

March 14, 2010
Grove Presbyterian Church

-- Ready for the Word --

Barnabas: the most important man, second to Jesus, in the entire New Testament

Barnabas? If it weren't for Barnabas, we wouldn't have $\frac{3}{4}$ of the New Testament. Because of him, Paul was raised up, so too Mark, Luke, Timothy, Titus...

All the more famous for knowing when to step aside and raise up others to be more important.

And not one in ten thousand knows your name.

Listen: Acts 9: 26-31:

When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

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The grace of knowing when to step aside. As one generation yields to the next. As if we have a choice. We're all playing a game of tag. Tag! You're it!

So back we go to Ezekiel. A fable followed by a proverb:

- ♦ The fable of the Cedar Tree

- ♦ The proverb of Sour Grapes.

Not the sour grapes of the Aesop Fable fox, who, because he can't reach the grapes, gives up, sneers, gripes that they are probably sour anyway, and he really didn't want them.

But a familiar Hebrew proverb that if our parents eat something really sour, it is we the child who suffers. Our mouth puckers. We grimace. Our teeth are set on edge because of what they chose to do.

***'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'***

And that may have been the case with them, the people and leaders of Israel, ignoring the prophets because of their arrogance and confidence and self-righteousness that led to their downfall, them being conquered by the Babylonians, their children captives in a foreign land.

But Ezekiel puts a new spin to the proverb. This generational punishment no longer applies.

- ♦ Israel's children will not suffer captivity and banishment because their parents and grandparents were unfaithful, unrighteous. They will become a new Israel.

The children are not accountable for the sins of the fathers.

- ♦ Listen, I didn't own slaves so don't chastise me.
- ♦ Hey, Nigeria - it's been generations since colonial rule. Don't blame that oppression for tribal discord today, for machetes chopping up children.

Generation Z don't blame the Millennials. Millennials, don't blame Generation X. Generation X, don't blame the Baby Boomers. Baby Boomers, don't blame the silent Generation.

See how this proverb packs a punch. If I can't blame you, I can only blame me. I can only be held liable for mine own sins. I am accountable. And must be held to account for mine own messes.

You have yielded so we have a chance. Thank you. Now let us make something of it.

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See the family pictures on the wall. Generations. Past. See how the faces share a familiar look. See there, that isn't grandma, that's your aunt. See there, see how your son looks exactly like your father when he was young.

**I myself will take a sprig
from the lofty top of a cedar;
I will set it out.
I will break off a tender one
from the topmost of its young twigs;
I myself will plant it
on a high and lofty mountain.
On the mountain height of Israel
I will plant it,
in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,
and become a noble cedar.**

We see it here.

Tall trees, green sprigs.

The bigger giving way to the littler, making way, so the littler can be tall in its own time.

In the forest tall trees crowd out younger ones. Stifling and stunting. Van Wagner, tree expert, helps me here:

When the overstory tree canopy is thick, it prevents sunlight from reaching the emergent trees in the understory.

Opposite is true for us. Ezekiel's parable of the cedar tree. The cedars -- with fragrance, cone, and evergreen -- which once upon a time covered all of Lebanon. A forest, dense and primeval. Now nearly all gone, victim to warfare, to Solomon's temple building, and to our human fondness for ships, closets, and cedar chests.

The tall cedars - who are the source of the planted sprig - must be brought low, must make way, so the green tree can flourish and thrive. As Van describes it:

What usually follows this static mature overstory situation is a catastrophic weather event that cleans the slate so to speak. Heavy snow, violent winds, etc can take out the huge mature trees. Almost immediately the young understory begins a race to the top of the canopy thanks to all the newly available sunlight. Proper logging techniques can provide this same stimulus.

***The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon
Psalm 92: 12.***

How wonderfully coincident that our mission trip to Nicaragua is a re-forestation project.

***I will put in the wilderness the cedar,
the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive;
I will set in the desert the cypress,
the plane and the pine together..
Isaiah 41: 19***

Old Israel gives way to the new, the same as fathers serve the son, mothers serve their daughters.

May our children be a greater generation.

Such is the joy of a parent whose child exceeds them. Don't you want your son to be a better man than you? And what breaks a parent's heart more than when their son or daughter loses their way, gets hurt, sandbagged, fail their potential..

Green sprigs from the tall tree.

Pity the green sprigs whose tall trees never give them the chance.

Pity even more when the child is the lesser.

Such is the joy of the church old guard nurturing the new guard - not to be like them, clones and replicants, but for them to exceed their own way.

Such is the joy of President Bush praying and hoping President Obama will do a better job than he did. Followed by the joy of President Obama praying and hoping whoever succeeds him will succeed, will exceed. Anything less is

small and tawdry, petty and unpatriotic. Because what matters is the country.

Tag, you're it!

Imagine if our politicians, all our leaders, pledged in unison: "our job is to equip you to be better; our job isn't to feather out nest but to provide branches so you may build your nest."

Imagine if that were the standing operating procedure of Congress. SOP.

Otherwise we will prove Ezekiel wrong and the proverb true by suffering our children the sins of the parents; the sins of war, national debt, the sins of the greedy and indulgent today.

May the past demand that the future learn.

May the future demand that the past learn.

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Tonight we will discuss the book by Elie Wiesel's, titled Night.

The boy Wiesel who discovered that Auschwitz is what exactly what we humans do. I have no illusions that it can happen again. And that we would stoke the ovens.

It would not be accurate to say that that boy Wiesel survived the concentration camps. That boy died though he was eventually liberated. That same boy, turned the adult, pleads for, prays for, demands that a new humanity replace the old.

Please listen to this excerpt from his acceptance speech when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize:

*I remember: it happened yesterday or eternities ago. A young Jewish boy discovered the kingdom of night. I remember his bewilderment, I remember his anguish. It all happened so fast. The ghetto. The deportation. The sealed cattle car. The fiery altar upon which the history of our people and the future of mankind were meant to be sacrificed.*

*I remember: he asked his father: "Can this be true?" This is the twentieth century, not the Middle Ages. Who would allow such crimes to be committed? How could the world remain silent?*

*And now the boy is turning to me: "Tell me," he asks. "What have you done with my future? What have you done with your life?"*

*And I tell him that I have tried. That I have tried to keep memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget.*

*As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our lives will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs.*

*This is what I say to the young Jewish boy wondering what I have done with his years. It is in his name that I speak to you and that I express to you my deepest gratitude. No one is as capable of gratitude as one who has emerged from the kingdom of night. We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; not to share them would mean to betray them. Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately.*

*That is what the adult Wiesel said.*

*What shall we say to that boy?*

*See the young sprig at our feet needing sunlight.*