

**SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTACOST 09/27/20**

**EZEKIAL 18:1-4, 25-32 PSALM 25:1-8 PHILIPPIANS 2:1-13**

**MATTHEW 21:23-32**

**GOOD MORNING**

**THE CENTRAL THEME FOR TODAY SEEMS TO BE ABOUT A REAL REPOSE TO GOD. *SAYING YES!!***

**THE PROPHET EZEKIAL RAISES A NEW LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING REGARDING THE THEMES OF PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF FORGIVENESS FOR SIN.**

**EARLY HEBREW TEACHINGS SAID THAT GOD'S REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS WERE DEALT OUT IN THIS PRESENT LIFE. A PERSON WHO REACHED AN ADVANCED AGE WITH GOOD PHYSICAL HEALTH AND MATERIAL PROSPERITY OBVIOUSLY MUST HAVE ENJOYED DIVINE FAVOR DUE TO A RIGHTEOUS LIFE. IN CONTRAST, THOSE WHO DIED YOUNG OR SUFFERED POVERTY OR ILLNESS WERE THOUGHT TO BE SINNERS. EVEN DESCENDANTS TO THE 3<sup>RD</sup> AND 4<sup>TH</sup> GENERATION COULD BE PUNISHED FOR THE SINS FOR THEIR ANCESTORS. (SOME STILL THINK THIS WAY, EVEN TODAY).**

EZEKIAL SUPPOSED THIS TO BE AT LEAST AS BAD AS THE THOUGHT THAT ALL SUFFERING WAS PUNISHMENT FOR SIN. HE HAD LIVED THROUGH THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM AND THE EARLY DAYS OF THE EXILE. EVENTS CONVINCED HIM THAT RESPONSIBILITY FOR SIN WAS PERSONAL. THE SOUL OF THE PARENT AND THE SOUL OF THE CHILD BELONGED TO GOD; AND IT WAS THE SOUL THAT SINNED, THAT SHOULD DIE. THE PROPHET PROCLAIMED THE POSSIBILITY OF REPENTANCE. IF THE WICKED WERE TO TURN FROM EVIL WAYS AND LIVE IN ACCORD WITH GOD'S COMMANDMENTS, SINS WOULD BE FORGIVEN.

IN RESPONSE TO THESE NEW TEACHINGS, SOME OF THE PEOPLE COMPLAINED THAT THE LORD'S WAYS WERE UNFAIR. BY PROCLAIMING THAT EACH PERSON WOULD BE JUDGED ON THE BASIS OF HIS OR HER LIFE, THE LORD IS CONCERNED WITH JUSTICE AND RESTORATION OF RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS, NOT VENGEANCE.

WHILE EZEKIAL DECLARED THAT INDIVIDUALS ARE TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR OWN ACTIONS, THE PSALMIST EXPRESSES TRUST IN GOD AND PRAY FOR THE LORD'S

PROTECTION, GUIDANCE, AND FORGIVENESS. “MAKE ME TO KNOW YOUR WAYS, O LORD; TEACH ME YOUR PATHS.”

FOR THE NEXT FEW SUNDAYS, THE GOSPEL READINGS REFLECT THE INCREASING OPPOSITION FROM THE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES THAT JESUS FACED FOLLOWING HIS ARRIVAL IN JERUSALEM. THE PASSAGE FOR TODAY REVOLVES AROUND ISSUES OF AUTHORITY AND WHO DOES THE WILL OF GOD.

IN THESE VERSES FROM MATTHEW, JESUS CONFRONTS SOME OF THE HIGHEST-RANKING, MOST POWERFUL AND MORE WIDELY INFLUENTIAL AUTHORITIES WITHIN THE JUDAISM OF HIS TIME AND PLACE. THESE CHIEF PRIESTS AND ELDERS. MEMBERS OF A *SCRIBAL ELITE* CLASS, PLAYED IMPORTANT AND VISIBLE ROLES REGARDING RELIGIOUS PRACTICES, RITUALS AND SYMBOLS, THE INTERPRETATION OF SACRED TEXTS, AND ROMAN GOVERNANCE OVER THE REGION. JESUS HAS NOT DIRECTLY ENGAGED PEOPLE LIKE THIS BEFORE, EXCEPT FOR AN EARLIER BRIEF ENCOUNTER WHERE THEY DIDN'T

LIKE HIS PRAISES SUNG BY CHILDREN, AND THE TENSION IS HIGH HERE.

JESUS IMPLICITLY CRITICIZES THEM FOR NOT RECOGNIZING JOHN THE BAPTISIZER AND HIS MINISTRY AS AUTHORIZED *FROM HEAVEN*. THAT IS, AS EXPRESSIONS OF GOD'S OWN INTENTIONS OR AS MEANS BY WHICH SOMEONE MIGHT GLIMPSE GOD AND GOD'S PRIORITIES FOR THE WORLD. BY EXTENSION, JESUS INSINUATES THAT THESE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES ALSO FAIL TO RECOGNIZE THE SAME IN HIM AND IN THE TEACHING AND WORK *HE* DOES.

JESUS TELLS HIS PARABLE AFTER THAT EXCHANGE, *AFTER* HE HAS EXPOSED THESE PARTICULAR LEADERS AS UNABLE OR UNWILLING TO GRASP HOW GOD MIGHT BE KNOWABLE – OR EVEN AT WORK – IN OTHER PLACES OR IN OTHER WAYS.

BECAUSE IF GOD IS ACTIVE OR DISCOVERABLE IN THE EFFORTS OF SOMEONE LIKE JOHN, A WILD-EYED LONG-TOILING PROPHET WHO SETS UP CAMP IN THE WILDERNESS CALLING FOR A NEW WORLD TO COME INTO BEING, A WORLD MARKED BY JUSTICE, CHANGED LIVES, AND A

RECOGNITION THAT GOD INTENDS FOR MORE THAN JUST THE CONTINUATION OF AN ONGOING AND CORROSIVE STATUS QUO – THEN PERHAPS PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE, SYMBOLS, PRACTICES, AND TRUST CLAIMS SHOULD BE CURIOUS PEOPLE, BENT ON KEEPING THEIR EYES OPEN FOR WAYS IN WHICH GOD MIGHT BE MADE KNOWN, OR WAYS IN WHICH THE PURPOSES OF GOD MIGHT BE EXPRESSED.

IN OTHER WORDS, SAYING YES TO GOD SHOULD LEAD A PERSON TO SAY YES TO *LOOKING FOR* GOD AND YES TO GETTING ENGAGED IN GOD’S BUSINESS – THE BUSINESS OF SEEING TO THE FLOURISHING OF JUSTICE, PEACE, RECONCILIATION, SECURITY, RESTORATIONS, AND FORGIVENESS.

THAT’S WHY JESUS IN HIS PARABLE AND IN HIS WORDS IMMEDIATELY AFTER IT, PRAISES “TAX COLLECTORS AND PROSTITUTES” – PEOPLE WHO BY MOST APPEARANCES HAVE NOT CLAIMED TO SAY YES TO GOD BUT HAVE NEVERTHELESS RESPONDED TO OR FOUND THEIR PLACE WITHIN GOD’S ACTIVITY.

SO, DON'T EQUATE THE PARABLE WITH ORDINARY MORALITY TALES MEANT TO PRAISE HARD WORK AND INTEGRITY. ALTHOUGH THE PARABLE COMMENDS OBEDIENCE, IT DOES SO IN A CONTEXT SUGGESTING THAT A LIFE OF *WORKING IN THE VINEYARD* IS ABOUT PLAYING ONE'S PART IN GOD'S ONGOING WORK AND ENJOYING GOD'S BENEFITS. SUCH TOIL IS NOT PUNISHMENT OR LIFELESS RELIGIOUS OBLIGATION. IT IS ABOUT GOING TO WHERE GOD IS. JOHN AND JESUS WERE CLEAR THAT EVERYONE NEEDED TO REPENT, TO UNDERGO A CHANGE OF DIRECTION IN THEIR LIVES: TO BOTH SAY YES AND *FOLLOW THROUGH ON THAT COMMITMENT*.

IF WE BECOME THOSE WHO SAY YES TO GOD, THEN WE ARE LOOKING TO A SOURCE THAT IS BEYOND OURSELVES. WE IDENTIFY OURSELVES AS PEOPLE OF THE KINGDOM.

AMEN