with choosing life. The way we honor our lives and lives of those we love is by choosing life, to turn and to live such that we are living our lives in the fullest and most faithful ways we know how.

Choosing life – to turn and to live – does not mean that bad things won't happen. It does not mean that we won't experience pain and suffering. Choosing life – to turn and to live – means to take responsibility for our lives – past, present, and future – in such a way that engages the world, the community, and this church through a spirit of love, care, compassion, and generosity, just as God does for us.

It means, as Frank wrote to all of us on Thursday, to "step up and be here and live out your faith."

Thanks be to the loving and living God, a God who chooses life. Amen.