

“Parents in Pain”
March 27, 2011
Grove Presbyterian Church

Old Testament Lesson

I Samuel 2: 12-17

Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD or for the duties of the priests to the people. When anyone offered sacrifice, the priest’s servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, and he would thrust it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there.

Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest’s servant would come and say to the one who was sacrificing, “Give meat for the priest to roast; for he will not accept boiled meat from you, but only raw.” And if the man said to him, “Let them burn the fat first, and then take whatever you wish,” he would say, “No, you must give it now; if not, I will take it by force.”

Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the LORD; for they treated the offerings of the LORD with contempt.

When they hear this type of text lots of people’s eyes glaze over.

Seems typically Old Testamentally silly. Irrelevant. Obscure. Archaic.

Unless you appreciate the context and culture. Too many folks too blithely dismiss the Bible without truly taking the time to understand it. They dismiss it for what they think it is rather than for what it really is.

We’ve got some priestly, ancient rituals at play here. Bring up the sacrifice. The fatty bits belonged to God. When I go for a thick Delmonico steak, I look for marbling. The roasted fat makes for juice and flavor.

What make sense about this ritual?

You offer up a portion to remind yourself you are very, very dependent. Very dependent on forces beyond your control.

Give up the fat and remind yourself that there is something out there more important than yourself.

Unless you are Eli’s scoundrel sons. These fellows lick their lips and stab the best portions for themselves.

Now we're nudging toward the message within the text.

What would be an apt parallel here? Imagine if I let my daughter rummage through the offering plates and confiscate whatever she wanted before the Deacons bag it and deposit the collection at the bank.

Eli's sons. Men of power and advantage, but really bums. Their only interest is profit, prestige, and pleasure. Later, we are told how they abuse women. Sleeping around. Bullying others. Using their high position to steal from the offerings. I'm betting they laughed behind Dad's back.

The wastrel sons of Eli, who hold God and others in contempt.

How can you dismiss this text as archaic and irrelevant when it tells us there is nothing new under the sun about children who become less than what we've hoped for.

Makes you wonder how Eli felt. On one hand, there he was: the most honored and respected priest in Israel. On the other hand, his sons make him feel old, defeated, ashamed, disappointed.

Children out there, do you know what gives an old man his greatest joy? To have raised worthy children. We don't care if you are rich or not – we want you to have integrity.

Eli didn't raise worthy sons. A father's broken heart. I wonder when he gave up trying to shape his boys up.

His sons were worthless men and everybody knew it. The people mock Eli behind his back.

It'll get worse. He's going to live long enough to see both of them killed in a vain and stupid battle against the Philistines. No man should have to bury his sons, even if they are bums.

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Over and over again, the Bible tells us that rude, ungrateful, self-centered children is nothing new, especially when they are the sons and daughters of successful, powerful men. King David's son tries to kill Dad.

Look to our own history. Forefather John Adams had one son who became, as did he, a President of the United States; another son died in the gutter from alcoholism.

Ben Franklin's son supported the English in the Revolution.

Donald Rumsfeld, President Bush's Secretary of Defense, wrote recently about how his son suffered from drug addiction.

Senator and former Presidential candidate George McGovern buried his alcoholic daughter after she passed out one night and froze to death in a snow drift.

Imagine what devout Roman Catholic Martin Sheen is going through.

You name it -- there's enough kids around murdering themselves from drugs or alcohol.

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As a parent, I shouldn't be surprised. As a pastor, I constantly am.

It is overwhelming how many parents are in pain. Tons of parents. How do we comfort these parents? How can Grove Church better minister to our own children?

As a church we've suffered some terrible sadnesses, so often the result of some youths making harmful choices. I think of parents whose children are addicted to drugs or alcohol. We've lost two to heroin. I think of parents whose kids struggle to find themselves the hard way. I remember two former members bludgeoned to death by their own son.

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When they suffered from appendicitis or tonsillitis, oh boy, that was easy by comparison.

How many of us felt that knot in the stomach and lump in the throat, that skin crawling chill, when you had to release them to strangers in scrubs, and all you could do was wait helpless outside?

They fall off the jungle gym or crash the car, and there's nary a parent I know who wouldn't wish they could switch places with them and bear their hurt.

Or imagine when the baby you eagerly anticipated is born with a birth defect, Down Syndrome, or mental illness. There's a huge emotional adjustment. Not to the loving, but to the coping, adjusting your dreams and expectations for your dear child.

But, friends, it only gets harder.

The world intrudes: forces beyond our control.

Because they grow up. Playgrounds get replace by proms. Let's go to Reflections in Bloomsburg, the kid say, and buy some incense to smoke to get high. And all you want is for them to be safe and happy. You want them to be independent and skilled enough to make their own way in life.

But things happen.

Then they make dumb, dumb mistakes.

Some of our sons sit in prison. Some are in rehab. Clever mischief gets replaced by meanness, even malicious violence. We've seen our daughters with an unplanned pregnancy. Or they marry, but those wedding day smiles quickly fade, replaced by reality, and a year later it's the hurtful divorce.

Sorrows due to circumstances.

Sorrows due to lousy, lousy choices.

All sorts of pain. Acute pain. Chronic pain.

Pain from the anger and frustration because you want to scream and break something.

Pain from the guilt because even if your friends and your own brain tells you it's not your fault, you still feel that it is.

Pain because sometimes you feel you just want to give up trying, and then you feel even worse for daring to think that.

Out there is a whole chromatic scale of parents in pain: the sounds of groans, shouts, sobs, sighs, bleak silence....

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My niece worries over her ten month old baby. His left arm is listless, under-developed. But the pediatricians suggest there's nothing neurologically wrong. Little Maxwell simply never developed his muscles there. Why? Scant belly time. Little time to wiggle and push himself up, those baby push-ups. Always carted about in car seat, carrier, stroller. We're protecting them, sure, but also turning them into slugs, like those rotund and flaccid humans in the movie, "Wall-E." More water balloons of flesh with stunted appendages.

Natalie tells me that pediatricians are beginning to see little skulls being reshaped, flattened by always reclining.

Lynne tells me how some babies, carted about, are never touched at all during the day. At Head Start she found some kids couldn't sit up on the floor, they lacked developed diaphragm muscles.

Our love and smothering care can create an environment that enfeebles our own children. Enfeebing them physically, yes; but just as easily our has become a culture enfeebing them morally, enfeebing them spiritually. Making them weak prey for the nasty vultures

that circle overhead ready to pounce on them. There be those Pied Pipers who steal them from us, along with their souls.

You do know, of course, that it doesn't help to simply drop them off at church school and tell them you'll pick them up later. That's like training them to ride a bicycle by giving them an unassembled bike still in its carton and telling them good luck, you'll check on them after you go shopping.

You know it doesn't help to simply send them to Confirmation Class, get their ticket punched, and then let them never show up again.

If you don't show up for practice, can you really consider yourself part of the team?

Our children face tough choices. They require the principles and values necessary to decide what is good. It ain't going to happen scribbling in a Confirmation workbook for one hour a week for a few weeks.

It can happen by a lifetime of osmosis, imitation, application.

It can only happen by them worshipping something more important than themselves.

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But let's avoid blaming the parents for the failures of the children. They do become adults. They do make choices. Yet often I hear those in trouble blaming others, looking for rescue, when they need to own up that they're in trouble because it is their own fault.

Your parents didn't make you pop the pills, get her pregnant, or slam back the Jagermeister.

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The Bible has something to say here. The worthy life we want of our children is the result of something else – being filled with the knowledge of God. This was a lesson Eli's boys ignored.

Listen:

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.

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Parents in pain: you can only give choices rather than solutions.

Parents in pain: you cannot and must not live their life for them.

Parents in pain: you really cannot rescue them.

Parents in pain: all you can really do is hope.

Parents in pain: it is the toughest job there is. We honor you and your children.

Parents in pain: I'm going to remind you of something that you already know: choosing to love necessitates choosing to suffer.

Let us pray...