“Sour grapes, sensitive teeth, and new futures”
Ezekiel 18:1-4
June 23, 2013
Travis Collins

I’m a fan of the late Hank Williams Sr. He was a country music singer from L.A., Lower Alabama.

When I was in college I had a record player. Yes, a record player. Some of you remember those. And one of my favorite records was by Hank Williams Sr. Some of my favorite Hank Williams Sr. songs are, Caliga, the Wooden Indian. Hey, Good Lookin’. Whatcha got cookin’? How’s about cookin’ somethin’ up with me? Your Cheatin’ Heart, Your Cold, Cold Heart (the women in his life apparently had bad hearts).

I loved the songs of Hank Williams Sr.

His son, Bosephus, Hank Williams Jr., not so much. Junior has lived a pretty rowdy life, by the way. One of Hank Williams Jr.’s most popular songs was All My Rowdy Friends Are Comin’ Over Tonight. Hank Williams Sr. apparently also lived a pretty rough life. And when his son came along he recorded a song, the lyrics of which went like this:

When the doctor asked me,
“Son how’d you get in this condition?”
I said, “Hey Sawbones, I’m just carryin’ on
An old family tradition.

In other words, “My daddy was a mess, and I’m a mess, and I’m a mess because my daddy was a mess.”

That could have been the theme song of the ancient Israelite culture, it seems, when they were just a young nation. That idea wasn’t completely unfounded. It is reflected in two Bible verses back in Exodus and Numbers. Numbers 14:18, for example, reads, The LORD...punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.

So, we have something of a problem here. In the Ezekiel text that we read this morning, and the same in Jeremiah 31, which we did not read, God says through His word, “Don’t say, ‘My parents ate the bad grapes and my teeth are hurting’.” But in Exodus and Numbers, written eight hundred years earlier, we seem to be hearing the opposite. That’s worth a closer look.

It’s true that one’s choices, good or bad, have an impact on coming generations.

Our choices—everything from where we live to how we treat our families to whether or not we will be faithful Christians—shape the lives of generations to come. Every one of us ought to remember that. Our decisions have a big impact on our children, their children, and our grandchildren’s grandchildren.

I, as an example, am shaped by the fact that somebody, probably named O’Colean (or something like that) decided to leave Ireland generations ago. I am shaped by the fact that my father was terribly impatient. (I, also, tend to be impatient). And my life, my sons’ and my daughter’s life,
and my grandson’s life are what they are because, at about the age of forty, my father gave his heart to Jesus and was radically transformed. He was living a life akin to that of Hank Williams Jr. and his conversion had a multi-generational impact.

It’s helpful to understand our families of origin and the impact of our families of origin on how we are. However…each of us still is accountable and responsible for his or her own decisions.

It’s one thing to recognize that our history shapes our present. It’s another thing, a wrong thing, to assume our yesterdays determine our tomorrows.

Let’s talk for a moment about scripts.

I learned of this idea from Stephen Covey years ago. It’s a helpful way, I believe, of thinking about the generation-to-generation issues that I’m talking about here.

Here’s the script thing. An actor follows a script. An actress follows a script. They succeed or flop based largely on the quality of the script. Even an exceptional actor or actress cannot overcome the problem of a bad script.

They do not make decisions on their own about their characters or roles in the dramas. If the script says they are happy, they act happy. Nice…mean…violent…funny…no matter, the actors and actresses follow what the script says they are.

All of us have been handed a script. From our parents, our families of origin, we have been handed a script that said, “Here’s how we do things.” Sometimes that’s a great script. Sometimes the traditions, traits and values of families are admirable and worthy of carrying on. But some scripts aren’t wonderful. From bad attitudes to poor health habits to awful prejudices, sometimes what we inherit from our parents isn’t good.

Sometimes the script we are handed is the result of abuse—emotional or physical or even sexual abuse. The impact of such is deep and sometimes is passed on, unintentionally, from generation to generation. No one, for example, says “My parents abused me so I’m going to abuse my children,” but bad scripts tend to get handed down from generation to generation.

We have to learn to name those scripts, get them out in the open. Talk about them with siblings and even parents when possible. Some think, “If we don’t talk about it, it doesn’t exist.” That’s just self-deception. Name it when you need to. Such as…

“The men in our family have violent tempers and sometimes we hurt people…including our wives and kids.”

“Addiction runs in our family; let’s not kid ourselves.”

“We haven’t seen a good marriage modeled in our family for generations; we haven’t seen a good marriage up close so we don’t do well at marriage.”

If you’ve been handed a bad script, name it. But don’t pass it on. Articulate it, but don’t perpetuate it!

To say, “That’s how I was raised” is fine, even helpful. But to say, “That’s how I was raised so I can’t help myself” is unacceptable.
Of course sometimes that which is passed on is deeper than behavior. It can be a mental illness or a scar so deep that we can’t just “decide” our way out of it.

But, with the exception of mental illness and unusually deep scars…we can get new scripts. We can take on a new life; we do not have to be bound by our pasts. We do not have to live out the tendencies we inherited from our parents or picked up along the way. What a great thing you can do—to break the cycle. Unlike actors and actresses, we can re-write our scripts. We can re-invent our futures.

You can break the cycle! You can be the one! You can “re-script.” You don’t have to follow the script handed to you by your family.

But we have to assume responsibility for our lives.

That’s the point of this text this morning from Jeremiah 31. “It’s time to stop blaming your ancestors,” says Jeremiah. “It’s time to stop saying, ‘Well, I’m just paying for my parents’ sins. Everybody knows the parents eat bitter grapes and the children get the bad taste in their mouths.”

Every generation will get a little bit of a sour taste in their mouths because of the bitter grapes their parents ate. Most all of us have stuff to work through. All of us could psycho-analyze our parents. We could huddle up right now and go around the circles and all of us could say, “Well, yes, my parents did this wrong and that wrong.” And some of us would continue, “And I’m really messed up because of them!”

But the truth is that each of us is responsible and accountable for our own choices. And the truth that you are responsible and accountable for your own choices is not a harsh biblical teaching. On the contrary: It’s a message of great hope! This is liberating! You can re-script! You can change course, overcome your background, break bad family cycles and bless future generations!

I’m not talking about pulling yourself up by your bootstrap. In fact, I’m talking about acknowledging that you cannot. You cannot change your own heart.

So I’m not talking about you just deciding to change. I’m talking about you acknowledging the power of God’s Spirit to transform you and opening yourself up to that. Look at that gift you received just for being here today, the bookmark…

TEN BIBLICAL, SEQUENTIAL STEPS FROM TROUBLED LIFE TO TRANSFORMED LIFE *

I can’t handle my troubles on my own.

I recognize that God can.

I give up, for I’m not God.

I will examine myself.
I know I am responsible and accountable for my own choices.
I will live out my God-given freedom from that which hinders and entangles me.
I will go back and make things right.
When I fall, by God’s grace I will get up.
I will pray from now on that God will grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
I will now help others find their way.

I believe you can re-script, re-invent your future, if you will assume responsibility and accountability for your choices, and follow those transformative steps.

Ida lived next door to our church in Kentucky. Her life story would have made a great movie, except it might have seemed too far-fetched to be believable. Listening to her stories was like reading an action novel. They were from the Appalachian Mountains and were involved with the same kind of illegal industry that some of you have seen on the reality TV show, Moonshiners. Except theirs wasn’t a charming life; it was a violent life. Ida’s family had experienced more killings than I could keep up with.

Ida’s son, Paul, came to live near his mom when he was released from prison, and there I got to know him. Paul is a believer and has a new life. He has some issues with church he hasn’t overcome, so he doesn’t go to church much, or at least didn’t when I knew him. Yet I was impressed with the fact that, despite his history, he has gotten and kept his life together.

He was out in Ida’s yard one day when I stopped to talk to him. What he said to me that day was so good I immediately walked into my office and wrote it down:

I was in prison for twenty-seven years all total for violent crimes. Four of my brothers were shot to death and my father was shot to death when I was a boy. I’ve abused alcohol and drugs. I’m a recovering alcoholic now. It finally dawned on me, after twenty-seven years in prison, that I was the problem. It wasn't my world or my past. It was Paul.

Paul’s family history had a definite impact on the direction his life took. Some would say his violent crimes were inevitable. His fathers had eaten bitter grapes, and he suffered the consequences. His father’s sins were visited on his sons.

But Paul finally refused to play the role of a victim. He decided not to carry on the “family tradition.” Paul decided to take responsibility for his life. And he re-scripted. Paul’s past no longer determines his future.

You, too, can re-script. You can change course, overcome your background, break the bad family cycles, and bless future generations.

I don’t listen to country music on record players anymore. Nope. Now I listen on my iPod. And yesterday I was driving my pickup truck and, as with all Saturdays, I had the Sunday sermon on my mind. Kenny Chesney started singing, via the magic of compact disc, Some People Change…
She was born with her mother’s habit. Guess you can say it’s in her blood
She hates it that she’s gotta have it. She fills a glass up.
She’d love to kill that bottle but all she can think about is a better life,
a second chance, and everyone she’s letting down
She throws that bottle down

And the chorus says, Some people change.

...He was raised to think like his dad—narrow minded, full of hate.
On the road to nowhere fast till the grace of God got in the way.
Then he saw the light and hit his knees and cried and said a prayer,
Rose up a brand new man; left the old one right there

And the chorus says,

Don’t give up hope some people change
against all odds, against the grain...some people change

It’s true that your history shapes your present. But your yesterday does not determine your tomorrow. By God’s grace...some people change.

*Adapted from Alcoholics Anonymous’ Twelve Steps*