

[Sermon Garden of Eden copy 2019]

GARDEN OF EDEN
SEPT 7/8, 2019

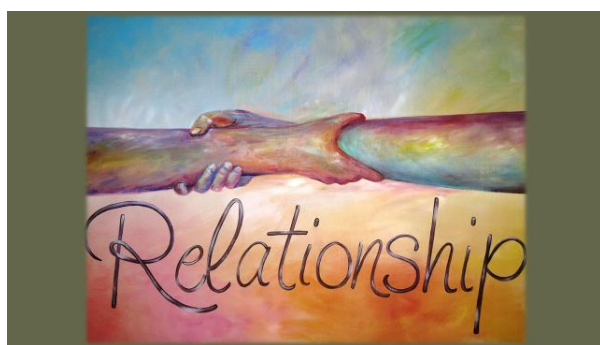
1ST MARSHALL
PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

The Garden of Eden

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's all about...



...the relationship.

This saying was a key precept of our faith-based community organizing ministry up in Anchorage, Alaska. A congregational listening team was formed to do 100 visits of congregational members. The goal was simply to listen those visited – to find out how they were doing individually and/or as a family, what their neighborhood was like, how their kids were doing in school, etc.

Then each week the visiting team would come together and share what they'd heard. No names were revealed, just information – both good and bad – about the people's experience of life.

We visitors were coached to trust that eventually an issue would arise, an issue of significance to a large number of our people, an issue we could address as a community of faith.

Well, the first concern that came through loud and clear was that we were living in a violent part of town – something that came as an incredible surprise to most of us. The Sand Lake area of Anchorage had for years enjoyed the reputation of being a quiet little part of the bigger city.

However, a search of the crime statistics for Anchorage soon proved that myth to be a lie.

In the category *Crimes Against People and Property*, our community was listed as the second most violent in the whole Anchorage bowl area. That information allowed us to focus our new questions to ask even as the Spirit revealed our issue to work on: to ask the city to provide a stronger police presence in our part of town.

It was a great experience, and we accomplished some wonderful things in that whole ministry, but...the greatest benefit that came from all that work was not the public accomplishments – but this: every person who visited members and neighbors had a bucketful of new relationships. People who had been strangers now greeted each other as friends – at church, in line at the movie theater, on the phone...truly, it was-and-is all about the relationship.

The same thing is true in our bible story for today. Where Genesis 1 describes creation from the perspective of our God who simply speaks and makes things happen, Genesis 2 describes God as One who is most definitely a hands-on creator.

And the theme of this next section of the bible is clear: it's all about the relationship...the relationship:

-between God and creation, between God and all creatures, between God and people,

-between man and woman, between people and the earth, between the people and the serpent,

-and how all those relationships change after our rebellion against God's Word. This story of the Garden – and the broader story of God's plan to undo the damage of the forbidden fruit – is all about...the relationship.

I always enjoy revisiting this event commonly referred to as The Fall – as in: humanity fell from innocence into sin...there's so much to notice, and ponder and, even, celebrate.

God forms the man, *adam*, from the ground, or *adamah*, then breathes into his nostrils the breath of life. Next God plants a garden, full of trees that are both pleasant to look at and good for food.



In the middle of the garden, God places the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...

Now if we were telling this story around the campfire on a starry night, this would be the place in the plot where people would shake their heads in acknowledgement that this is not going to have a Walt Disney ending. You can't have a tree of the knowledge of good and evil without something going wrong, right?

But let's start with the easy one. **What do you think was the Tree of Life?**

I think it's pretty self-explanatory – it is what it appears to be – to eat the fruit of that tree would allow a person to live much longer than we do now, right?

So, **what in the world is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?**

Discuss...

Next we're told that God took the man, put him in the garden, and gave him this command: *You may freely eat of every tree of the garden – except one. You shall not eat the fruit from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, for in the day that you eat of it, you will die...*

dm, dm, dmmmm...

Well after that warning, God then declares that it's not good for the man to be alone, so in an almost comedic fashion, God starts creating animals and showing them to Adam, as if one of those would be his partner. The man gives them all names, yet none of them fulfill the role of being a ***helper as a partner***. So God goes back to the drawing board and hatches a plan – he puts Adam to sleep, takes a rib, sews him up, and creates Eve – and Adam approves.

Interesting note: the Hebrew word for helper, *ezer*, is not an insignificant term. In fact, Psalm 54, v. 4 says, ***But surely, God is my ezer-helper, the Lord is the upholder of my life.***

Then the chapter concludes with those famous words:

²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

What a beautiful word picture of innocence, right? It's like when a little child has been bathed, and, in the process of getting dressed for bed, manages to escape and streak through the house full of company naked as a jaybird – laughing all the way.

They were naked and not ashamed... But again,

dm, dm, dmmmm... (again, we know that something bad is going to happen!)

Now in chapter 3 we get to the **crisis**. The serpent tempts the couple to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree. In essence, the beast says, *God gave you a lot of great stuff...but did you notice that the Lord kept the best for himself??*

So, with the temptation to be like God ringing in her ears, the woman took a bite, tossed a piece to the man who also ate...and truly, they became like God knowing good and evil...it's just that they weren't equipped to deal with that kind of knowledge while still maintaining their innocence.

This, says Martin Luther, is the most tragic moment of life – when the man and woman listen to the voice of the serpent who only wants to sow seeds of discontent, even as they ignore the voice of the God who created them in love, to love, and to be loved...

So what is this knowledge of Good and Evil?

Any ideas??

The goal of knowledge, I think, is being able to identify the issue, distinguish between good and bad consequences, and then **always** selecting the **best** thing to do in **any** situation **for the sake of the Gospel**. I don't believe it's about choosing between angels and demons, between heaven and hell, between fire and brimstone on the one hand vs. haloes and harps on the other.

But, for we who are on this side of the Fall, it doesn't quite work out that way. Instead, we're more likely to:

- tell a little lie to make us look better than to be honest and tell the truth .
- treat strangers with more patience than we do those closest to us.
- turn a blind eye to the needs of our neighbors as we spend extravagantly on ourselves.

It's about how challenging it is to pray, *Not my will, O Lord, but your will be done.*

And the worst part of the problem? It's not that we're challenged to distinguish between good and evil, but 1) we don't ALWAYS choose the good, and 2) we often **delight** in choosing the evil...

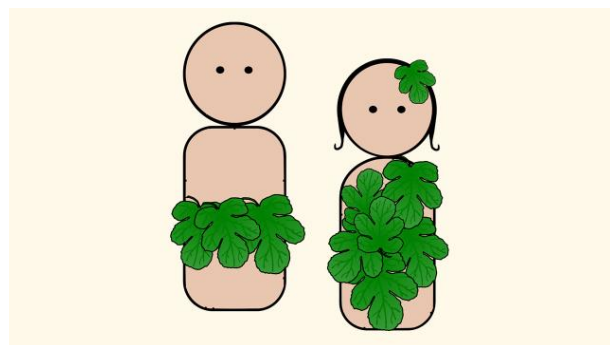
Now, if anyone wants to assign more guilt to Eve than to Adam for being the first to take a bite of the forbidden fruit— you should note this fact: God gave the warning about the TKGE to Adam alone. Chapter 2, verse 17. Eve wasn't even created until v. 22.

What that means is this: Eve / had to rely on her husband / to give her the details / of this very important message... Wives...do you see where I'm going with this?

I have often been accused – and rightfully so – of failing to completely communicate the details of a message that I'd been asked to pass on to Carolyn. If she were here, she would be nodding her head...AND rolling her eyes at the same time!

But the fact of the matter is, in the end it doesn't matter...because the deed is done, the die is cast, Elvis has left the building (whatever that means!!!).

The man and woman lose their innocence and succumb to that terrible feeling of vulnerability and shame, the very same burden that you and I carry around with us until the day we die. That first couple's attempted solution? They grab some fig leaves to cover their nakedness – and try to hide from the God who created them in love...



The next scene is priceless. Farmer God goes for a walk through the orchard and, not seeing the man and woman, calls out, *Where are you?* The man replies, *I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.* God says, *Who told you that you were naked???*

Isn't that beautiful? The twisted work of sin has already taken root. Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the serpent, and God must describe to them the consequences of their rebellion. The most poignant of which is that they are forced to leave the garden that God had planted for them. From that day until the world ends, we will forever be toiling to get what we need from life...



Yet, even in this sad exit from God's garden, the Lord provides the couple with two very important gifts. One is obvious, the other less so, but perhaps even more important than the first.

Chapter 3, v. 21 the Lord takes animal skins, and makes clothes for Adam and Eve, a significantly more durable solution than fig leaves...can I get an AMEN?

The second thing God does, at first looks much more like punishment than gift: after banishing the couple from the garden, the Lord assigns an angel to prevent anyone from having access to the tree of life...

Now, our folklore is riddled with stories about fountains of youth, secret formulas for extended, eternal life – all of which are proof of how inadequate we find our short span of life to be for all that we would like to experience. And yet...what might life look like if we were to discover the Tree of Life or a Fountain of Youth?

I've only read two books by Stephen King that I really like: The Stand and The Green Mile. In the second, King weaves a beautiful story about a southern prison and the guards who work on death row – which is nicknamed the green mile.

One day they receive an inmate – a very large African-American man named John Coffey. He's been sent to the green mile to be executed for allegedly killing two little girls.

His size and his reputation have the guards on high alert...but they soon realize that he's a gentle giant. And not only is he gentle, but they eventually discover that he has the gift of seeing and healing. He can see into a person's body and

soul. He can identify sickness and remove it by first taking into himself, and then eventually setting it free to where it's rendered harmless.

It's a gift...but...it's also taking its toll on John. When the guards discover that he did not murder those two girls, they start talking about how to get his conviction overturned. But he's dealt with so much pain and corruption in life that he's bone weary, spirit sore, and dog tired. If John refuses to cooperate, his execution will proceed and he will **get** to die...



One of the guards, a man named Paul Edgecome, has a severe bladder infection. One day John heals him of his condition, which is very good news...and yet, there's one significant side effect of John's healing gift that the guard only discovers many years later.

Paul, the narrator of the story, has lived way beyond his expectations, has, in fact, outlived all of his loved ones...and at 108 years old he wonders how much longer he will have to remain in life.

That puts a different spin on the human dream of finding the fountain of youth or the waters of life. Where all the rest of us – in varying degrees – wrestle with a **fear** of death, the character, Paul, finds himself almost wistfully longing for death.

The key, I believe, is for us to embrace the confidence that the Apostle Paul speaks of in Romans, chapter 14.

He writes,

⁷We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

This is a wonderful invitation for us to let go of our tight-fisted grip on the reins of our experience in life – and trust that there is One who is able to give us the true gift of life – life as a beloved child of the one, true God.

It's all about the relationship...

I told you before that our son, Mark, is a pilot for Delta. He tells the story of a flight he was on as a passenger. A woman sat down next to him, and looked very nervous – she was scared to death and explained that she hated flying so much that she hadn't flown in 30 years.

So Mark let her know that he was a pilot and told her that if anything happened, he would make sure that she was ok, and that she could ask him about kind of noises, procedures, anything. They talked for a while more and she clearly settled in, so after take-off he took a nap. When he woke up, his seat mate had bought him a meal and thanked him again for his willingness to help.

It's all about...the relationship.

One more quick flying story. We were going off on vacation with our daughter and son-in-law and their kids, and I got to sit next to our granddaughter Sophia who was maybe three years old at the time. When the plane started to move, Sophie grabbed my hand and in a loud voice declared, **We pway, Papa!** So...I prayed for the pilots, the flight attendants, the airplane and everybody on it, and said Amen, thinking I was done. She looked at me with those big brown eyes and said, with just a hint of disappointment, **More pway, Papa!!** as if I was trying to get out of something (which I was!!!).

However, I prayed until she was satisfied because...it's all about the relationship...

Our relationship with God, and our relationships with each other, unite us in a holy bond of together being the body of Christ in the world.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.