

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

The word of the Lord came to me: ²What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”? ³As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. ⁴Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.

²⁵Yet you say, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? ²⁶When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. ²⁷Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. ²⁸Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. ²⁹Yet the house of Israel says, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?

³⁰Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. ³¹Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³²For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

Matthew 21:23-32

²³When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” ²⁴Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ²⁶But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” ²⁷So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Authority Issues October 1, 2017

I had the opportunity to attend a Pastor’s Retreat this past week and the topic of the retreat was, *The Jazz of the Pastoral Life*. Bill Carter, who is a minister and accomplished Jazz pianist, led us through some very interesting journeys about our lives of ministry and he made some very powerful connections for those of us who have musical backgrounds and talents. Bill encouraged us to keep singing our songs. Those songs of love and compassion that keep us on course in this life of faith. Those songs that God has given us to sing which is another way of saying, be true to the gifts and talents that you have been given and use them to their fullest. Be truly alive and live your life in joy. Sometimes that means living in opposition to those who believe you should be doing something else or acting in the ways that they deem appropriate or even religious.

That's sort of what we find in our reading today with Jesus and the chief priests and elders. They are challenging the way Jesus is living and acting in the world. They don't like the way he dismisses their authority and so like all people who have their power threatened, they come after him. But Jesus won't be denied his authority or his song. He reminds them that while they cling to ways of worldly power and misuse their religious positions to exclude and abuse God's people they may be the last to enter the very Kingdom they represent. They are the ones who say 'yes' with their lips, but 'no' with their lives. They put God in a box and use their positions as religious leaders to control and condemn.

Now, Jesus always speaks truth to power and it often gets him in hot water, but that is what love does in the world. And it upsets the status quo. We don't have to look very far to see other religious groups in our world that get upset when we don't behave or believe the way they think we ought to. Which is one reason so many are leaving the church or dismissing her as irrelevant. As good religious folk we like things to be in good order and not have our beliefs, our ideas, or our worship challenged or disrupted. But sometimes, being fully alive can upset the very nature of worship as well as the life of faith. The prophet Ezekiel and Jesus both remind us that we often need to change our minds, to repent, to turn around and away from the things that separate us from God's love, to have "new hearts and new spirits." Hearts and Spirits that are honest and open, and reflect God's inclusive, all-encompassing love.

I want to share a beautiful story this morning by Pastor Stacy Swain that was in the Christian Century Magazine. It speaks not only to World Communion Sunday, but also to our text today, as someone, who is different and challenging, arrives in morning worship. Stacy tells it like this:

"This past Lent, our church did a worship series focusing on communion. We tried to see with new eyes what sharing in the communion of Christ could look like in our time and place. In the wake of the election last November, edginess, tension, and fear had crept into our wider community and our life together as church. So, it felt particularly right and important to remember who we are as the beloved community and what sharing in communion looks like.

The Fifth Sunday in Lent was also the first Sunday in April. For us, that meant it was a communion Sunday. As worship began, I remember feeling grateful for that wooden communion table at the front of the sanctuary, a table full of fresh bread and cups of juice, a table of welcome and abundance.

I was about halfway through the sermon, sharing how I had come to see not the cross, but the communion table as the defining symbol of our faith, when the side door to the sanctuary opened and Harriet (I will call her) walked in. Harriet had been worshiping with us off and on ever since first coming to the church a couple of months back as one of the guest artists from Common Art. The Boston-based program provides space, materials, and caring staff to support unhoused and low-income people as they develop their artistic abilities. As Harriet entered the sanctuary, the door shut loudly behind her. Several people glanced in her direction.

I continued preaching. "Communion was not just the purpose of Jesus' life," I said, "but is to be also the purpose of church. We are to be instruments of that love, working towards healing and wholeness for others and for the world."

As I spoke, Harriet made her way past the pulpit. She crossed the front of the sanctuary and was about to head down the center aisle to take a pew. Then the table caught her eye. Switching up her trajectory, she drew close to the table and began helping herself to the bread. She ate one piece, then another and another. I was still preaching, but the attention in the sanctuary had clearly shifted to Harriet. I felt everyone watching her and wondering what to do. After a couple of more minutes at the table, Harriet filled both of her hands with bread, made her way about halfway down the center aisle, and slipped into a pew.

I felt the congregation relax. I was almost finished with the sermon. But then—Harriet was up, again. She was making her way back to the table for more bread. At this point, one of our deacons—I'll call her Brenda—slipped out of her pew and walked unhurriedly up to the table as well. Standing next to Harriet, Brenda wrapped her arm lovingly around Harriet's shoulders. When Harriet was finished—when she had all the bread she needed—they turned together and walked slowly back to the pew, Harriet holding the bread in her hands and Brenda holding Harriet. Then they slid into the pew, side by side, together.

In this week's passage from Matthew's Gospel, the chief priests and elders ask Jesus by what authority he is doing the things he is doing. He has been making them uncomfortable, disrupting the usual way of things. They are concerned about whether his actions are permissible. Are they to be allowed? I may have been the one preaching that Sunday in April, but I could hear the unspoken words of many in the room, words that, truth be told, were on my mind as well as Harriet disrupted our worship and tarried over the communion table. What is she doing? That is not allowed. She should not be doing that. Someone should be stopping her.

But when I saw Brenda put her arm around Harriet there at the table, as Harriet satisfied her hunger with the abundance of the bread, the word came home to me in a way that suddenly made it crystal clear what was happening. While I had been going on and on about the purpose of the church and our call to communion, God had something else in mind for our time together—something God wanted to show us. What God wanted to show us was what communion could look like in our place and our time. There it was: an arm around the shoulders, a filled belly, all the time in the world, and a place in the pew for them both, side by side. There it was, so perfectly simple and powerfully real.

On this World Communion Sunday, there is still so much that divides us one from another. There is still much edginess, tension, and fear. The question the chief priests and elders ask may still be on our lips and on the lips of many others as we question the legitimacy of policies and priorities and wonder how best to make our way in this world. This is fine and good and what we need to be doing.

But in the midst of it all, I hope we also can see what is also right in front of us, what Jesus says is apparent to tax collectors and prostitutes though hidden from those who think they are in the know. And that is, that love has come into the world and is walking even now, in the way of communion. It turns out that the evidence is all around us. I hope to have the eyes to see it and a heart to enter in. But even if I don't, I trust that God will continue to make it abundantly clear." (*The author is Stacy Swain, pastor of the Union Church in Waban, Massachusetts. Christian Century Magazine September 13, 2017*)

Once a Father Told His Children

NETTLETON 8.7.8.7 D ("Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing")

*Once a father told his children,
"Go and do your daily chores.
Go and work out in my vineyard;
All that's mine will soon be yours."
One responded, "I won't do it!"
Then he changed his mind and went.
One said, "Yes! Just send me to it!"
But he went back home again.*

*Once a church was filled with Christians
Who were proud and feeling blessed.
"God has called us and we've answered!
We have truly answered, "Yes!"
On a chilly Sunday morning,
When a homeless man came by,
They said, "Go! It's not yet storming!
God is love — he will supply."*

*Once a woman, quite the sinner,
Struggled deep in pain and doubt.
As she passed that church in winter,
There she saw that man walk out.
He was homeless, worn and weary,
So she stopped her car and said,
"I'm no saint but you look hungry —
Let's go buy some soup and bread."*

*God of love, you call your children;
Some say, "No!" and some say, "Yes!"
Lord, forgive us for our judging
Who will be among the blessed.
For your kingdom is surprising;
Some you call will not obey;
Those we find ourselves despising
May be those who seek your way.*

Biblical Reference: Matthew 21:23-32

Tune: John Wyeth's *Repository of Sacred Music*, 1813 ("Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing") ([MIDI](#))

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Jesus assures us that if we act and live like the priests and elders in our story this morning we will be the last to enter the kingdom. That those who we think shouldn't be included, may very well be first in line. I know who I am in this story and I wonder if you will take time to consider who you might be. Those who say, "yes with their lips and no with their lives?" Or maybe, and I pray this is the truth, you might say no at times because you are afraid, but after thinking about it you surrender your will and follow Jesus anyway. This morning we gather at this table of bread and cup. A table that reminds us of Jesus' great, "YES" to the God of his life. And on this day of World Communion we gather with all those around the world who also say, "yes" to God's love and redemption. A love that challenges, that comforts, that binds us together, that finds us more often than not, arm in arm or side by side, gathered around a table, sharing the deep hope and promise of our lives in God. Let those with new hearts and new spirits hear these words and rejoice. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Prayer for World Communion Sunday

God of all creation, we give You thanks that we are all made in Your image, with such rich diversity. On this day we are joined together with the faithful around the world. As we break bread together, we remember that we are still one body in You, even though we have different languages, cultures and traditions, different ways of worshipping, praying and praising.

In unity we drink the cup together of hope, of new life, knowing that Your will is for Your people to be one body. And though we are one body, yet we are not the same—we are young and old, rich and poor, those who work with our hands and hard labor, we are those who work with our minds and pens, we are those who work with our hearts and compassion. We are those still figuring out who we are.

And we are those who remember to pray for others not only here at home but those who are far from us, living in despair or anguish, poverty and scarcity, those fleeing for safety and those mourning deep loss and tragedy. Comfort them all Loving God with your healing presence and bring quickly the safety so needed by all.

We remember also those who seek to help. Those who put themselves in harm's way to bring relief and comfort, warm meals and places to sleep, a kind word and a cool drink of water, those who defend the rights of the weak. O loving God, bless and sustain those who risk and give for others.

And we lift up those here in our community who are dear to us, those who need healing and those who need encouragement. Those who mourn and those who are struggling with faith, life, and living, and ask that you hear now the prayers of our hearts both spoken and silent...

Steadfast God, our world is ever-turning, ever-changing. What we know today we did not always know, and what comes tomorrow may completely surprise us. Help us to be open to the movement of Your Spirit in our lives and in our world. May our hearts be open to love, and our minds be open to change. May we ourselves be open to welcome others to Your table, for You are the one who welcomes us. And for that we go into the world rejoicing and looking for your presence in all people, offering our prayers in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray saying...