

Consequences
Isaiah 5:1-7
Luke 12:41-48

“...he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!”

The out of vogue word for the morning is a word still invoked by many a mother or father as a son or daughter heads out the door. Whether a newly licensed driver or just twenty-one with a legitimate ID, whether off to college or spending a weekend with friends at the shore, a parent will invariably find some way to use the word consequence in a sentence. From the child's point of view, I think this is mostly a futile warning spoken helplessly as a hedge against disaster. God only knows what will become of them once they step out of the house. They think they are immortal, of course, or that they know better or that they will never get caught. So thought we all once upon a time in the garden, only a moment before we took the fall and then heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. “Because you have done this,” God said to the serpent and to the woman and to the man. Consequences would seem to be built in to the order of creation, for our own good, God the parent hastens to add. Tit for tat. Action and reaction. Give and take. Crime and punishment. How could it be otherwise?

Still we continue to act as though we were immune if not immortal, as though we do know better, as though we will not get caught doing those things we ought not to do. Three millennia after God promised to be Abraham's God, God must be at wit's end with us, having run out of sentences to say, threats to brandish, punishments to mete out. Consider the seven short verses in Isaiah that begin as the story of a Beloved's unsuccessful tending of his vineyard and become a parable for God's pathos over his failed parenting of Israel. The verbs tell the tale: God dug, cleared, planted, watched, hewed out. The image is one of tireless attention and care. Then comes the last verb in the first series: expected.

Expected? Like indignant teenagers, we are surprised that the lavish provisions of the One who has given us life are, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, “not disinterested. The vineyard owner expects something in return for all the effort. Of course the owner expected fruit, good produce. That is the purpose of a vineyard.” Of course God expects us to mature into loving, caring, just and generous human beings who will live together in loving, caring, just and generous communities. Along with enjoying God forever, this is our chief end, the purpose of human existence.

However, our inhumane actions beg to disagree. As Isaiah put it in a clever play on words: “[The Beloved] expected [the vineyard] to yield grapes but it yielded wild grapes...; [God] expected justice (*mispah*), but saw bloodshed (*mispah*).” “The bloodshed that concerned [Isaiah was] not thuggery or murder, but the more subtle, slower [though] equally decisive killing through economic policy against the vulnerable and resourceless,” Brueggemann insists. God expected “righteousness (*sedaqa*), but heard a cry (*se a qa*)!” or more accurately an outcry, “the feeble social protests of those who are victimized by rapacious social policy.”

God then asks, as only a parent can ask, when years of love and tireless care have come to naught, “What more was there to do?” In a word, there were consequences! Now the verbs turn ugly: remove, devour, break down, trample down, waste, not prune, not hoe, no rain. Is there a parent here who has not wanted to do just that with an incorrigible child? Specifically, the consequence for Israel’s inhumanity was exile, was life cut off from God’s presence and put with the unfaithful.

Likewise exile is the consequence in the parable Jesus tells. A manager is given the responsibility of overseeing the master’s possessions, just as the listening disciples have been entrusted with the gospel. Those left in charge are *expected* (there is that word again!) to act

faithfully and prudently until the master returns, until the end of time. The disciples now know what acting faithfully looks like because they know the one who is telling the story. Yet their knowledge ups the ante on the master's final reckoning. Just so, because in Jesus God has revealed what God expects, revealed what being human looks like, the consequence for being inhumane—for beating the other slaves and living like gluttons—is, once again, exile from God's presence. According to the parable, the master will “cut him off and put him with the unfaithful.” Moreover, the consequences for those who confess Christ and act like heathen will be harsher than the consequences for those who do not know Christ. In the parable the manager receives a beating; God only knows what will become of us eternally who have been entrusted with the gospel and yet live as though our lives were our own to do with as we please.

In the midst of wrestling with the meaning of these two parables for our lives as followers of Jesus Christ and members of his church, I found myself wondering about another “c” word: namely, consequences sent me to seek out the role of conscience in the course of human events. *Con-scientia*: a knowing (*scientia*) that comes from a relation of some kind (*con*). When my mother or father would use “consequences” in a sentence before I slammed the door behind me, I think they were appealing to my conscience, my knowing how to behave in relation to their expectations. And I am sure what they prayed—or at least what my mother prayed—was that my conscience, my knowing how a human being acted in any given situation, would become second nature; that I would grow up, would mature at some point, making it no longer necessary to remind me of the consequences of being less than who I was, less than the person they expected me to be. I would expect that of myself.

The matter, however, has never been that simple. It turns out there are more ways than one to connect the dots between conscience and consequences. At variance is the “con” of

conscience. What is the relation that conditions our knowing good and evil and our doing of one or the other? If ethics connects the dots between conscience and consequences, human reason alone is said to be sufficient. We can autonomously arrive at the difference between being naughty and nice, back to last week's sermon, and roughly anticipate the good or ill that might follow from each ethical choice we make. If moral theology is the source of our knowing, then divine revelation is the basis of what we know about good and evil: God said so, with mom and dad standing in for God until we reach maturity, so to speak! In this relationship, the consequences for doing evil may not be immediately evident, but the controlling word spoken over human behavior is that ultimately God *will* get you! Therefore our conscience functions in relation to a higher authority whose threat of eternal punishment, of being cut off and put with the unfaithful, discourages disobedience.

Here is the rub: neither reason nor the threats of a higher power have ever been able to curb human enthusiasm for mistaking freedom for license. In the thousands upon thousands of years of human history, the threat of consequences have yet to change our default setting for sin, for living without regard to God or God's will. I know you do not like this doctrine, but this is the doctrine of total depravity that nails the "pathos, sobriety and depth of the ethical predicament" of humankind to the cross. We do not have it in us to close the gap between knowing the good and doing the good. Therefore to God's question in Isaiah—"what more shall I do?"—the answer within God can only be that God alone can take upon himself the consequences of our living as though our inhumanity were inconsequential eternally, were of no matter to God's righteous judgment.

What both parables tell us is that our refusal to be human—either within ourselves or in relation to one another—angers God to the point that God leaves us to our own devices. This is

what Scripture identifies as the wrath of God which, along with total depravity, nice Christians seldom mention anymore. In fact, I could find almost no hymns in our hymnal that set to music the reality of God's wrath against the social chaos that is the consequence of our inhumanity toward one another. "The wrath of God," Christian ethicist Paul Lehmann writes, "is the disintegration of creaturehood, not as an impenetrable fate, but as an intrinsic consequence of the disregard by the creature of boundaries divinely arranged for [our] good out of the abundant goodness of the Creator." In other words, consequences are not the threats of what God will do if we are bad; consequences are simply the chaos that results when we are not the creatures we were created to be. Our refusal to be human, to live as we were destined to live in relation to God, results in our suffering as those who, by our own choice, are cut off from God. Yet this is the life we thought we wanted (is it not?) when we walked out and slammed the door of faith in God's face!

God, of course, has had it with us and would let us walk away forever except for the fact that God is love, the kind of love that never quits. Therefore God does the opposite: God comes after us always as the One who alone is doing everything under the sun to make and keep our human lives human. In sum, Lehmann says, God is after our heart not our conscience, after the whole of our selves. Therefore God has sent his heart, his Beloved, his Son both to suffer the consequences of our living without him and to cancel the consequence that is our dying without him eternally.

"What if," Marilynne Robinson asks, "in important numbers, we believe there is a God who is mysterious and demanding, with whom one is not easily at peace? What if we believe there will be a reckoning? I find no evidence," she writes, "that such beliefs were felt to be discredited or that they were consciously abandoned. They simply dropped out of the cultural

conversation....” What if, in fact, my mother’s prayer--that I one day would grow up, would reach maturity and not need to be reminded of the consequences of my actions in order to choose the good—what my mother’s prayer has been answered in him who reckoned his righteousness even to me? I am still, by God’s grace alone, growing up into Christ. He is my conscience—the one in relation to whom I know the self I am destined to become—and he is my heart. Therefore I am bold to believe that there will yet be a reckoning, when I will be presented perfectly myself before God’s throne of grace by him who is my sure redeemer. Thanks be to God.