

Genesis 2:15-25

Love

Like all the great stories, all the ancient and important legends and myths, the creation stories in Genesis defy easy interpretations; they are profound and multi-layered, stories that hold up to the passage of time and the new interpretations of different ages: never simplistic, but always challenging our perceptions and assumptions. So that we are forced to admit we have never understood completely the biblical account of God creating the world and of God making the first man and the first woman. It is hard to find the myriad meanings of scripture- and especially scriptures like this: we don't read the original languages; we don't know how and when the earlier creation myths- from Egypt, Canaan, Babylon, Sumer- were passed along to the people who wrote the biblical accounts; we are children of our own culture, but if we are willing, perhaps we can open the book and learn something we have never seen before. And maybe this is the first thing to learn: that paradise was not perfect.

That isn't something we want to admit, God created for six days, and at the end of each one God saw that "it was good." But here God made the man, planted a garden and made trees to grow in it and put the man there. But now,

God sees the flaw in the plan, and says, "It is not good." Here is the man, alone, how did God not foresee that problem? Should we think of how God has always existed in community, as in our doctrine of "One God in Three Persons," thus, in eternal fellowship with himself; or should we think of God as the True God in a pantheon of gods? "Let us make man in our image," and we know that God was not alone. But the man was. It is a life made just for him, but there is no one, no thing to share it.

So God said, "I will make a helper fit for him," and took a rib from his side and made the woman out of it. No. That is not the story, it skips too many steps.

To find a companion for the man God first made every animal, every bird, made them out of the ground- everything that lives has the same source as do we.

Chapter one has God commanding the male and the female to "have dominion over every living thing," but here we learn these living things are our brothers and sisters- like us, creatures of the earth. And then God brought them all to the man, to see if one of these could be his true companion. We are struck by an odd sense of experimentation out of verses 19-20, because God didn't bring them just

so the man could give them names, they were made and brought to see if one of them might be the right one. But no. No helper fit for him.

Then after the hard work of naming all the beasts and birds, the man was sleepy. We should not think this as normal sleep, but rather the sleep of near-death- coma, trance, oblivion-so that when he wakes it's almost like resurrection. Because this is not a simple operation: God is making the woman, and God is *remaking* the man. The woman is made from the man's rib, that is the Hebrew word, but it's a word that also means the side of something, the side of a mountain, side of the tabernacle, the side or one-half of the man. I think we need to understand that God didn't just take a single small physical element from the man, but took part of the whole man.

All this time in the garden the man had been a real human. But how long was it before he felt lonely? How much longer then for God to make each animal, each bird, bring them one by one to the man, for the man to observe them, to play or work with them, and to name them? How long? And after all that, to be still alone. Fully human, a whole man, but he was incomplete. So God opens his side and takes a rib, or perhaps takes half of him- mind and flesh, blood and bone-

in order to make a second whole person, so that two together are complete. The man is something different now. Different because something has been taken out, but also different because what had been taken was replaced with relationship. And so, community is born. The true companion for the human is another human.

The man knows something has changed, not because of the scar in his side, but because he knows instinctively this is the right one for him- another person. Can you sense his joy, as God, the matchmaker, introduces her to him, "At last!" he says. And we, too, know something has changed: up to now, "the man" had been called by this word, *adam*, which means earth or ground; he is the human being made from the dust. But now there is another human, and so the man uses a word of relationship, he calls himself *ish*, man, and she is *ishshah*, woman. And therefore, the scripture tells us, the *ish* leaves his parents and clings to his *ishshah*, and they become one.

So, our passage begins with the man in the garden, a life with every need met, but "it is not good." What is the only thing that can overcome the "not good" things of our existence? Love. The man is a whole human, made just as

God wanted him to be, but he was without love. Now, a disclaimer: the word love isn't in the text. Love isn't used to describe human relationships until the story of Isaac, that tells of his love for Rebekah. When Eve gives birth to her first child, Cain, it isn't because they "made love," but the Bible says that Adam "knew" Eve. But we can see that strongest emotion, filling up the man when he meets the woman, something more powerful than anything he had known before. An innocent, perfect love, though the scripture strongly implies sexual love, as well: they were one flesh, they were both naked; their love and their sexuality were expressions of the joy of relationship, and answers to our human loneliness. The first story of creation ends with and finds its meaning in the Sabbath rest with God; the second story, in chapter 2, finds its meaning in the intimate fellowship of two persons together.

Love, the story demands that we understand it is love, that could never be truly given and received between the man and the animals, but only between equals and partners. The story is leading us to the later expressions in scripture of God's love, the commandments that bid us to love God, the words of the prophets that tell us the depth of God's love for his people, "I have loved you with

unending love.” Love that finds its greatest expression in the example of Jesus and in his words that demand of us love for our neighbors- and even, love for our enemies. We may sometimes think it is easier to avoid the command to love (especially these hard words), and all the trouble relationships can cause. Because we know it is not all joy and laughter, not just “naked and unashamed.” It is also working through anger, miscommunication, and selfishness, and living through hurt and loss. But love is the one thing that makes us complete- like the *ish* and his *ishshah*- the one thing where we find what we are, in the other person.

I didn't say anything about the tree of knowledge in the garden, we'll have to do that another time. I do want to say something about what scripture says the woman was. A “helper fit” for him, or in the KJV, a “helpmeet.” For a long time we have misunderstood, emphasized the “help” part, as though that is all she is for, she is supposed to live as subordinate to the man. The first creation story should immediately invalidate that interpretation. But here, too: the “meet” part of helpmeet means equal, and “fit” implies competence and readiness for companionship. The Hebrew word and its cognates are used to express

something alongside something else, so that we see the second person is someone who joins with the other and builds up and supports; but also, it means something different or opposite, so that she fills up and completes what is missing: another set of hands, a second viewpoint; she is even called in one translation, the “strength.” In no way is woman less than, or secondary to, man. And a culture or a faith that thinks so has missed the point of God’s creation, and God’s will for the world and for human relationships.

Love can only be given and received between equals, we understand that, don’t we? And we can be real human beings and real followers of the Lord who loves, only when we lift up others- friends and neighbors and enemies- to the place beside us, and love them as he has loved us. There we will find our joy and our purpose, as we create relationships and make companions of the people in the world around us, as we see others as truly part of ourselves.