

Scripture Readings: Ezekiel 18: 1-4, 25-32 Philippians 2: 1-9, 12-13 *New Revised Standard Version*

From the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapter 18, Verses 1-4, 25-32

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.

Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is unfair." Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?

When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die.

Yet the house of Israel says, "The way of the Lord is unfair." O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel--all of you--according to your ways, says the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!

Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live.

From Paul's Letter to the Philippians, Chapter 2, Verses 1-9, 12-13

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name...

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, 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.

The Word of Our Lord.

Sermon “Make My Joy Complete” Minister David Jones

At the very start of the pandemic, when the schools closed and our church building closed--and the weather outside was still too cold in late March to spend much time outside--Caity and I started doing puzzles in our apartment over Buckland Pizza in Shelburne Falls. We didn't have a lot of space in that apartment, so our 1000-piece puzzles crowded our dinner table. But that was okay. Our living room became where we ate, and then it was the kitchen that we would “retire to,” maybe with a drink, to sit down and work on the puzzle. And that's when we started listening to a young country and bluegrass artist named Tyler Childers. He had this album called “Country Squire” that was very fun, it was upbeat and many of the songs had comical, devil-may-care lyrics.

The album was a welcome distraction from the frightening thing that was beginning to set in around us. I imagine we all remember that moment, when Covid cases were spiking in New York City and then in our state, but, as I was still finishing up my chaplaincy course at Baystate in Springfield, I really remember the way it felt, how it felt like I was breathing in the virus all day long, how my chest would suddenly feel tight or my breath suddenly short after I heard a co-worker cough in our shared office. Caity was afraid for me, and I was definitely experiencing real anxiety for the first time in my life. So, some light-hearted music and a puzzle was just right to take my mind off things, a little joy to help me relax before bed.

I have been thinking about that particular moment lately, for a couple reasons. For one thing, with schools re-opening this month, many people in our community and in our church, are experiencing some of that acute stress all over again. I know I have been keeping an eye again on the Massachusetts case count in a way that I had stopped doing over the summer.

But another reason is that this same artist just put out a new album, and Caity and I have been playing it on repeat in our new apartment. The new album is full of fiddle standards. This artist makes his music in Lawrence County in Eastern Kentucky. Eastern Kentucky strikes me as a place in the world halfway between the Deep South and Western Mass; bluegrass music sort of cuts the distance down between these very distinct places.

Anyway, unlike the fun, escapist album we were listening to in March, Tyler's new album ends with a song called "Long Violent History." When he released this song, he paired it with a short video essay, where he explained that the song is his own reflective, observational piece on what has gone on since the beginning of the pandemic. It wasn't long after the cold April, which we navigated by seeking out distractions, that we came face to face with a long summer of protest. The only thing that has defined this unique period in our history more than a sense of isolation and remoteness as we practice social distancing is the unprecedented uprising that erupted again this past Wednesday. It is these protests that have drawn the 29 year old Kentucky artist away from singing about young love to singing instead about our country's long violent history.

"It's the worst that it's been since the last time it happened; it's happening again right in front of our eyes," Tyler sings. Before continuing, he pauses to acknowledge that his own predominantly white audience may wonder why he's singing about this at all. But here in the song he does something that I think is very instructive for us here in the hilltowns. He does not use the academic jargon of the day, he doesn't talk about his "privilege" or his audience's privilege. Instead he roots his reflection in the disadvantages of his own life. As a white guy from the hills of Eastern Kentucky, Tyler speaks with his own hard-earned moral authority.

Eastern Kentucky is considered among the very hardest places in the country to grow up, a place where 1 in 5 live under the poverty line. It is also a place where the predominantly white population is often looked down on; as Tyler sings, the world has called him "*belligerent*" and taken him for "*ignorant*." From this, his own disadvantaged place, Tyler would like to share his opinion. And that is when he invokes the words of George Floyd and too many others killed in police custody. For all his own challenges, for all the many ways our culture and our

economy mistreats him and his home, no one has ever made him beg just to breathe.

In the most provocative lyrics in the song, Tyler wonders aloud, what would happen in East Kentucky, if what was happening in the black neighborhoods of this country happened there?

*“How many boys could they haul off this mountain
Shoot full of holes, cuffed and layin' in the streets
'Til we come into town in a stark ravin' anger
Looking for answers and armed to the teeth?”*

How many of our sons, how many of our grandchildren, could be killed in handcuffs; How many of our daughters could be killed in the dead of night while lying in bed, before we took matters into our own hands? Tyler lives in Eastern Kentucky, and he dedicated his new album to a fellow Kentuckian, the late Breonna Taylor, whose family was just denied even any hope for justice on Wednesday.

In our reading from the prophet Ezekiel this morning, God is pretty blunt in explaining to God's faithful that they are confusing their own unfairness toward one another--their own iniquities--for God's. It is not God that makes some rich and some poor; that's *our* work. It is *our* iniquities, *our* mistreatment of each other, that ruins us, that have made a long violent history. And in our reading from Paul's letter, we learn that God does not abandon those who have done wrong, who have committed iniquities, it is rather that God goes on working through us to overcome the wrongs that we have done. Paul implores us to be humble so that we might perceive God at work *in* us. We need to stop thinking so highly of ourselves that we can't follow the beacon and guide within.

This is not so different from Tyler's song. We should not make the poor white people that Tyler sings to live with less, and we shouldn't take them for ignorant. That is also the iniquity between us that ruins us. And we cannot ignore what black Americans are experiencing, or try to hem in and dictate the terms of their rebellion, because, after all, how many of our children in the hilltowns would it take before we fought back? These iniquities of our own making are ruining us. We have got to redouble our faith efforts; we have got to see Breonna Taylor's life as God's own to hold, not as ours to take and discard. We have got to see the pain and anger in the chests of black Americans as the pain and anger of God, working through them, *in* this country to turn it toward righteousness.

We have got to get a new heart and a new spirit; we have got to remember that from the hilltowns to the Deep South, to Eastern Kentucky in between, whether white or black, whether by poverty or oppression, God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. It is not God whose ways are unfair but our own. We have to empty ourselves of any judgments and pretensions, of all but the consolations from love, of all but the Spirit we share in, of all that is not compassion and sympathy, so that we might make the Lord's joy complete.

Alleluia and amen.