

Sin and Free Will

Romans 7:15-25, Genesis 3 & 4

May 25, 2008

A man stood on a busy street corner in the heart of a city - plainly dressed - stern-faced. As people walked by on their way to eat or to an appointment, he periodically, rather solemnly, lifted his right arm and pointed at the nearest person and proclaimed loudly, "Guilty!"

Without changing the expression on his face, he would resume his mannequin type stance for a few moments and then again raise his right arm and point at another person and loudly yell, "Guilty!"

Those who experienced the man's strange behavior often stopped in their tracks and stared him. Some hesitated for a moment and sort of looked around hoping that he was pointing at someone else. Most would look at the man one more time and then they'd hurry away.

One man turned to his companion and asked, "But, how did he know?"

I thought about starting my sermon this morning that way – walking through the congregation, periodically pointing at one of you and then another all the while announcing, "Guilty!" "Guilty!" "Guilty!" "Guilty!"

Bet you're pretty glad I didn't do it, aren't you? I don't know about you, but I know it's true – I'm guilty. I'm guilty of struggling with right and wrong and of choosing wrong more times than I want publicly to admit – more times than I want you to know. I am a sinner. I sin.

Now, I'm not crazy about saying that. I would rather not say it. The truth of the matter is I've gone back and forth over the years as a Christian – as a human being – struggling with the tension I feel between understanding myself as a person created in the image of God – according to the Old Testament creation story, created as good – and this idea that as a human being I am sinful – that I am naturally sinful – that I am by nature, by heredity, a sinner. To be honest with you, there have been times when I have opted to emphasize the goodness of our humanness and chosen not to talk about us as sinful beings – chosen not to include the prayer of confession in the worship service.

Admittedly, part of that is my reaction to what I believe to be an overemphasis on our sinful nature by some of our faith. That is, I believe that some people are told too often they are evil – that they are bad – of no earthly good, and I don't think that contributes to forming us into the kind of humans God intends us to be. One of my favorite pictures and phrases is the one that has the face of a cute little baby on it and these words: "God don't make no junk!"

And yet, and yet, there is this reality in my life that I'm not always what I know I can be – that I'm not always what I should be – that I'm not always what God planned for me to be or wants me to be. St. Paul's words in the 7th chapter of Romans describe what I often feel like to a tee: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." (NIV, Romans 7:15)

I can identify with the way another preacher responded to a person who asked him where the Garden of Eden was located. He said: "I looked at him and said, 'The Garden of Eden was located at 803 Blue Street in Hope, Arkansas.'

He said that the man looked surprised by his response and finally said: “Arkansas? I thought the Garden of Eden was supposed to have been someplace in the Middle East.”

And this preacher said that he went on to say: “I don’t really know where the biblical Garden of Eden was located. But, I know that my Garden of Eden was on Blue Street in Hope, Arkansas. I was only a young boy (four or five years old) and I did something that I knew was wrong. My father usually put his change in a caddy on his dresser. I took a quarter without asking and went down to the store and bought myself some candy. As I ate the candy, shame overwhelmed me, guilt gripped at my heart, and sin became a reality for the first time in my life. My Garden of Eden was lost and I was embarrassed by my sinfulness. The lush, secure world of a little boy had evaporated and I headed home from the store aware that what I had done was wrong. Sin was no longer something only found in Bible stories. Sin was now a reality in my life.”¹

I understand preacher Robert Allen’s observation. My Garden of Eden was Frey’s Department Store in my hometown of Ottawa. I was shopping with my mom. I really don’t remember how old I was – old enough to know better – maybe 6 or 7. Yes, those were the days when even a 6 or 7 year old could walk around in a store without holding a mother’s hand without fear of something bad happening.

The candy area was on the second floor of the store and it was one of those kind that had a bunch of bins with a different candy in each one – single pieces that you told the clerk how much you wanted and they weighed it out for you. Well, there wasn’t a clerk behind the counter and it appeared that no one else was around either. And I rationalized that no one would really miss one little piece of candy and so I reached around the glass case and cautiously picked up a piece and put it in my mouth as I quickly moved away from the area.

I wasn’t caught – but the memory of what I did stuck with me for years. Whenever anyone talked about sinning it would pop into my mind. Now, I don’t want to leave you with the impression that it was the worse thing I ever did, but it was my Garden of Eden. And I’m pretty sure it wasn’t the first thing I ever did wrong. But, it was the trigger event – the event that made me aware that I sin – that I do wrong – that even when I know what is the right thing to do I do the wrong thing. Mind you, the experience is still in my memory bank and that is despite the fact that as a teenager, several years later, I intentionally went into Frey’s Department Store and slipped a nickel on the counter in an attempt to make restitution for the sin I had committed many years before. I believe I’ve been forgiven a long time ago, but the memory is still there and is in fact one of those tapes I’ve played when I’ve been tempted to do something else wrong over the years. Sometimes it helps me to do right, but not always.

So, here’s where we’re heading: the story of the Garden of Eden – the story of Adam and Eve and the snake – the story of Cain and Abel – they are stories of **our** lives. We are Adam and Eve. We are Cain and Abel.

Now, before I go any further with this thought, in fairness to my feminist creation introduction last week, let me offer you this rather chauvinistic one this week.

“As Adam and his sons, Cain and Abel, were walking one day, they passed the beautiful Garden of Eden. Just to pass by was an experience. Adam knew what was inside those beautiful gates – the lush fruit, the gorgeous flowers – it was a place of endless delight.

“An angel with a flaming sword was guarding the gate. Adam said, ‘Boys, take a good look. That’s where we lived before your mother ate us out of house and home.’”

The ancients were living their lives and sitting around philosophizing about life – pondering life and the question of people not always treating everyone as good as they deemed everyone ought to treat one another and they began to wonder why. I imagine the argument going something like this: “If everything God created is good – if the creation of God is understood to be good – then where did sin come from - how did this sin become a part of our world? How come we started hiding from the truth about ourselves? How come we started hiding from one another? How come we started hiding from God? How do we explain this existence of evil, of bad in our lives?”

What they determined was that at some point in every person’s life there comes the temptation to test the boundaries – the accepted norms – the rules – taught, handed down, given by parents – God the parent.

“Like Adam and Eve, we have all been confronted with the reality of our sins. We know what it is to feel guilty ... We know what it is to be caught off-base and to be embarrassed ... We know what it is to come up short of what we expect of ourselves ... We know what it is to do things that are wrong, not get caught, and then have to live with it, whatever the frustrations might be. Sin is not simply something from biblical times. Every last one of us is confronted each day with the reality of our sins. We are not sinners simply because Adam sinned. We were not born into sin. We are sinners, because, like Adam and Eve, we have rebelled in our own hearts and minds against God.”²

Now, if you’re trying to make a case for not being both a good person in the eyes of God and a sinner by listing the things you’re not guilty of – you know the really big ones against others and society – like murder, stealing, the Big Ten better known as the 10 Commandments – if that’s what you’re doing, then you’re working with a limited definition of sin. Hear the way some of the most widely accepted theologians have explained it:

Paul Tillich, a theologian whom I struggled to understand in my college days but whom I now appreciate even though I still struggle to understand what he is saying sometimes – Paul Tillich defined sin as “a state of things in which the holy and the secular are separated, struggling with each other and trying to conquer each other. It is the state in which God is not ‘all in all,’ the state in which God is ‘in addition to’ all other things.”³

In Frederick Buechner’s theological work Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, he notes: “‘Original Sin’ means we all originate out of a sinful world which taints us from the word go. We all tend to make ourselves the center of the universe, pushing away centrifugally from that center everything that seems to impede its freewheeling. More even than hunger, poverty, or disease, it is what Jesus said he came to save the world from.”⁴

In A Layman’s Guide to Protestant Theology there are these thoughts: “Sin occurs when (we are) out of harmony with the Source of (our) being and when (we) betray (our) highest values.”⁵

“Sin occurs when (we try) to live by (ourselves), isolated from the universe and (others). (We) live for (our) own selfish interest, but in so living (we) find that (we) are miserable. This misery of (ours) in (our) isolation is proof of (our) oneness with God. It can be overcome only when (we) lose (ourselves) in the service of God and (others).”⁶

Emil Brunner notes: “The essence of sin, requires a free decision. Sin is the result of (our) choice, not (our) heredity. (We are) created by God to live in harmony with God, but instead (we) choose to live a life centered

around (ourselves). (We) withdraw into (our) ‘I castle’ and can only be brought out when God comes to (us) with love, and winning (our) confidence, overcomes (our) anxiety and enables (us) to give (ourselves) away.”⁷

Again, it’s not any of the, what we might call, “obvious” vices, but rather it’s our pride when we think we are good enough the way we are and we point our fingers at the conditions we see in everyone else.

It’s not that we need to think of ourselves as these awful, depraved human beings hopelessly going through life committing atrocity upon atrocity. Rather, it’s this sensing that when I allow myself the time and the space to do so, it’s this pausing and simply saying “I’m sorry” and then naming the frailties of our spirit. For me, it’s that I’ve not lived up to my calling as a minister, as a Christian, as one who wants to be and claims to be in relationship with God. For me the lament usually goes something like: “I’m sorry God for not being as patient as I should have or could have with ...” “I’m sorry God for having this doubting attitude toward this person who shared with me an idea ...” “I’m sorry God for my lack of time with you.”

Admitting our human failings is not for the purpose of lading ourselves with guilt. Rather, it is to prepare us for the reconciling grace – the good news that despite our inability to be rid of sin in our lives we have a Savior who pays for whatever costs our sins deposit on the big book of life. We can’t earn our way into heaven – into God’s grace. Jesus covers our bill.

And so, in the Book of Discipline we read these words attributed to those congregations that merged to form the United Methodist Church. We former Methodists stated: “Original sin ... is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually.”⁸

We former EUBers stated it thus: “We believe man is fallen from righteousness and, apart from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, is destitute of holiness and inclined to evil. Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God. In his own strength, without divine grace, man cannot do good works pleasing and acceptable to God. We believe, however, man influenced and empowered by the Holy Spirit is responsible in freedom to exercise his will for good.”⁹

Somewhere in my years I once heard it put something like this: “Sin with a capital ‘S’ describes when there is distance between God and us. Sin with a small ‘s’ describes those things we do or think that puts distance between God and us – they are what make us aware that we are separated from God. Jesus is the bridge over the gulf between God and us. Jesus paid the price so that our relationship with God is made whole.

And so, what does this all mean for us. “Guilty!” “Guilty!” “Guilty!” “Forgiven!” “Forgiven!” “Forgiven!” Salvation cannot be attained on our own. We are in need of the saving grace Jesus purchased for us. We are forgiven – redeemed – saved. Guilt does not have to control our lives. Forgiven sinners: that’s what we are.

1. Robert L. Allen, "The Reality of Sin," Greatest Passages of the Bible (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Co., Inc., 1990), 1-55673-172-8.
2. Ibid.
3. Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology: Volume 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 218.
4. Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), pp. 88-89.
5. William Hordern, A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1968), p. vxi.
6. Ibid., p. 45.
7. Ibid., p. 124.
8. The Book of Discipline, p.
9. Ibid., p.