

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on October 10, 2021.

THE FIRST SIN

For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. ~ Genesis 3:5

This Sunday we continue our series on the core stories of the Bible. Most of the narratives that we will focus on over the course of these twelve months are positive. In Genesis one and two we have learned that God has created the world and pronounced it all good. Human beings were created in the likeness and image of God. Every human being has value in God's eyes. We also learned that we have been made with a built-in need for community. We are nurtured through all the various human relationships that make up our lives.

When we come to the third chapter of Genesis, we come to the first core story that is not so pretty. In this chapter we wrestle with the dark side of human nature. The story of Adam and Eve in the garden introduces the concept of sin and evil into the world. While human beings are created good, there is a flaw in human nature.

In late 2003 Amnesty International and the Associated Press reported on how troops of the US military had abused prisoners at Abu Ghraib. There were reports of all kinds of mistreatment of prisoners. This caused a great deal of shock and soul searching in the west. In an essay published in May of 2004, Theodore Dalrymple reflected on the reports in these words:

We all want to think that our boys are different, that they would never stoop to the vile practices of foreign despots, such as abuse of captives or the torture of prisoners. But this is to forget the meaning of Original Sin: That there is within each and every one of us a capacity for wrongdoing and evil, awaiting only an opportunity to assert itself. And chief among these opportunities is the possession of unbridled power over others.

He then ends his thought-provoking article with this paragraph:

Although I am a secularist, I believe (as a result of my experience) in the doctrine of Original Sin, or at least in the sense that evil lurks like a crouching beast in each and every one of us, waiting to pounce if restraints are removed. There is joy in committing evil, and none of us, whatever fine tradition we pride ourselves in belonging to, is immune to it.

This is the same lesson that we are taught in the third chapter of Genesis. We learn that human nature is not perfect. This chapter teaches us that the tendency to sin is part of our fallen human nature. You and I came into the world with a disability. We are born with what theologians have named Original Sin.

In the Western Church, the concept of Original Sin has often been taught in a very unappealing way. Many western theologians have followed the legal character of the Latin language. This has led many to interpret the doctrine to mean that every person is born

guilty. They have taught that babies come into this world guilty and bound for hell. Thus, they need baptism as soon as possible to gain forgiveness. I believe it is very hard for us to believe that a baby deserves to go to hell.

On top of this harsh understanding somehow the transmission of this Original Sin became entangled with procreation. Thus, sex came to be seen as being uniquely connected with Original Sin and thus somehow a lesser part of God's creation. For many people the idea of Original Sin seems to be an archaic product of a bygone era that hated the human body.

I do not believe that this understanding is the only way to interpret the third chapter of Genesis. For me, a much more helpful understanding of Original Sin comes to us from the Greek part of the early church. In their reflections on the Bible the Greek writers tended to view Original Sin as a wound inflicted on nature. This means we are born with a handicap that makes us turn from God's will. The primary symptom of this handicap is our tendency to sin.

This seemingly innate tendency to sin is explored most fully by Augustine. Augustine's thinking about human nature was clarified in a debate with a monk named Pelagius. Pelagius was a British Monk who held a rather positive view of human nature. Pelagius wrote these words:

Everything good and everything evil, in respect of which we are either worthy of praise or of blame, is done by us, not born with us. We are not born in our full development, but with a capacity for good and evil; we are begotten as well without virtue as with vice, and before our activity of our own personal will there is nothing in man but what God has in store in him.

I am sure these words sound reasonable and acceptable to most of us. They sound similar to John Locke the philosopher who shaped the thinking of the founders of our nation. We want to believe that human beings are born rather like an empty slate. We want to hope that human beings have the power to perfect themselves. We tend to think that evil is the result of ignorance and that proper education will overcome evil. We believe that if people just had the right information they will act in a proper civilized manner.

Yet when Augustine and others read the Bible, they found a different truth about human nature. The Scriptures do not leave us with a picture of complete innocence. In Genesis we read the story of Adam and Eve. They were living in complete harmony with God, nature and each other. God had set limits for them. He tells them that they can eat of all the trees of the Garden with the exception of one. The serpent in the story tells them that they would become like God if they ate of the tree, so they ate. This came to be called the fall. Humankind has fallen from innocence.

Augustine's understanding of Original Sin teaches us that we are all tainted by the fall. Paul tells us that in one (Adam), we all were condemned. This does not mean we follow the pattern of Adam and Eve. It does not mean that we are born innocent and then fall. The doctrine says that we are born with a disease called sin. We all have this disability. We come into this world with a tendency towards sin. We are born with a handicap to our wills. No matter how hard we may try, we cannot be perfect on our own.

Why did Augustine teach this truth about human nature? I believe that his interpretation of Scripture was shaped by his experience. Paul writes in our passage from Romans **“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”** Augustine experienced the truth of this passage in his own life. He knew how Original Sin warps our character. In his famous book which may have been the first autobiography of all time, he tells of an incident from when he was sixteen years old. He and some friends slipped into a pear orchard and stole some pears. His family had plenty of pears of better quality at home. Augustine and his friends went into the orchard to steal just for fun. In reflecting on this he wrote to God:

Behold; now let my heart tell you what it looked for there, that I should be evil without purpose and that there should be no cause for my evil, but evil itself. Foul was the evil, and I loved it.

When we reflect on our own lives, have we not had similar experiences? We know something is wrong and we do not want to do it and yet we still do it. We just cannot control our will. How often could we not say with Paul **I do not understand my own actions? For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.**

You and I are born with a tendency towards sin. Not all of us give in completely to sin. But if a person does not receive love, training and discipline they can grow ever more distorted by sin. If we are nurtured well some of the effects of this disability can be mitigated.

Now the doctrine of Original Sin is not a teaching from the Bible that excites us. It is not something that inspires hymn writers; it is not something we want to be reminded of. And it is not my purpose to depress us by reviewing our flawed humanity. Yet in light of all the events reported in the media every day, acts of violence, abuse, war and all the other acts of inhumanity, we are daily reminded of the truth of the reality of Original Sin. We need to build our common life on this understanding of human nature.

This doctrine teaches us that external controls are needed to contain human sinfulness. There has been in western culture from the time of Rousseau a school of thought that believes all constraints should be taken off of people in order for the goodness of humanity to come forth. Part of the message of the sixties was a rejection of the constraints of society. There have been movements that believed that if we could get rid of government, tradition and religion then peace would prevail.

But the truth of the matter is that human beings left to their own devices will sin and be destructive. If we are freed from all law and government that self-concern will have free reign as we learned from reading ***Lord of the Flies*** in middle school.

This doctrine can shape both our understanding of our common life and our personal spiritual life.

First it undergirds the building of our common life. The Doctrine of Original Sin teaches us that it is important to stand behind the rule of law. Law and government keep a check on the evil that we would do to one another. For all its shortcomings, government does help to keep the powerful from hurting and controlling all people.

The concept of original sin undergirds our form of government. The framers of our Constitution went to great lengths to diffuse power. The founders wanted to make certain that no person, faction or group could gain too much power. Power within our government is checked by the separation of powers. The Constitution limits the power of government itself. The intent is to play self-interests off each other to provide restraint on sinful human nature. As Madison famously wrote in the Federalist Papers:

If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.

Secondly the doctrine of Original Sin can also help us understand the nature and purpose of our personal spiritual lives. One of my favorite authors of fiction is Bernard Cornwell. One of his series tells the adventures of an English archer in the 1300's. In the second book of the series called *Vagabond*, Thomas is captured by his enemies and tortured. I do not want to describe all the agonies he endured, but in the course of his torture his hands and fingers are broken. When he is finally ransomed, he is turned over to his own army a broken man. It seems impossible for him ever to be an archer again. A doctor resets his bones and then gave him a string to pluck as a form of rehabilitation. After months of work he gains strength and finally he regains his ability to be an archer.

This is a paradigm of the Christian life. Every human person comes into this world wounded by Original Sin. This disability keeps us from being the man or woman God intends for us to be. But God does not leave us without hope. God has provided us with Jesus. He is the physician who tends our wounds, and, in his death, he offers power to overcome sin. In his resurrection he walks with us as we live a new life. Paul tells us, **Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.** All Christian practices from worship and prayer to acts of mercy are part of a rehab process. These practices help us to grow in our ability to overcome sin and become the person God intends for us to be. This can only happen when the grace of Christ is at work to make real transformation possible.

The third chapter of Genesis teaches us that each person has the disability we call sin. It affects every part of our lives. It causes difficulties in our relationships with God, and with others and with ourselves.

The good news of the Gospel is that sin is curable. God sent Jesus as the great physician to bring healing and wholeness. The choir will now sing an anthem that reflects the understanding that salvation means healing on many levels. The love of Jesus brings healing and wholeness to the human soul. This anthem includes this prayer:

**Lord, let your Spirit meet us here
To mend the body, mind and soul,
To disentangle peace from pain,
And make your broken people whole.**