

Sept 29, 2019  
Rev. Jane Florence  
Jeremiah 31 and Exodus 20: 1-6  
“Our Children’s Inheritance”



Scripture says God spoke these words also:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

If you put these two verses of Exodus and Jeremiah side by side, you may get some theological whiplash. In Exodus: God is quoted as saying, " I will punish the children for the iniquity of the parents to the third and fourth generation. That means a child receives the punishment of parent, or grandparent, or great-grandparent, or even great-great- grandparent that they didn’t even know?

I much prefer Jeremiah 31: God doesn’t remember our sins, and doesn’t punish our great-grandchildren for them. So what did these two scriptures have to say to our faith ancestors? what do they say to each other and to us? and what does your answer say about your God?

Some may say the Exodus text speaking to the nation of Hebrews that God has delivered from captivity, and the Jeremiah text speaking to the individual. In that case, the corporate sins of each generation are passed down to the generations to follow, but perhaps the individual transgressions are forgiven and forgotten as long as the individual sins don’t perpetuate or participate in the societal sins of the whole tribe. But if that’s the case, why is Jesus asked the question he is asked five hundred years later as the Gospel of John reports? (John 9:1-12) “As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup>His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’” Clearly Jesus’ disciples believe the Exodus passage applies to individuals.

We humans have a need for cause and blame. We want to know why things happen? Who can we blame? Someone should bear responsibility for calamity, crisis and tragedy! Our faith ancestors gave us stories of people who believed that they could appease or anger the gods with their behaviors. They believed they had some control over what happened in their world through the gods They believed that blessings and good gifts were bestowed upon those whose behaviors God favored; and punishment, disease, hardship were bestowed upon those whose behaviors displeased God.

It seems rather primitive when we put it like that. Pleasing or displeasing heavenly gods as a way to explain our weather catastrophes or a malignant diagnosis. That’s not what we believe.

We don’t believe that children who get cancer are being punished for their behaviors or their parents. We don’t believe that only good people live long happy lives and only bad people suffer in this life. We don’t believe God is the heavenly score keeper that is so malicious as to punish generations of innocent children for the sins of their ancestors. Jesus answered his

students question about the cause of the man's blindness, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned..." So, perhaps our faith stories are pointing out something else. Perhaps they are revealing what modern day sociologist and scientists now teach. There is not a Divine Being who is flinging catastrophes based on what grandpa did, but there are generational behaviors that continue to affect lives far down family tree.

Dr Murray Bowen pioneered the work we call Family Systems Theory which maintains that individuals are not so individual as we might like to think, but rather we are profoundly impacted, positively or negatively, by our family of origin. We can carry those impacts long after we no longer live under the roof of our parents and we transmit to our children and our grandchildren behaviors of our family tree as well- even when ( most often when) we aren't even cognizant of the behavior.

For example, emotional distance- abandonment - abuse- neglect- addictions - domestic violence - a person tends to parent as they were parented- a person learns relationship patterns from our earliest relationship- family. So Grandpa was emotionally distant and aloof from his son, his son doesn't know any other way to be, so he repeats the behavior and is emotionally unavailable to his son, and so on and so on- down the family tree, generation after generation. So, the 'sins' of grandpa - in not affirming his son, or showing affection to transmitting love- create a wounded child who spends the rest of his life trying to prove his self-worth who doesn't know how to show love, and so on and so on. Family of origin theory maintains that we pass along our behaviors Generation to Generation, we learn behaviors that we carry forward even if we don't know it.

What about racism? Prejudice? Those things are taught you know. Sins against people of different race, skin tone, religious backgrounds, genders are learned. Generation to generation pass down those diseases in big bold white sheets of grandpa's Klan membership or in inconspicuous comments, jokes and attitudes around the dinner table. Generation after generation are paying for the sin of racism. Let's not blame that on God.

What of our earth? Is the earth not suffering from the sins of our ancestors and our own violation in refusing to do something once the problem was brought to public awareness decades ago. Actually, in the 1800s experiments suggesting there could be a link between human produced carbon dioxide and the earth's atmosphere were beginning. Last week, Greta Thunberg a 16 year old Swedish environmental activist explained ancestral sin to the United Nations. How dare we destroy the earth and act as though it's no big deal? How dare we steal our children's future?

What other sins are we placing upon the shoulders of our children ? Notice I said, "we", not God. God isn't a Divine Accountant with a spreadsheet in the heavens to tally our mistakes and punish our grandchildren to the seventh generation, but WE do.

What of our national debt ? What burden are we passing on to our children? and grandchildren? What of current societal norms/ behaviors/ of demeaning and demonizing opponents? That is otherwise known as bullying, and it is not a problem isolated to children. What about the lost value of the dignity and honor of people?

We lost the concept of life as sacred. We just accept possession of assault weapons in the hands of any and all citizenry, and another mass shooting just a blip on the news for a few days. What values and priorities are we passing on to our children as acceptable ? Punishing children for the sins of ancestral parents, to the third and the fourth generation- is not God's doing, but it happens.

Going back to scripture, the sin that is passed down in the Exodus text is that the people are faulted for worshipping that which is not God. Worship of money, power, success by world standards, making idols out of consumerism marketing, sports, work -anything that holds priority over God is an idol.

We could learn the warning from our ancestors. Our Native American ancestors understood what our Hebrew ancestors were trying to tell us. Hear these words from Native American leaders:

"If you ask me what is the most important thing that I have learned about being Iroquois , it's the idea that we are connected to a community, but a community that transcends time. We're connected to the first [people] who walked on this earth, the very first ones, however long ago that was. But we're also connected to those [people] who aren't even born yet, who are going to walk this earth. And our job in the middle is to bridge that gap. You take the inheritance from the past, you add to it, your ideas and your thinking, and you bundle it up and shoot it to the future. And there is a different kind of responsibility. That is not just about me, my pride and my ego, it's about all that other stuff."

**Rick Hill Sr.** (Tuscarora)

Chair, Haudenosaunee Standing Committee on NAGPRA

"The Peacemaker taught us about the Seven Generations. He said, when you sit in council for the welfare of the people, you must not think of yourself or of your family, not even of your generation. He said, make your decisions on behalf of the seven generations coming, so that they may enjoy what you have today."

**Oren Lyons** (Seneca)

Faithkeeper, Onondaga Nation

"You start to think in terms of the people who come after me. Those faces that are coming from beneath the earth that are yet unborn, is the way we refer to that."

**G. Peter Jemison**

Faithkeeper, Cattaraugus Reservation  
Seneca Nation<sup>1</sup>

The "7th generation" principle taught by Native Americans says that in **every decision**, be it personal, governmental or corporate, we must **consider how it will affect our descendants** seven generations into the future. It is interesting to note that [Western society generally considers a generation to be 25 years; the Lakota Nation considers one generation to be 100 years.]

To live by this principle, one would ask, prior to any undertaking, how it will affect the land, water, air, animals, birds, plants and the future for our children seven generations into the future? How does it apply to you? It causes to to think about where you build a house, what kind of car you drive. if you drive?

Do you throw out or recycle? What kind of impact are you making on the earth?

What kind of message are you giving your children? We teach them by example.

We teach our **PRIORITIES** in how we spend our time and talent and money. Getting right down to it that means your calendar and your bank account. Where is God in your priorities? Where is God on your calendar? Where is God in your budget?

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.pbs.org/warrior/content/timeline/opendoor/roleOfChief.html>

We teach our children and our grandchildren what we truly believe and what we truly value, what is truly important in this life by how we live and the example we set.

The Jeremiah text has a message of love that transcends all human failures. The Holy Divine Energy of the Universe, which we can call "God" displays steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love and keep God's commandments. The commandment is to love. To love the earth, to love our children and our grandchildren enough to change how we live today, to love the sacred creation and creator with all of our life so that our children may experience it and theirs also.

We honor people today who have been living their faith in the UMC for over 50 years. We honor people today who have been in loving relationships for over 50 years. We have examples before us of love and commitment and faith. We have warnings and blessings before us.

What will be pass along to the 7th generation? We decide that at the voting booths in choosing leaders who look to the 7th generation. We decide that in our homes in how we speak to and about others. We decide that with our actions or inactions every single day.

The hope and good news is found in Jeremiah's words. God makes covenant with us. God's writing IS on our heart. God's covenant is that we CAN BE God's holy people. The covenant IS that we can experience God's presence and known that we are forgiven to live differently.

May we live and share this covenant in all we do and say, in every way we live, and in the world we create and leave for our children, God's children.

May it be so.