

## SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 27, 2020

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8 | PSALM 23 | PHILIPPIANS 2:1-13 | MATTHEW 21:23-32

Victor Vescovo is a submarine pilot. What makes him an unusual submarine pilot is that his submarine only goes one direction: down. He's part of a team of explorers who seek to plumb the depths of the oceans. In Vescovo's case, that means climbing into a titanium pod and descending over seven miles. On a typical journey, it takes four hours to make the descent down. He brings a sandwich.<sup>1</sup>

Recently, Vescovo plunged over thirty thousand feet into the Indian Ocean's Java Trench. His team had discovered a newly formed crevasse, meaning that Vescovo was going somewhere no human had ever been before. And when he finally reached the bottom, he looked out the window of the submarine and saw a plastic bag float by. Vescovo was the first human to reach the bottom of the trench. But humanity got there first.

That's essentially what today's reading from Ezekiel was about. It's about how we live with the mistakes of those who came before us and learn to create a better future. This message from Ezekiel comes from the exile period. The Israelites had been conquered, deported, and sent into exile. They are living away from their homes, apart their family, and removed from their institutions. And people start trying to make sense of what happened. Why were they all deported? Why are they all suffering so much? Why was life so awful?

And a proverb, a saying, an explanation starts to spread among the people. "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." (Maybe it rhymes in Hebrew or something.) In other words, our parents sinned, and we bear the consequences. Our parents weren't faithful to the covenant with God, and so now we are being punished for their sins here in Babylon. We might think that we create our own world, but we're always stuck with the debris of other people's mistakes. You think you're in uncharted territory, and then a plastic bag floats by outside the window.

We all know that this is true on some level. We live with the errors of our predecessors. Sometimes those errors are kind of silly. Our church sanctuary is a good reminder of this. Whenever I see the list of people who built it, I want to thank them for their faithfulness and their generosity and stewardship and all that stuff. And then I want to ask them why no one thought to put the front doors of the church on, I don't know, the front of the building?

But sometimes those mistakes are deadly serious. Gaps in generational wealth, health, and prosperity have a way of compounding over time. In our own context, we often call those problems "systemic" or "institutional." People bear the consequences of choices made by others. We often hear that people who live in poverty should have made better choices, but they're often making really good choices. The bad choices were made decades ago.<sup>2</sup> Those are the people who should have made better choices. We don't live in a world of our own making, we live in a world that was created for us. Parents eat sour grapes, kiddos' teeth are set on edge.

This proverb is justified when it's a lament. It's well and good to look at injustice in the world and ask why the people who eat so many grapes aren't the ones who get sore teeth. The problem is that the Israelites have turned that proverb into an excuse. They've begun to ascribe all the world's problems to their ancestors as a way of shirking responsibility. Why did we get sent into exile? Because of our parents' mistakes. Not because of anything we did. We just live with the consequences. The Israelites find themselves in a bad situation and think, *Man, if only I had been alive when I could have made a difference.*

And God has this sort of funny response. God calls the prophet over and says, *I don't know why the Israelites keep saying this thing about sour grapes and kids' teeth, but they've got to stop saying that.* Instead, God says, "Know

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Taub, "Thirty-Six Thousand Feet Under the Sea," *The New Yorker*, accessed September 21, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/18/thirty-six-thousand-feet-under-the-sea>.

<sup>2</sup> The development of employment-based health insurance in the U.S. is a good example of a system that few people would want to build from scratch but developed almost by accident because of other policy choices. It consistently boggles my mind how many people I interact with are in severe economic distress because of World War II-era wage freezes.

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that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine.” This means everyone is in the same sort of covenantal relationship with God. It isn’t as if the parents lived in some special time where they determined the future of this community once and for all. The kids are just as responsible for the flourishing of this community. So, God says. you are responsible. You are not just dealing with other people’s bad decisions, you are making equally important decisions yourself.

Sometimes I fear that our labeling of problems as “systemic” and “institutional” is turning into a kind of sour grapes proverb for our own time. That isn’t to say it’s wrong, this past week was a reminder of how just pernicious those systemic problems are, but labeling problems as systemic and institutional can often be used as a way of abdicating responsibility. If a problem is systemic, it’s easy to think that we can’t do anything about it.<sup>3</sup>

The plastic bag that Vescovo saw out the submarine window is a good reminder of this. We know that environmental stewardship is a systemic problem. We often feel like we can’t make a significant difference. That’s for governments, NGOs, corporate boards, etc. It’s tax policy. Cap and trade. Agreements and pacts. It’s not something you can solve with tote bags and lightbulbs.<sup>4</sup>

That’s probably true, at least to some degree. But, the prophet tells us, don’t let yourself off the hook. Because when you abdicate responsibility, you abdicate your power, too. Collective problems can’t be fixed by personal action. But they can’t be solved without it, either. The problem these Israelites have isn’t just that they’ve shifted the blame to someone else, it’s that they think they don’t have the ability to do anything.

And that’s the real heart of the problem. It’s not just that they blame all their problems on the past and don’t notice the ways they themselves contribute. It’s that they think they aren’t able to change anything. The former is a problem of history. But the latter is a crisis of faith.

So what does God say to these sore-toothed Israelites? Change! Repent! Turn and live! Because the life you know isn’t the only one that’s possible. You can build something new. You are not just passive. You are not just recipients. You have agency. You inherit the world that other people made, but you don’t have to be bound by it. If they built unjust systems, then you can take them apart and put up something new. If they constructed flawed institutions, then you can tear them down and build something better. If the plastic bag floating by the window upsets you, don’t curse whoever put it there and lament how you have to clean up after other people’s problems. Work out a solution. Turn and live. Get a new heart and a new spirit because one is always available.

If there’s a moral crisis in our country, in our communities, in our churches, and in ourselves, it isn’t so much that we are making the wrong choices. It’s that we assume the choices we have been given are the only ones that are available. We assume that the only things that are possible are the things that have been done. That the only things that are conceivable are the things that we know.

That invitation to repentance is, in a rather unorthodox way, an act of grace. Because it promises that another world, another way of life, another future is possible. To the exiles and to all of us who live amidst the debris of the past, God says, turn, repent, and, most important, live.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>3</sup> Hiring practices in churches are a good example of this. Many predominantly churches lament the institutionalized sexism, racism, and homophobia in the church, but don’t do anything to actually hire a diverse staff or develop diverse leaders. It’s almost as if they don’t understand themselves as institutions.

<sup>4</sup> Annie Lowrey, “All That Performative Environmentalism Adds Up,” The Atlantic, August 31, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/08/your-tote-bag-can-make-difference/615817/>.