

The director of music at my previous parish grew up in Minnesota, and his mother never lost her thick accent. She sounded just like the characters on “A Prairie Home Companion.” He loved to tell the story of the time when someone complimented her on her accent. Rather than thanking him, she said, “I don’t have an accent. *You* have an accent.” And I suppose that’s true. What’s considered standard American pronunciation and what’s considered a regional accent could just be a matter of which group of speakers is largest.

But I’m also reminded of the cartoon that’s been shared around the Internet for many years now. Two people are pointing at a number on the ground that’s either a six or a nine, depending on where one is standing. The cartoon seems to be trying to make the point that truth is relative, and both people are right from their own point of view. But others have pointed out that just because both people are being honest about what they see doesn’t mean that they are both right. One of them must be mistaken. Whoever made the mark on the ground intended it to be one number or the other, and if the two people were more interested in figuring out which it was than in arguing about it, they could look around for contextual clues, like other numbers.

Those are seemingly trivial stories, but of course, perspective and truth are serious business. Very serious indeed in the reading from Ezekiel, who was conveying a divine message to the Jewish community that had been taken into exile. Apparently they had been blaming their ancestors for their plight, and there are Biblical passages that support that point of view, at least somewhat. And it’s certainly true that earlier generations had set the stage for the generation taken into exile by compromising on the strict monotheism that God had commanded, as well as on the other laws God had given them. But that doesn’t legitimize their own failures. And God loves them too much to let them persist in behavior that is beneath them, that won’t let them grow and change in the ways they will need to. So God gets their attention and gives them some context and perspective.

God reminds them that God’s perspective determines all meaning. It is God, not humanity, who determines what is right and wrong. Only God has the authority to teach what is life-giving and what is life-destroying, and that just as good people won’t be punished for the lapses of their ancestors, neither can the wicked hide behind others. But that is not the point, nor the end, of the story.

Like the story from Jonah last week, Ezekiel’s prophecy goes on to emphasize that God’s goal is not the punishment of the wicked, but their repentance. For all the warnings about death, God does not want to deal out death, but rather, longs to bestow new life. “Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!” We tend to project the worst of humanity onto God, but we praise God like the Psalmist does for the very reason that God is not like us; we are the ones who are alternately uncaring and condemning. God is the giver of life and peace, order and beauty, blessing, mercy, and grace.

St. Paul offers a profound meditation on the most powerful way God has ever done this, the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. Perhaps you've heard this poem described as expressing the Greek concept of *kenosis*, that is, emptying, in the sense of self-emptying. Some people seem to like to use the word *kenosis* around without explaining what it has to do with our own spiritual lives, or anything else. And as cool as it is to bust out the occasional ancient Greek word — at least, I hope it's cool — we might reasonably wonder what we're supposed to take away from a description of something only Jesus could do. None of us have ever been divine, let alone been "in the form of God," or equal with God, so it's not like we could have given up divine goodness even if we wanted to. Nor do I think any of us would have become "obedient to the point of death." I don't even like to let people cut ahead of me in line.

Well, in a way, that's just the problem that *kenosis* can address. We might not be full of grace, but as my mother would say, we're full of something. Seriously though, what we're full of is stubbornness, willfulness, selfishness, fear, doubt, and anger. We're a bit like the exiled Israelites who had dared to call God's ways "unfair."

And granted, they were under extraordinary stress, and were struggling to make sense of the unthinkable having been realized, so it's understandable that they would lash out. Even if you don't feel that way right now, maybe you can think of a time in your life when you were, and maybe you said some things you otherwise wouldn't have. By the grace of God, life goes on, and healing is possible.

Because *kenosis* is also inherent to repentance. The very premise of repentance is replacing our will with God's will, emptying ourselves of stubborn willfulness and all the other things that separate us from God in order that the fullness of God's love and grace can fill us, and through us, flow out into the world. That, I believe, is what St. Paul is getting at when he asks his church to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

Which sounds great, but it gets even better. We might think of this as encouragement to the devout, and there's nothing wrong with encouraging the devout. I do it myself from time to time. But the whole point, and God's great glory, is the redemption and reconciliation of sinners. Which brings us to Jesus and the religious authorities.

They were hoping to trap Jesus, so they could have him killed. He exposed their cowardice and incompetence, but not because he wanted to make them look bad. Jesus was already in control and, at that moment, popular; he had all the power he could need or want, and he didn't need to make them look bad to make himself look good. So he doesn't condemn them, or even end the conversation. Rather, he takes advantage of a teachable moment.

This should give us great hope, for it reminds us that God never gives up on us, but rather, always tries to bring us into right relationship with God and neighbor. And the

parable implicitly reinforces this. Today's parable leaves open the possibility that the disobedient son could at any subsequent time have a change of heart, get up, and join his brother working in their father's vineyard. And Jesus uses it to teach not that the authorities are barred from the kingdom of God, but that notorious sinners are going there *ahead* of them.

Realizing that the seemingly cut and dried parable is actually open-ended — notice that it does not end with condemnation, weeping, or gnashing of teeth, but rather, with a question — helps us see that with God, repentance and reconciliation are always possible. This is especially encouraging in light of last week's parable of the workers paid a full day's wage for different amounts of work. Jesus didn't give up on the religious leaders who hated him, so even though we're not Jesus, we can try to see conflict from his point of view, rather than our own, and follow his example as best we can. As the authorities demonstrated, this is not always easy, so our worship supports us in finding the right direction and starting to travel that way. We have, then, yet another reason to praise God, in whatever accent comes naturally to us.