

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Aug 16th 2014

Lately, there have been many references to proverbs and parables in the daily readings. Often, especially in the Gospels, Jesus explains the sayings. But this was not the case with the reading from Ezekiel. I have to admit being stumped by the literal meaning of the proverb about fathers eating green grapes and “thus their children’s teeth are on edge.” Perhaps this is because the green grapes at the grocery store have been so good lately that I’ve literally had a bunch every day at lunch. And what exactly does it mean that the children’s teeth were on edge. Were the kids annoyed or angry at their fathers? Embarrassed? Nervous? In pain? I’ve certainly generated all those reactions from my children! According to *The Catholic Study Bible* (2011), the proverb was used by the ancients “to complain that they were being punished for their ancestors’ sins” (p. 1178). Contrary to tradition, the reading asserts that the sins of the fathers should not be visited upon their children, nor, I assume, should parents always be blamed when their children fail. Each person is responsible for his or her own actions. Ezekiel quotes the Lord, “Therefore I will judge you . . . each one according to his ways.” If each person is “virtuous” and avoids sin, then “he shall surely live.”

As someone raising children in the age of helicopter parenting and child psychology, I have been guilty of blaming the parents when kids act out, and I have been embarrassed and apologetic—I’ve felt responsible—when my own old-enough-to-know-better children have committed infractions. Of course, a person raised in a culture of poverty or abuse does have extenuating circumstances; however, our judgment should not be skewed by prejudices and guilt by association. God’s judgment isn’t. We would certainly have fewer problems around the globe if people could forget ancestral injuries and longstanding quarrels.

Another shift in the ancient and patriarchal way of doing things is found in the passage from Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus exhorts, “Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; / for the Kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” The disciples are not happy about this. Like most people of their time, they feel that children are not that important, certainly not as influential or as worthy as adults. Usually, adults served as examples for children, but Jesus, as he was wont to do, turns things upside down. A few lines earlier, in Matthew 18:3, he urges his followers to “become like children.” Jesus values the humility, openness, and innocence of children. All of this makes me think of the British Romantic poets and their works—of William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and of Wordsworth’s *Immortality Ode*—that celebrate the power and purity of children.

Children tend to have clean hearts and minds, more so than adults. Sometimes, when I am overwhelmed by all my mistakes and flaws or even the violence and sadness in the world, I find myself saying the very words of today’s psalm: “Create a clean heart in me, O God.” I long for a fresh start, a do-over, a spiritual bath that cleanses my sins and renews my spirit. The sacrament of reconciliation is one solution, but if that is not available, I try to get back to basics—love of God and love of neighbor—and to again see the world with the humble, hopeful, and wondering eyes of a child.

Mary Longo