

# 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

19<sup>th</sup> May 2019

Genesis 2:25-3:24

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*Original Blessing*

A few weeks ago, I got a phone call from Emily, our student intern last summer. She had just finished a meeting with the Holston Presbytery Committee on Preparation for Ministry, or CPM. I shared with you a couple of sermons ago about how writing out a personal statement of faith is a requirement of every minister in the PCUSA whenever we are seeking ordination or applying to a church. This was the meeting where Emily presented her statement of faith to be reviewed as part of her journey toward ordination.

I read what Emily wrote.

No surprise...it was articulate and theologically sound. And yet Emily's phone call wasn't to simply report that everything went off without a hitch. Rather she was calling to talk about why one committee member, a minister in our presbytery, voted to NOT approve her statement of faith. His reason was that nowhere in her statement did Emily mention the words 'sin' or 'atonement'. In his assessment, it could not be a statement of Christian faith without addressing the concepts of original sin and sacrificial atonement.

I share that, with Emi-

ly's permission, to illustrate just how deeply entrenched these ideas are in the way so many people understand Christianity. We talked about atonement theology a few weeks ago, and if you missed that one, I've posted all my manuscripts for this series on the church website. The 11th century bishop, Anselm of Canterbury, who proposed the idea of sacrificial atonement that has become so entrenched in Christianity, was trying to make the Bible and the death of Christ all fit together with a logical consistency.

The original sin part of Anselm's formula, the whole reason humanity required a sacrifice of a perfect Christ to set us right before God, the whole reason we are in this irredeemable mess to begin with all starts with Genesis 3 that we heard this morning.

Obviously Anselm and

the Bible both predated modern genetics by many hundreds of years, and yet in a fascinating story from Genesis 30, Jacob understood how to genetically engineer sheep to outwit his father-in-law Laban (Genesis 30:31-43), while Anselm reasoned that a walking, talking snake could imbue an entire created species with a genetic defect called sin that persisted throughout the entirety of the human race. In this case, it's not the Bible that's the problem so much as the interpreter.

But is the whole point of this story of Eden and the Serpent really to start off the Bible with the assertion that humankind is bad? Early Jewish readers of this story didn't interpret it in those kinds of moralistic terms. No Jew, including Jesus, ever heard of something called original sin. For them, Genesis 3 was a story

of human beings growing into self-awareness, learning to discern between good and evil, ceasing to be children dependent on a heavenly parent for everything, and instead having to grow up and assume self-responsibility. Eden wasn't originally read as a story about the fall of humanity in God's eyes; it was a parable about growing up.

More importantly, Genesis 3 wasn't intended to come along an undo Genesis 1, the first creation poem, in which God declared the creation of humanity to be very good. And that's a pretty significant distinction if we stop and think about everything else that is shaped by the presupposition that humankind is bad, is sinful, is fallen, and is unable to ever measure up in the eyes of God.

That whole theology is not shared by the other

Abrahamic traditions either. I was at an interfaith event last year talking with a Muslim about his understanding of sin, and of original sin in particular. He made the comment that, "we don't have that idea in Islam. Original sin is a distinctly Christian idea." So not only do we, as Christians, see something radically different in the story of Eden than our Jewish and Muslim siblings do, but we have taken this parable of growing and maturing as human beings and turned it into perhaps the most harmful and self-destructive theological idea in Christendom—that we human beings are, by default, bad.

Think for a minute about how destructive that ideology can be. How can we love our neighbor as we love ourselves if we're to believe our neighbor is bad and sinful, and by the way, so are

we. If humans are genetically and therefore inescapably bad and sinful, then we have eroded the foundations of trust and goodwill from among communities. We are less willing to open ourselves to welcoming a stranger if we believe that everyone is bad by default.

Original Sin also casts the whole idea of sin as a rift between us as individuals and God. There is no acknowledgement or emphasis on sin as something that harms my neighbor. But when Jesus is asked about sin, he always responds by focusing the conversation on how we love neighbor.

Reading Genesis 3 as the downfall of humanity has also been used to justify centuries of misogyny under the argument that the woman, Eve, was weak and succumbed to temptation. Obviously Adam, who himself caved to Eve's sug-

gestion, could not possibly be responsible for his own actions. Not only has Genesis 3 been used to justify misogyny, but it has, for centuries, been used to make sex the original sin and the root of all evil. (Never mind that 1 Timothy suggests instead that the love of money is the root of all evil.) Adam and Eve were apparently perfectly sinless until sex entered the garden, presumably an inevitability once they realized they were both naked.

The first verse in our reading this morning noted that Adam and Eve were naked, but they were not ashamed. Then they ate of the forbidden fruit, discovered they were naked, and suddenly became ashamed. Now, if 2 millennia of Christian art is to be believed, they were not ashamed because they didn't have a good tan, and obviously they wouldn't

have had to worry about tan lines. Nor did they become ashamed because they were having a bad hair day—I've yet to ever see a depiction of them in hats covering up some bed head. Nor were they ashamed because they had been hitting the desert table at the Eden buffet more than they should and sleeping through their morning workout at the gym. I'm basing this on the fact that I've never seen Adam trying to hide a beer belly. No. Once they realize they are naked, the only body part they choose to cover is their genitalia. That's the part of their bodies of which they are ashamed.

So the doctrine of original sin takes makes anything and everything having to do with sex bad and terrible and disappointing to God. So we end up with a celibate clergy class in the Roman church. We teach that the

only proper expression of sexuality is for procreation within a heterosexual marriage. And why is divorce sinful? It's because if you get remarried, you're now having sex with another person and that can't be permitted. Well, unless you're male and needed a son to carry on the family name, in which case polygamy was acceptable. Or if your brother died and it was your duty to impregnate your sister-in-law so she could give birth to a son to care for her. But otherwise, no sex unless you're trying to procreate. And that clearly sets the church against any kind of sexual relationship that does not have procreation as its goal, including any kind of same gender relationship.

But what if this story isn't about sex or sin at all, but rather, as our Jewish siblings interpret it, about shame and responsibility.

Adam and Eve were not ashamed, the story makes a point of reminding us. But then they do something that they were not supposed to do, and shame takes over. They first respond by hiding. They become secretive. They begin pointing fingers, looking for someone or something else to take the blame. And they even lie to God hoping to stay out of trouble. Does that sound to you at all like Adam and Eve are children who just got caught with their hands in the cookie jar?

Read like that, not as a history of sin, but as an invitation to grow and take responsibility for our actions, this suddenly becomes a story about how humanity was created good, and continues to have to capacity for good. Humanity is not inherently evil, or sinful, or broken. Creation has been groaning for billions of years

so that we might evolve. Creation continues to groan as we continue to evolve into all that we can be.

I am not suggesting that humanity is not capable of evil, or that we are not capable of sin, or that there are parts of us that are not broken. I'm not saying we are perfect. I am saying that we are incomplete and out of our incompleteness evil, sin and brokenness can emerge. But we are fearfully and wonderfully made, capable of great goodness and innately wired with a pull toward cooperation. We have a role to play in the ongoing evolution of our species. We have a role to play in determining how and what we evolve into. All that potential is entrusted to us.

So perhaps instead of original sin, we would do better to talk about original

blessing. For 13.8 billion years, our species has been blessed by choices of the universe that have resulted in the cosmic miracle of our very existence and a rich and blessed world in which we live. This is the original state into which we were born. The only original sin, the only sin against God, is our own refusal to say “Yes” and “Thank You” for that original blessing.

Amen.

