

## “The Sin Talk”

- The first draft of this sermon opened this a different line: it was, “A good day for sin”
  - But I quickly realized that perhaps such an opener would convey the wrong sentiment. Word choice in sermons is important.
  - Yet it is a good day to talk about sin, isn’t it? To this old Baptist, talking about sin feels like wearing an old, familiar pair of jeans.
  - Our readings, following the revised common lectionary for today, certainly lend themselves to that very thing
  - Opening with THE sin, the first sin, the one that started it all
  - And continuing with Jesus, who tells us about an unforgivable sin- one beyond forgiveness... blasphemy against the holy spirit... huh
  - What fun.
  - I see this Sunday as a pivot point along our calendar here at church
  - We have just come through the spring- Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and finally Pentecost and Trinity Sundays
  - We have learned all about what happened to Jesus and the disciples, and how we have become heirs to this great legacy- this Gospel
  - And now I think our scripture readings are asking us to go a little deeper into the why, and how, to grow in our faith by increasing understanding
  - To go more deeply into the nature of our relationship with God, with each other, and with what God is ultimately working toward
  - That means sin. That means redemption.
  - Ok, so let’s do this, have a little fun along the way, and what I hope will become a source of hope
    - And a sermon that might be a little more theological than I usually preach
  - Because we have a promise from God: a guarantee, that wherever there is sin,
    - There is also the possibility- no, the assurance- of grace and forgiveness.

- We begin today with Genesis, again looking back at the beginning to understand where we are now
  - And we have the story of The Fall- when Adam and Eve ate the fruit at the urging of the serpent, and sin entered the world
  - It is, for many theologians, most notably St. Augustine, the beginning of the Original Sin
  - The notion that humans beings, to some degree or another, are imperfect
  - I will tell you when I first became convinced of this... that human beings are born with the capacity for both good and evil
    - And will inevitably do both
  - It was raising toddlers. Yeah, I'm not kidding- it's funny, and absolutely true.
  - Anyone raising a toddler knows that with that little precious human is affection that can melt your heart
    - And selfishness that knows no bounds- they cannot see past themselves
  - And maybe it is simplistic, but that's how I see us all starting, and refining for the rest of our lives as we grow up
  - If you casually looked at the Wikipedia page for this, and did not tell your seminary professor you did it
  - You might read that this doctrine ranges in degree, that some believe we have a slight deficiency or tendency towards sin<sup>1</sup>
  - While others, probably raising toddlers at the time, suggest that we have a "total depravity or automatic guilt" that includes all humans.
  - To some degree or another, most theologians believe that humans can and will unavoidably mess up.
  - And God knows it. Loves us anyway.
  - It started with Adam and Eve
  - This legend, this passage about Adam and Eve serve to illustrate that to us and give us some truths I think
  - You all know by now I am not a Biblical literalist-
  - I think narrowing down the interpretation of Adam and Eve to simply an historical account is demeaning
  - It robs it of its truth and power
  - The Old Testament scholar Samuel Terrien says that <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Original\\_sin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Original_sin)

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Terrien, quoted by John Rollefson, *Feasting on the Word* Year B Volume 3, Proper 5, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) p. 98

- The “intention in the telling of this story was ‘simply to show the religious situation of humankind’, and to depict ‘the sin of hubris par excellence as a lust for self-deification.’”
- Adam and Eve are like toddlers, with the capacity to make their choice
- And they make the wrong one
- Two weeks ago I casually mentioned on Pentecost that I thought the original sin was either our tendency to scapegoat
  - Or our tendency worship idols, or ourselves
    - Or said another way our tendency to lose focus on God and give our focus on other things that can take God’s place
  - I’m not sure which one is original, because both are right here in the beginning
- Adam and Eve turning away from God and listening to that serpent
- And then blaming everything- including God- for the consequences
- It’s worth noting here that this passage has been used for many year to suggest that the genders behave in certain stereotypical ways
- And that is no longer helpful for you and me today
- The fact that Eve was female and Adam was male is not the point.
- The point is that we, humans, regardless of gender, often lose sight of God and focus on metaphorical snakes and fruit
- And we, humans, are excellent at justifying it to ourselves, and finding someone else to blame.
- It is not something that we should punish ourselves for, or get down on ourselves about
- It is simply to have an awareness that you and I do the same things that Adam and Eve did.
- And that’s why Adam and Eve are in the Bible- to help us know more about ourselves and our relationship to God and each other
- Now this sin had its consequences, and like all sin it damaged the relationship not only between Adam and Eve
- But their relationship to God, and the loss of paradise
- But notice that God, even in telling them about the consequences, notes that Adam and Eve’s offspring will survive this encounter with sin<sup>3</sup>
  - There is yet hope that the serpent, and all that it is symbolizing, may be overcome
- God is already working out the plan of redemption
- As Christians, we believe that plan culminates in Christ,

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<sup>3</sup> James O. Duke, *Feasting on the Word Year B Volume 3, Proper 5*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) p. 100

- And that the sin and death that was introduced in the legend of Adam and Eve finally loses its hold
- There is a way out of that old cycle
- We have talked about this in other sermons this spring-
- The sin cycle is laid bare in the crucifixion and death of Jesus, and then rendered insufficient to overcome God's love
- But before we get to the cross, we find Jesus here on the heels of his baptism in the Gospel of Mark
- And he is on fire! He is just getting started, too <sup>4</sup>
- Jesus' reputation is growing, no matter how hard he tries to keep it quiet, it spreads
- And things are heating up, getting a little out of hand, at least from his family's point of view- they have come to get him
- He's bringing some embarrassment, or maybe shame, on the family and they are worried about him
- The passage picks up and we find him trying to eat dinner after a long day, and unable to
- So Jesus is tired and hangry- remember that fully human piece that Deacon Tim mentioned last week?
- And the scribes accused him of being possessed by the devil
- And Jesus fires back, at least I am not blaspheming the Holy Spirit like some people...
- And it is an eternal sin, unforgivable, so that's worse
- Jesus' family tried to take him home, and he goes as far as to say they are not even his family, for his family is those who do God's will
- The accusations against Jesus are getting serious, even with the possibility of becoming deadly<sup>5</sup>
- But of special interest to our sermon about sin is this unforgivable one Jesus mentions
- I will tell you, I remember a sermon from my childhood specifically, that used this verse to scare us into believing.
- The thought that we can do something that would undo God's forgiveness was horrifying
- Is still horrifying.
- As a priest I have been asked about this on multiple occasions: what is it and how do I avoid it?

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper5b>

<sup>5</sup> Don E. Saliers, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B Volume 3, Pastoral Perspective, 116

- Now I said in the beginning that this sermon is finally one of hope and good news, so here it is:
  - If you are asking that question, you have nothing to worry about
  - Frankly, I do not think there is such a sin that can, in the eyes of eternity, stop God's love and grace, and God's redemptive plan
  - We simply do not have that much power
  - In the shorter term, perhaps the only thing that can, for a time, frustrate God's work in our lives is our own inability to admit we need it
  - Our own willful denial of our need for that forgiveness, our denial of our sin
  - Our denial that we still have that original sin of losing focus on God and scapegoating, and failing to see how it damages relationships to God and others
  - If we never admit that, then we never believe we need forgiveness
  - And we are trapped in our own mess- it's locked from the inside
  - And even that, I believe, will ultimately be overcome by God's love
  - However, we have a much greater opportunity if we can look in the mirror, see us as we are and as God sees us
  - That is, still sinful, but loved more
  - We can begin to mindfully and lovingly act towards ourselves and to others out of love
  - We can, if we dare to admit that we need to, become more compassionate and more understanding
  - And more convinced that justice, and peace, and equality are the only ways in which that can be achieved.
  - We can be reborn into a new way of being human- reborn of water and spirit, and into a new Kingdom
  - Not the one Adam and Eve built,
  - But the one God began building, Jesus worked to make possible, and the one the Holy Spirit still urges us to make.
- You may have noticed that last week, and indeed going forward, our general confession and absolution has returned to our service
  - It is tradition to skip it during Easter, as a reminder that we are forgiven already!
  - And tradition to have it there the other 44 Sundays of the year to remind us that we still need it
  - Still need to look at ourselves, without shame or hate, but to see just what God loves so much, and to see just how much potential we have with God

- To confess, and hear absolution, and to move forward trying again, not being trapped any longer
- This week, when we confess together, it's ok to smile a little
- Because it is only a reminder that nothing we can do will separate us from the love of God
- God is right there, waiting, hoping for a return,
- Wanting us to focus back on our creator and redeemer and to let go of the blame
- Yes, we all inherited something from our Biblical beginnings with Adam and Eve
- And we also are inheritors of God's promise that God has not given up, will not give up, and can work amazing things through us
- And sin- the sin talk- sin just becomes a measure of just how much grace there is
- Because no matter how much sin, God always has a little more grace.
- Because no matter how much sin, God always has a little more grace.

Amen.