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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-13
Romans 3:21-28
3rd in a series

“Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: Is Eve Really to Blame?”

I’ve been running my sermon titles for this series of sermons on the church sign – but when I pulled into the church last week I noticed there was a typo in this week’s title – the question “Is Eve Really to Blame?” was missing the question mark. So I told Tola, who changes the sign, “Hey, that’s not a statement of fact – It’s a question. And I don’t want people driving by on Clayton Road to get the wrong answer!”

So in case you’re wondering, let’s cut straight to the chase. Eve is not blame. Granted she took the first bite of the apple, but Adam was a willing participant. Both bear responsibility for what happened in the garden. I liken to what we may have heard from our parents growing up, or what we may tell our kids now – things like, “It doesn’t matter who was driving the car, you were in it!” Or: it doesn’t matter whose idea it was, you were there and went along with it! Not that those things were ever said to me; or to my children!

Last week I thought of another good title to this sermon, and it’s “Help, I’ve Fallen and I Can’t Get Up!” Remember those commercials? How many of you have heard this story referred to as “The Fall”? It’s a popular interpretation that most of us probably learned as kids or adults in Sunday School. The idea behind it is that everything was great until Eve took that apple from the serpent, and ever since sin has been injected into human history. Original sin, we call it. And there’s nothing we can do about it. We’re sinners of the worst kind. Born that way! And it’s all because Eve took that apple from the serpent. Stupid Eve. Why did she have to go and ruin all the fun?

The Calvinists, our ancestors, loved to talk about sin almost to the point that it was considered sinful. In the Westminster Confession, our founding document written in 1643, they said, “Our first parents, being seduced by the subtlety and temptation of Satan, sinned in eating the forbidden fruit . . .fell from their original

righteousness . . . became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all their faculties . . . from this original corruption, we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil.” Ouch. “Total depravity,” they called it. It made its way into the old General Confession that said, “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and done those things we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us.” No health. None. Sinners of the worst kind. And it’s all because of Eve. Dumb Eve. Why’d she have to go and eat that apple?

The thing is, this interpretation, while having some valid points – because let’s be honest since we’re among friends, we have all left undone those things we ought to have done, and done those things we ought not to have done – but the thing is when we read this story as “the fall”, it becomes history – something done in the past. Adam and Eve fell, not us. Why am I to blame for someone else’s actions? I don’t even like apples! So this whole business of sin becomes someone else’s fault, which means I don’t really bear any responsibility for what’s wrong in the world. Someone else does. Sure, I may be willing to own up to my faults. Maybe. But the big things? What do they have to do with me?

Now you might be thinking, “I don’t read the story that way.” Well, maybe not consciously, but subconsciously we all tend to think along these lines. It allows us to accept as normal the fact that 80% of African American children don’t read up to grade level, or that we won’t pay for quality education for every child. This is the way things are, we say. We can’t do anything about it. It’s always been that way. I’m just one person. How can I make a difference in a problem so big and systemic? Plus, it’s not my fault those schools are unaccredited. Let the people who live in those districts fix the problem. They created it.

Friends, this is what is called the sin of sloth, which is the absence or lack of care. OK, maybe we do care about those kids and schools, but those neighborhoods are dangerous – we don’t want to drive into them – what if something would happen to us? So we push the responsibility off on someone else. It’s the legislators’ problem; perhaps if we had different elected officials; yes, it’s their fault. They just don’t fund those schools enough.

In her book “Acedia and Me” (acedia is an older word for sloth), Kathleen Norris writes:

“If the church has made too much of the sin of pride, which seduces us into thinking too highly of ourselves, it has not made enough of the sin of sloth, which allows us to settle for being less than we can be, both as individuals and as a society . . . The Judeo-Christian story places it in Eden, where the primal sin involves refusing to take responsibility. Put on the spot, Adam tries to excuse himself by blaming Eve, and Eve blames the serpent. Neither cares where the buck stops, as long as it rests with someone else.”

This is the sin of sloth, of settling for less than we can and should be as individuals and as a society, and it has its roots in this story, this story of the Fall, which places the blame on someone else. “They fell, not me” we subconsciously tell ourselves. But friends, the Bible is no more a history book than it is a science book. This moment isn’t something that happened a long time ago and our job is to pass the buck of responsibility onto someone else. This story is alive and well. Sloth is real. And whether we want to acknowledge it or not, our role is to tend to the garden. To till it and keep it.

The story tells us: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” This is more than just God moving Adam from one place to another. This is a statement of purpose; a mission statement – to till and keep the garden. That’s why God made us. To be tillers and keepers.

This is very different than other creation stories of the ancient world, which depict humans as an after-thought, some by-product of creation. Genesis makes it clear that we were intended to be created and that we have a purpose; we are responsible for this garden. We have dominion over the garden, Genesis tells us. But not in the way we think we do; our purpose isn’t to exploit the garden or dominate the garden; our role is to till – which is best translated “to serve or be a slave of” in the original Hebrew, and “to keep” which in Hebrew means to “preserve or protect”. We are to serve and protect, or even to be a slave of.

Which doesn’t sound that appealing, does it? No wonder we pass the buck. No one wants to be a slave of anything. But then again, for those of you who garden, think about your own gardens. I bet it sometimes feels like you’re a slave to your garden, especially when the St. Louis summer heat settles in. I’ve seen many of our community gardeners at work this season, spending countless hours, tilling and keeping the garden, caring for it – weeding and watering, mulching and

planting. My guess is they sometimes feel like a slave to it. Wonder why they do it. This no leisurely pastime! But then the fruits of their labor start to appear. A bean there, a tomato here. A flower blossoms, a butterfly appears – it all begins to take shape. All that slaving away begins to show promise. People are fed with that food. Eco systems survive on those flowers and bees and butterflies. And in the process we become God's instruments caring for creation, the tillers and keepers.

And yet, even though this mission is compelling and should be all-consuming, we get distracted. In the midst of caring for the garden, we inevitably find fruit that we think looks good to eat. We meet interesting animals and strike up conversations and think they know what they're talking about, so we follow their advice instead of the Master Gardener's advice. We use our God-given intellect to rationalize doing things that aren't part of our mission, like eating apples and talking to snakes. And sometimes we settle for doing things others tell us to do, even though the Master Gardener tells us it's not a good idea.

That's why we confess our sins every week, because we get distracted, and do things we shouldn't do, and most importantly do things God didn't create us to do. Confessing is our way of owning up to it, and being responsible for our share of it.

But after that, we hear those wonderful words of forgiveness: You are a new creation! Everything old has passed away! We are forgiven!

By whom? Well the Master Gardener, of course. Why? Because God loves us, and cares for us, and created us, and wants us to be all we can be, and wants us to be tillers and keepers of God's love and mercy and grace.

Friends, the point of this story isn't to assign blame for something that happened thousands and thousands of years ago, if it even happened at all. The point is to find ourselves in the story, and own up to our part in it, and accept responsibility for what is wrong in this garden we inhabit, and fulfill our mission to be tillers and keepers, instruments of God's care and concern.

Because the Bible isn't a history book, or a science book, it's a theology book.

Amen.

