

**Sermon: The Rev. Christopher Bishop  
St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Radnor, PA  
15 Pentecost, Sept.25, 2011**

**Lectionary:**

[Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32](#)

[Psalm 25:1-9](#)

[Philippians 2:1-13](#)

[Matthew 21:23-32](#)

**Ezekiel is one of my favorite prophets** in all of scripture—mostly because of just how crazy he appears to be a lot of the time. But also because of how he gets who I am, every time. And the question he presents, in quite dramatic fashion, of fairness, of what is fair, something we spoke of last week, looms large for me. As I have said elsewhere, by the world's standards, the normal ways of seeing things, I really have no business being here preaching to you today as a priest.

**The life I led, up until my late 30s**, in no way suggested that that would be God's path for me. I was a person who had one concern in my life: me. I left the church as a teenager, and I spent every waking hour pursuing what I thought was good for *me*. My early life in the arts, though fun and exciting, was ultimately all about me expressing myself with, truth be told, very little thought about anyone else. How could I, in the world of film, get known, heard, wealthy, with access to the money, women and acclaim that came with fame and success?

**I certainly played at being concerned with others.** I even did some good things for other people. But I never, ever connected it with God. And if anyone had ever mentioned a loving, Christian source to my works, I would ridicule it. I even used my own father's success as a priest to reject the work of the church, the work of God in the world. My dad was a careerist, I surmised, who had chosen his churches over his own sons, neglected us! So yeah, "'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge(?)'" It applied directly to me. Right?

**But what the lectionary cuts out today** is that the reason God prohibits the Israelites from uttering this proverb, is that using bad parenting or past experience as an excuse to remain out of relationship with God just doesn't work. For, as Ezekial writes,

“When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it.” For us perhaps a small, day by day, piece by piece, death of the heart, of the spirit. Because if we sin by placing the idol of our self before God--the persistent, age old sin of the Israelites--it is precisely our issue to deal with, and no one else’s.

**And the reason is blessedly simple**, and life-giving, and full of grace: Because, says the Lord, “Know that all lives are *mine*; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine.” We are called out in one of our most common and useless complaints, that we act as we do because “Life is unfair! God, is unfair!” But we get reminded over and over in scripture that God is up to much bigger things than we can understand through human assessments of who is deserving of what. Of what fairness actually is. Because all of us, all of us, no matter our station or attainments, get to choose what lies in the center of our lives, and who and how we are going to be as human beings. *All the time.*

**And that is what both our Old Testament and New Testament** lessons point to today. The reality, the importance, of the choice God lays before us, and that the choice is everything. And more than merely the freedom to choose our relationship with God and the beings around us. But that in each and every moment of choosing, lies the possibility of getting for ourselves and our world “a new heart and a new spirit.” And in that, a glorious freedom from the past. We are reborn into a life of new possibilities for lovingness, a new purpose beyond our selves. And boy, doesn’t that sound great? And doesn’t that sound familiar to what we are up to here at St. Martin’s, together?

**I don’t know about you, but I am both sons in the parable today.** Often like the second son I will say yes, God, I will do what you ask, I will take the spirit of love you give me and be your work of reconciliation and healing in your vineyard! But then I don’t do it when it counts. Then, at times, I am also the first son. Who initially says no, I have better things to do, but then sometimes, at least, know what I am called by God to do, and I go out and do it. What we don’t hear in the story, however, is what creates the transformation in the second son. What creates the “yes”, from the original “no?” And it is in precisely that question that all the difference for us lies. What happened to change the son’s mind? What can change ours?

**Today Jesus directs the parable at the chief priests** and elders of the temple. He tells them “*You* have been given the living word of God in no uncertain terms from the lips

of the Baptist. And *you* are the ones saying yeah yeah yeah and then doing only for yourselves. Neglecting the poor. Enriching yourselves at the expense of others, even using God's promises to do it. They are a group paying lips service to one way of being, and then being another way. Just as we at times do. And what Jesus seems to be getting at in the parable is that choosing to honor our commitments to God, made freely and in full understanding of what this makes available to our lives and God's world, literally wipes away all that came before it and makes possible whole new realms of being, of possibilities for us.

**Jesus relates to the tax collectors and prostitutes**, again, all of us, never on the basis on who they were, and what they've done wrong, or not gotten right. But always on the basis of who we are now. A people who believe, and who, because they believe, are called to try and live in a different way. Who, though we inevitably will screw up and have crises of faith, and miss the mark again, are redeemed nonetheless. Because luckily for us, the God we worship is the God of second, third, and thousandth chances. And as both Ezekial and the Gospel point out, it's when we turn aside from our self-directed ways and begin to respond to the call and command of God, that we begin to truly live.

**And, as Ezekiel in particular makes clear**, responding to God's call *is not optional*. The things we do or don't do in the world, especially the things we do or don't do in God's name really do matter---in fact, it's a matter of life and death. Perhaps in real terms, the difference between having a loving or a lonely heart. And its the tremendous power that we've been given in His name that means *we* are the primary resource that most of the world has for learning about God and his Kingdom.

**We know it's easy to say that we are people of faith**. As John Reilly so eloquently put it in our newsletter, to stand up in church and read aloud the creeds, listing the things we believe about God, and life, and the world. It's much harder to actually *live* what we believe, to be the voice and hands of God in the world, to make new commitments to God's world, commitments to life.

**And this word, commitments, just keeps coming up** again and again, doesn't it? And that's because it's *through* honoring our commitments, the things we promise that lift us toward fulfilling on our lives and God's call of love, that we experience the fullness of being children of the Living God In the coming weeks we will enter into an inquiry

together about what those commitments may be. We will examine the true weight of what we do in God's name through the choices we make, and just as importantly where we make them from.

**Because, and here's the gift:** when we make these choices as a church community, about what we give our time, energy and money to, our individual and communal power is exponentially multiplied by the Spirit that is the voice of God in us. And the sweetest part is, as we do this, we can bask in the freedom that, as Paul writes in today's epistle, it is "*God* who is at work in us, enabling us both to will and to work for *his* good pleasure."

**Amen.**