

So last week was pretty heavy.

Sheila started us off in this series we're calling "This is Not the End". Back in October we spent a lot of time talking about what it means to be an Exile - that when we choose to follow Jesus, we actually become part of a totally different culture without moving anywhere. We become citizens of God's Kingdom. That means we have different values, a different way of life from the culture around us, the culture we used to call home.

And when that happens, it's okay to grieve the loss of our former culture. There's a mourning that's good and necessary when we leave everything behind, when we count it all as lost for the sake of Jesus and his Gospel.

I went to New York City when I was in High School. It was a school trip and I remember walking around the city with my friends. We really wanted to visit the Twin Towers in the midst of everything else - the Empire State Building, Time Square, Central Park. And the towers were so huge, you could see them from almost anywhere on the Island. They dominated the skyline. So we kept making our way towards them. They were so huge we figured they could only be a few more blocks away. But we kept walking. And walking. And walking. Finally we found a map of Manhattan and realized we were about halfway up the island, while the towers stood at the far southern end of the Island. We were still *miles* from the towers. They were *that* big. Something like that, you think it'll be there forever. That there's no way anything will ever change.

That's why after 9/11, the Manhattan skyline was so painful to see. It's an iconic image, one you see everywhere. But suddenly, there was a hole where those towers used to be. And we felt it at a deep, personal *and* cultural level.

It's hard to grieve something that big. It's easy to get trapped in grief. We can let the pain of our loss keep us from moving forward. We've seen that in our country as a whole as we've grieved the loss we experienced in 9/11. And on an even larger scale, much of the culture wars we're experiencing stem from this same inability to grieve the loss of some cultural institutions that were cherished, but are gone. In fact, it's almost as though unconsciously the loss of the twin towers became a focus for the rage and grief we were already feeling on that larger, cultural scale.

On every level of our lives, we've all experienced loss. The world we grew up in isn't around anymore. The world that made us feel safe. The Church isn't the center of culture anymore. There was a day when "regular" church attendance meant every Sunday, every Sunday night and every Wednesday. And *most* people in the country went to Church regularly.

Today, "regular" church attendance is once ever four weeks. And even still most people don't go to church "regularly". Even when I was in High School, Churches didn't do anything on Wednesday nights. Little leagues didn't have games on Sunday. If you go back another generation, even businesses weren't open on Sundays. You couldn't even buy *gas* on Sundays. Because Church was at the center of culture.

That's not true anymore. Sundays and Wednesdays are just another day of the week. Church - rather than being the center of life, has moved to the outside. It's not UNimportant; it's just one more thing that we can do if we want. That's a *huge* change.

And we feel the reverberations from this shift. Once upon a time, the nuclear family was the norm. A mom and dad and a few kids. Maybe a pet. But that's not true anymore. Most people live in a blended family or with a single parent.

Once upon a time, the laws of this country were almost explicitly, conservatively Christian. But in the last 50 years, we've seen a steady movement away from that. Everything from Roe v Wade to PC movement to the so-called Holiday Wars (do you say Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays?) to the movement to take "Under God" out of the pledge of allegiance.

Whatever you believe about these issues, a couple of things are worth noting: First, these conversations wouldn't even have been taking place 50 years ago. And second, they occupy a *lot* of the time our culture spends thinking and discussing about faith and the public world.

These are clear signs that the way we used to do life is gone. It's past. It's dead. There's a hole were something used to be. Just like the New York skyline.

It feels like we've lost something huge. It feels like the world we knew, the world that made us comfortable, that gave us stability

And as the Church, as Exiles, as strangers in this strange land, our response to this shift, this loss should be shaped by the Cross of Jesus. Our culture - the Kingdom of God - should inform our grief and teach us to grieve well.

So last week Sheila took us into the Exilic prophets. There's no place more appropriate for us to hear from God in these circumstances, because in so many ways, Israel's Exile is a parallel to our story. The people of Israel watched as their entire world was destroyed. Their nation was conquered and their Temple - the building at the center of their world and culture, was totally devastated. Razed to the ground. In the space of just a few years, their entire way of life was utterly ruined.

There was a hole for them. Literally and figuratively - the Temple was gone and they felt abandoned. So God sent prophets to help them grieve. To help them to understand that This is Not the End.

Their story becomes our story as we, too, listen to these prophets. We believe that this is not the end for us, either. So we began last week by talking about our most common, obvious reaction to this grief - anger. Sheila took us to Lamentations, to the songs Jeremiah wrote.

This week, I want to explore a different reaction with you. Because I think for many of us in here, the loss that the older generation feels is removed from us. I grew up in the world of divorce. I never knew a world where abortion wasn't legal in some sense. I was barely in my 20s when 9/11 happened. I was a senior in high school when the Columbine shootings happened.

And now that I'm in my 30s, I'm facing a world with the reality of climate change, a failing economy, and a government that can't agree on the color of the sky or which way is up.

Those of us who are at the end of Generation X or part of that group that's being called Millennials have gotten a raw deal. We were told you have to go to college. Yes, you'll have

to take out enough loans to buy a house, but don't worry! When you graduate, you'll have a great job waiting for you. That's exactly what was said to us when I was in grad school: there's this whole generation of pastors and professors who are getting ready to retire. By the time you're done, they'll be gone and there'll be this HUGE job field waiting for you.

And then the crash happened and suddenly all those guys a generation or two above us couldn't afford to retire. So all those jobs we were promised, we were told was a sure thing, weren't there. And that's not just in my field. That's across the board: it's harder than ever to get promoted. Salaries are frozen. Jobs are disappearing.

And if you're like me, then there's a huge part of you that looks at this state of affairs, this the way the world is today and thinks, It's just not fair. Look at what kind of world I'm inheriting. Most of us in here aren't yet at the top of the ladder. We're not in office. We're not running corporations. Most of us are at the beginning or somewhere in the middle of our lives.

We didn't have any say in making the world the way it is now. We're just inheriting a world that's got a lot of problems. In that way, we're actually quite a lot like the Israelites who lived after the Exile. As Sheila talked about last week, they had to watch their whole universe destroyed - because of choices their parents made - and they had to live with the consequences.

We want to say, "That's not fair!" So did those exiled Israelites. They had developed a saying about it, that Ezekiel comments on in chapter 18 of his book (where we'll be today - go ahead and turn there). The word of the day was "**The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.**" You've eaten something sour, right?

Just in case, we have some candy (which is so easy to get for cheap the day after Halloween!) Go ahead and take out your candy and eat it. As you do, watch your neighbor.

See that pucker? (I know, some of you real tough guys didn't pucker... thanks for ruining my visual). You know that reaction we have to sour right? When we eat something sour, we pucker. Our faces naturally contort. It's cause and effect. So that makes this proverb interesting: "**The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.**"

What they meant by saying this was that their parents had sinned. Their parents had eaten something sour. And now we are paying for it. Our faces are puckering. This proverb was a complaint. It was a way of saying, "Hey! This isn't fair! I didn't create this world. I just have to live in it."

What's really under this issue is a question of inheritance. For us today, inheritance is all about money. But the ancient world didn't use cash. They really didn't use money very much. You inherited assets - land, livestock. Buildings. And all of this was wrapped up in your father's name. Your father passed on his name to you and your siblings. And you got everything that name entailed. Your father's reputation - good or bad. His debts. His successes *and* failures. (**here's the name graphic**)

And in that sense, we're not terribly different from the ancient Israelites. We become our parents - for good and for bad. Each of us has looked at our parents and said, "I never want to be like that," only later to find ourselves repeating that action, saying or habit. That seems inevitable.

And when it's just a silly saying or mannerism, it's no big deal. We can just laugh it off. But not everything our parents have done is so harmless. Sometimes what our parents pass down to us is frightening. Sometimes our inheritance is sour.

I am a lot like my dad. I get my people skills from him - he's a very fun, likable guy. I also get my love of learning from him (really from both of my parents). My dad's been a deacon and Sunday School teacher most of my life. I've inherited a lot of good from my dad.

But when I was in junior high, my dad cheated on my mom. And I know in this day and age that doesn't seem like a big deal, but I can tell you that fact haunted me for a lot of my life. Because I am so much like my dad. We look a lot alike. We have similar personalities. We handle conflict alike.

Even as a young teen, I worried: is that going to be my fate, too? Am I going to be a Cheater when I grow up?

I wonder what Name you've inherited from your parents. I hope it's good. I hope you think of yourself as Capable. Or Powerful. I hope the name you've received is Love. Faithful. Safe.

But for so many of us - even those of us who've come from great families - we have other names too. Ashamed. Not Good Enough. Abused. Workaholic. Crazy. Absent. Cheater.

These are our inheritance. Our broken homes are no different than our broken world - we've been handed a world, a life, a family, an identity. And it's not always pretty. It's not usually pretty. It's hurtful, scary.

And just like the Israelites living in the Exile, we want to say, Not fair! I didn't choose this! I didn't *ask* for this Name, this Inheritance. I didn't make this broken world. I'm suffering the consequences of a lot of choices that were made *for* me. Not fair!

And God's response to them (and to us) is, You're right. That's not fair. Life's not fair. And here's the bad news: Life's not *going* to be fair. So get over it.

You got a raw deal? So did I. So did everyone. You got a sour inheritance? You got a bad Name from your parents? *We all* did. It doesn't matter how awesome your parents were - nobody's perfect. Everyone has dysfunction. We all inherited something we don't want.

A name you're ashamed of or a world with a crappy economy, full of war and a culture as reliable as shifting sand. Whatever it is, we didn't build it, but we got it. We're cashing the checks our parents wrote. We're paying for their mistakes. Our parents ate the sour grapes, but our teeth are set on edge.

Right? Well, not according to God. Let's hear what he told the Israelite Exiles:

The word of the LORD came to me: "What 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'? As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know 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." -- Ezekiel 18:1-4 (NRS)

It is only the person who sins that shall die. You will suffer only the consequences of your own actions. That's what God says. Really? God goes on...

The person who sins is the one who will die. The child will not be punished for the parent's sins, and the parent will not be punished for the child's sins. Righteous people will be rewarded for their own righteous behavior, and wicked people will be punished for their own wickedness. But if wicked people turn away from all their sins and begin to obey my decrees and do what is just and right, they will surely live and not die. All their past sins will be forgotten, and they will live because of the righteous things they have done. Do you think that I like to see wicked people die? says the Sovereign LORD. Of course not! I want them to turn from their wicked ways and live. However, if righteous people turn from their righteous behavior and start doing sinful things and act like other sinners, should they be allowed to live? No, of course not! All their righteous acts will be forgotten, and they will die for their sins. -- Ezekiel 18:20-24 (NLT)

God says, I'm not going to punish you for what your parents did. And I'm not going to reward you for what they did either. Every person is punished or rewarded for the choices *they* make.

But we need to unpack this thing that God has said a little more. Because it's problematic, isn't it? God says that we don't have to suffer the consequences of our parents' sins.

But we do. When my parents divorced because of my dad's affair, my siblings and I suffered greatly. If you're the victim of abuse, you certainly suffer the consequences of your abuser's decisions. If you have a cold, distant parent, you suffer.

In fact, it's safe to say that because none of us has perfect parents, we all suffer the consequences of our parents sins. (And if you're a parent, your child will suffer the consequences of your sins.)

Like it or not, we all bear our parents names, along with all the good and the bad. So what does God mean by this?

God's good news is that we don't have to be the names we've inherited. That the sins our parents passed down to us don't have to be who we are. What's behind you doesn't define you.

In other words, we are not doomed to repeat our parents' sins.

That's how they thought in the ancient world. You were who your parents had been. If your dad was a carpenter, you were a carpenter. If your parents were wealthy, you were going to be wealthy. If your father worshiped a certain god, you would too. If your parents were respectable, you were automatically respectable too. And if your dad was a rotten person, well the apple doesn't fall far from the Tree.

God says, No to that. God says, No matter what hand you've been dealt, you can *choose* life. Your fate is in your hands. You're not defined by what's been done to you, by the choices made for you. All apologies to Lady GaGa, but it doesn't matter if you were "Born This Way." What's behind you doesn't define you.

I can't tell you how freeing this scripture was to me when I discovered it. I realized that I don't have to be a Cheater. That doesn't have to be my destiny. It certainly could be. I share enough character traits with my dad that I could become that kind of person.

But I don't *have to*. At the end of the day, I will be accountable for *my* choices. Not for my dad's. In God's world, righteousness trumps inheritance. What I choose beats out what was chosen for me.

We live in a world that in a lot of ways seems to be a sour inheritance. We live lives that bear evidence of the bad choices the generations that have gone before us made. And now we have a choice to make. Will we follow in their footsteps? Or will we choose to follow the Way of God?

Will we allow ourselves to be defined by the choices that were made for us, defined by the mistakes those who went before us made? Will we throw our hands up and say, It's not fair! I don't have any choice in this! Will we let the painful names we've inherited be the last word?

Or will we choose to stand on our own two feet? Will we choose to break the mold in which we were cast and change what we don't like about our world and our lives? Will we choose not to let the names we've been given define who we are?

Maybe you had parents who made you feel Ashamed of who you are. God says you don't have to be that person. You can be proud that you were created in God's image.

Maybe you've been taught you're Not Good Enough. God says you're accepted for who you are, that God delights in you for you.

Maybe you're Abused. God promises healing and redemption of each and every scar, whether it's on your body or your soul.

Maybe you learned to be a Workaholic. God offers you a Sabbath rest better than any you've ever known.

Maybe your parent was Crazy. Not in the fun way, but in the actual, diagnosable mental disorder way. God says you don't have to follow that same path.

Maybe your parent was Absent. God promises never to leave or forsake you. To teach you how to be there like your parent never was.

Maybe your parent was a Cheater. God says, My name is faithful and true. My way is the way of commitment, of honor. Follow me.

Another one of the Exilic prophets made this promise to God's people:

Because I love Zion, I will not keep still. Because my heart yearns for Jerusalem, I cannot remain silent. I will not stop praying for her until her righteousness shines like the dawn, and her salvation blazes like a burning torch. The nations will see your righteousness. World leaders will be blinded by your glory. And you will be given a new name by the LORD's own mouth. The LORD will hold you in his hand for all to see-- a splendid crown in the hand of God. Never again will you be called "The Forsaken City" or "The Desolate Land." Or Ashamed or Not Good Enough

or Abused or Crazy or Absent or Unfaithful. **Your new name will be "The City of God's Delight" and "The Bride of God," for the LORD delights in you and will claim you as his bride. -- Isaiah 62:1-4 (NLT)**

What's behind you doesn't define you. God will give you a new name. The sour inheritance you've received, I've received, doesn't have to define us.

Remember what God told Ezekiel:

"But if wicked people turn away from all their sins and begin to obey my decrees and do what is just and right, they will surely live and not die. All their past sins will be forgotten, and they will live because of the righteous things they have done. Do you think that I like to see wicked people die?" says the Sovereign LORD. "Of course not! I want them to turn from their wicked ways and live." -- Ezekiel 18:21-23 (NLT)

God doesn't hate wicked people. God doesn't hate those who choose not to follow God's way. God doesn't want to punish them, God certainly doesn't want to destroy them. God truly and wholly desires that every person would find the way to life. God really and truly wants each person to choose the way of Christ. God loves us all.

I don't have to be a Cheater. The choices my dad made don't define me. But even better, they don't have to define him! My dad's story didn't end with Cheating. He's found forgiveness and healing. His story of redemption is incredibly cool (but that's his story to tell).

This all comes down to personal responsibility. The world isn't fair. You were born into a world you didn't create and we're inheriting problems we didn't invent. It's not fair.

But the path before us is the same path that confronts everyone: Will we choose life or death? The Way of God or the ways of death? Will you continue to be defined by what's been done to you, what's been chosen for you, or will you accept responsibility for your own decisions? Will you accept God's new name?

"Do you think that I like to see wicked people die?" says the Sovereign LORD. "Of course not! I want them to turn from their wicked ways and live."

God wants you to *live*. God wants to do a new thing among us. God wants to bring justice and peace to this unfair world. And God wants you and me to be a part of it.

So turn from your wicked ways and live.

<prayer>

Reflection Time

God concludes his message to Ezekiel by saying to the Exile:

"Repent, and turn from your sins. Don't let them destroy you! Put all your rebellion behind you, and find yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die? I don't want you to die. Turn back and live!" -- Ezekiel 18:30-32 (NLT) <leave this on the screen during reflection time>

What does this look like for you this week? What choices that other people have made are you still allowing to define you? What names do you need to discard, to spit out like a sour candy?

In this time, may you hear the voice of God, calling you by your new name: You are the People of God's Delight. You are the Bride of Christ.

Benediction

As you go today, go in a spirit of repentance. What's behind you doesn't define you. What matters is today. Right now. So as you go today, turn from sin. Choose the right Way of God. Choose life. Go and walk in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.