

Original Sin

By Keith E Gatling

Sermon for February 10, 2008

Lent 1 in Year A

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

You know, it's funny how your take on a story can change over the years, and for me, the story of the Garden of Eden is a classic example.

I remember as a kid being a little ticked at Adam and Eve for eating that fruit, thinking, "You idiots! We could've lived forever. But no, you had to go eat that fruit. Why couldn't you just listen?"

Later on, in my 20s and 30s, I was thinking more along the lines of how the whole setup wasn't quite cricket for poor Adam and Eve. After all, they'd never been lied to before, and had no concept of it. So when the serpent comes around and suggests that they might have misunderstood what God said, they weren't savvy enough to say that they'd wait until God came around again, and then double-check the story with him. Nah, they probably figured, "Hey, thanks for clearing that up for us," and then went over to that tree. And I kept wondering how on earth it was that God didn't know that the serpent was a sneaky little so-and-so who would eventually be up to no good.

And then once I hit this side of the hill, I got a totally different take on the story. Forget about being disobedient, forget about not being savvy enough to know when someone's trying to pull a fast one on them. Adam and Eve were just complete doofuses.

Think about it. They had one rule to follow. One rule: don't touch the tree over there. You can do anything else you want. Anything else you want, but don't touch that tree. So what did they do? They traded in one rule that they had to follow, and total freedom otherwise, for tons of them that they couldn't possibly keep straight.

Forget the fruit they ate from the tree. I want to know about that little weed at the edge of the garden that they were obviously smoking when they made that decision. Because quite frankly, in my mind, they had to be smoking something that didn't come with the Surgeon General's warning to decide to trade in almost total freedom for one more thing to add to their salad.

I mean really, think about it. Up until then there was no sin. Everything was cool. It was party time in the Garden. They could've done whatever they wanted, and it would've been party time for us too. Sure, certain things still weren't good ideas, but they weren't sins. They eventually would've figured out that if you hit Steve here on the head with a rock, he doesn't wake up, and that's not a good idea. But it wouldn't have been wrong.

Similarly, they might have eventually figured out that George gets a little upset when you go away with his wife for the

weekend. But again, it wouldn't have been wrong.

Here, unlike what we're taught now, ignorance of the law was an excuse.

And those doofuses screwed it up for the rest of us by eating that little fruit.

I'm telling you, they had to be smoking something.

So they chose the fruit, the party's over, and now we have sin. Gee, thanks.

Original Sin. We Lutherans don't talk about that much because it's a "Catholic thing." And we all knew what that meant, at least we thought we knew what it meant: sex.

But that ain't the case. And in fact, I read an excellent description many years ago, in a Catholic magazine, of what we all might agree that original sin is.

Original sin is what says to us that none of our hands are clean. None. Not even, as hard as it is for us to accept, the tiniest, newest, little baby. That's because, especially in today's world, we're all so interconnected that each thing we do has far-reaching implications for people we don't even know on the other side of the world. The concept of original sin says to us that we can never really choose between pure right and pure wrong, but only between the lesser of two evils or the better of two tainted choices.

Don't quite believe me here? Think about clothing made in sweatshops. We're all against it, and none of us would ever buy clothing that we knew was being made by people who weren't being paid enough and worked in horrible conditions. Right? So what do you do when you find out that a company's clothes are being made by sweatshop labor? You boycott them and buy your clothes from some other manufacturer.

But wait a minute. You're boycotting the company because they're not paying their workers enough. But now that there's a boycott going on, those workers aren't getting paid at all. Do you see the problem here? No matter what you do, you're still part of the problem, and your hands can never be clean.

And this is how that tiny little newborn is also part of the problem. Unless her family lives totally self-sufficiently on an island in the middle of nowhere, she has needs that somehow negatively impact people elsewhere on the planet.

The bad news is that no one's hands are clean. And yet, ironically, the good news is that no one's hands are clean. There's a lot of guilt going around these days, a lot of ethnic guilt in particular.

"Your group did this to my group!"

"Oh yeah? When?"

"Back in 1847."

"Well before that, your group did it to mine in 1729!"

"Yeah, but you people started it in 1682!"

Let's get over it already, and admit that none of our hands are clean, and that if you go back far enough, you'll find that we've all screwed each other over in one way or another, and it all works out even.

Many years ago, in one of my computer classes, the subject of Afrocentrism came up. I don't remember how it came up, lots of unusual things come up in my class, but it did, and I found myself having to explain it to a few students who had never heard of it.

I said, Afrocentrism is the idea that we invented everything and that the white people stole it all from us. Everything that's great in science and culture, we did first, and you guys copied without giving us credit. And in all of this, our crowning achievement

was Egypt. Forget the fact that most American blacks aren't even remotely related to any Egyptians (and the fact that Cleopatra was Greek), it's on the continent, it was wonderful, it was us, it was something for us to be proud of.

But there's a dirty little secret about Egypt that we don't want to talk about. You see, if we were Egypt, then we owned slaves.

In fact, we owned slaves that we treated so badly, that God had to rescue them!

Let's not even go there, shall we?

No one's hands are clean. And trying to wash them even more just gets them red, dry, chapped, and more susceptible to infection. Lady Macbeth could tell us a thing or two about that.

Let me say this again. No one's hands are clean, and we cannot wash our own hands, because trying to do so just makes the condition worse. Especially if, in trying to appear sinless (and notice I said "appear" and not "be"), we ignore the very real needs of our neighbor. Just think of the story of the good Samaritan, and how the two members of the religious establishment didn't stop to help because it would've made them ritually unclean.

No, the simple fact is that not only can we not make our own hands clean, and not only can we not keep them relatively clean, but much to the consternation of many of the more OCD Christians among us, we're often called on to roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty. Maybe this is why Martin Luther tells us to sin boldly.

Perhaps, instead, the point is to recognize that we all have dirty hands, and that there is someone who is willing to take us with those dirty hands.

In the reading from Romans, Paul says that just as many were made sinner's by one person's disobedience, many will be made righteous by one person's obedience.

Who is this person? Well, of course it's Jesus. The one who though being tempted by Satan in the wilderness, the same way that he tempted Adam and Eve in the garden, was obedient to God and what he knew had to be done. The one who, through his obedience while being tempted, broke Satan's hold on us.

What does this mean? Does this mean, as kid Keith might ask, that we're not gonna die after all? Um no. We're all still gonna physically die. After all, we have to make room for the new people, and let's face it, do you really want to watch 10,000 years of reruns of "I Love Lucy?"

Does it mean, as the present day Keith might ask, that the rules are gone and the party's back in session, as long as we don't go near that tree (and keeping away from that weed might be a good idea too)? Unfortunately, no.

So then what good is this news if neither of those two things are the case?

Well, there are two reasons why this is good news. The first, which I'm assuming you know, but which often bears repeating, is that it means that we have been declared acceptable to God, and this is done as a free gift. Not as something we have to earn by our works, but that is there for the taking - provided that we're willing to get up and take it. And this gift means that while we will all still surely die, we will be in God's presence when we do so.

But let's face it, as wonderful as that is in the long run, that's still pretty abstract for most of us. Especially if you're in the under-

30 crowd. What's the good news from this that we can use right here and now?

That news, to me, is just as great. The fact that Jesus makes us all righteous, and is willing to accept us with our dirty hands frees us from obsessing about the little details. It frees us from bondage to what is called "scrupulosity," which is the religious manifestation of obsessive-compulsive disorder. It is scrupulosity which makes some of us unable to see the good that we do because we can all too clearly see the one or two flaws in our efforts. It is scrupulosity which puts a person's mind into an endless loop when they consider the sweatshop example that I gave earlier. It is scrupulosity that makes us want to try to be sinless in and of ourselves, even though we know that it just can't be done.

We are freed to get a grip! We are freed to take a look at our good faith efforts and intentions, and weigh them favorably against some of the possibly impure motives and unjust results involved. We are free to accept the fact that there are no perfect solutions.

We are freed from worrying about original sin. This is especially important when you consider that worrying about it too much and trying to avoid it can be so paralyzing that no good gets done at all.

Most important, we are freed to get our hands dirty doing God's work in this world.

Now at this point a lot of us get nervous because we remember that in his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul clearly states that

we should avoid even the appearance of sin. This is one of the many cases where either Paul, being human, was wrong, or he was translated poorly. Jesus clearly did many things that drove the Pharisees and Sadducees crazy because he wasn't following the law as they understood it. I suspect that in saying to avoid even the appearance of sin, Paul was more concerned about avoiding scandal among the Romans than about doing God's will. Jesus isn't concerned so much with what it looks like as he is with what it is.

Now, does this mean that we can go and get our hands dirty on purpose just for the fun of it, knowing that we'll be accepted anyway? By no means! The gift is not there to be intentionally abused. But the gift may be innocently misunderstood, and perhaps a little innocent misunderstanding of the gift is the price that God is willing to pay. And maybe wanting to know too many of the details about what we can and can't do is what got us into this mess in the first place.

So, on this first Sunday in Lent, if you give up nothing else for the season, I'd like you to give up worrying about those incidental sins that you just can't avoid. I'd like you to give up being frozen in your decision making because there's no one clear, right choice. I want you to give up being a slave to original sin - because Jesus has freed us from it.

Our hands are dirty, but we are God's. Jesus says so.

Therefore, this is most certainly true!