

Not Confined to History

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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I want you to listen with new ears to this first reading from Genesis. For centuries it's been used to say something about the nature of human beings. It's been used to say something about how we're born. But that's not in the text, and in the sermon, we're going to wrestle with what the text really says - and what we believe about humanity.

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

2:15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. **16** And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; **17** but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'

3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' **2** The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; **3** but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' **4** But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; **5** for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,^[a] knowing good and evil.' **6** So when the woman saw that the tree was good for

food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. **7** Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Matthew 4:1-11

4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. **2** He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. **3** The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' **4** But he answered, 'It is written,

“One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, **6** saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you”,
and “On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”

7 Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; **9** and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' **10** Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

“Worship the Lord your God,

and serve only him.”

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

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Words of welcome -

It's the first Sunday of Lent. This Lent we're starting in a different place from the typical Lent. We're starting from this declaration: God made us good.

God made all creation, all creatures, including every human being, good.

We're made in the image of God, good, and holy, and blessed.

Do we fall short sometimes? Yes.

Is God's grace here for us? Resoundingly, yes.

Celtic spirituality finds its center in creation; it recognizes nature as the first cathedral; it's an egalitarian tradition; it recognizes holiness in all people.

We're drawing, this Lent, from Celtic Christianity, which points to “the image of God at the heart of people”¹. And we're going all the way back to the 4th century, and all the way to the Celtic lands. We will practice the tradition of confession during this season - not for the purpose of guilt, but to find “the bridge over which we can walk to God again.”²

¹ John Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*, page 5.

² Danielle Shroyer, *Original Blessing*, page x.

And so we begin our worship.

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Is a human being born good or bad? Most of us, I'd guess, agree with 4th century Celtic teacher Pelagius on this - even though his answer got him excommunicated as a heretic. But before we turn to Pelagius, let's look at the garden and the wilderness, at Adam and Eve and Jesus, at the choices they made.

What do these two texts have in common, and where's the good news for today?

Right before each of these passages, we are told of belovedness and goodness.

God, in Genesis 1, looks at Their creation and says: this is good. God looks at human beings, made in Their image, and says, people are *very good*. That's what the Bible says about human beings. "God calls us good and beloved before we are anything else. Sin is not at the heart of our nature; blessing is. And that didn't stop being true because Adam and Eve ate fruit from the garden. In fact it has never stopped being true."³

And we come to the Gospel. Jesus is baptized just before he goes into the wilderness. At Jesus' baptism, God says in Matthew 3, this is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased.

So *before* either of these temptation stories, there is goodness and belovedness. That's good news.

³ Danielle Shroyer, *Original Blessing*, page xi.

[A second thing to notice in both of these texts is choice. A choice to follow God's instructions. A choice between power over and power for. In both of these texts there is a choice to be made. In every age, we - beloved, made for goodness - face choices. The choice of one person thousands of years ago does not define who we are today. But their choice may have something to show us. Temptations come and go - but we are not inherently bad.]

Danielle Shroyer looks at Genesis 3 in her book *Original Blessing; Putting Sin In Its Rightful Place* - which I highly recommend. I can't capture all of her ideas, but let me offer a couple of highlights.

She points out that the word 'fall' is no where in the text - and she points out the tenderness with which God engages with the man and woman, before and after they eat this forbidden fruit.⁴

"We can see the man Adam and the woman Eve as universal types, which means we see in them something that is also true about us...When we read Genesis 3, we do not have to say, "Oh yes, that's how I got to be like this. It's their fault." We can say, quite simply, "Oh yes, I am sometimes like that."⁵

Sometimes human beings mess up.

Even so, this text from Genesis has been used since Augustine of Hippo to justify the idea of original sin. Augustine and others taught "all that is born is sinful at its core and remains so until the grace of baptism puts a goodness in the soul."⁶ But Celtic teachers of the same era disagreed. They noted the goodness of creation and people as shown in Genesis.⁷ Current Celtic teacher John Philip Newell asks,

⁴ Shroyer, page 79

⁵ Shroyer, page 72

⁶ John Philip Newell, *One Food in Eden*, page 15

“If we recover this way of seeing, will we not begin to glimpse something of the profusion of holiness that is being born each instant?”⁸

Pelagius was a 4th century monk from Wales, and you might know him as a famous heretic, because Augustine - and the popes and emperors Augustine worked with - did not like Pelagius' teachings. The history books tend to say Pelagius didn't think human beings needed grace. But (according to John Philip Newell) Pelagius taught the need for grace: that grace is given to reconnect us to our nature, which is sacred and comes from God. Grace is needed to restore us to the essence of our being. ⁹

“Pelagius taught that it is not so much what you believe about Jesus that matters, [but]...becoming like Jesus, being compassionate.”¹⁰

Pelagius got into trouble for teaching women to read and interpret scripture, which was normal in the Celtic Church. *More on that next week.* And Pelagius got into real hot water for “his belief that when we look into the face of a new born, we are looking into the face of God freshly born among us.”¹¹ For Pelagius, humanity was more sacred than sinful.

Meanwhile, Augustine was preaching original sin. This is just a few decades after the Roman Empire became Christian - which is to say, Christianity became the religion of the empire - and that had everything to do with this theological contest. JP Newell says, “...the religion of empire was about to formalize a teaching that was

⁷ Ibid, pages 15-20

⁸ Ibid, pages 15-20

⁹ John Philip Newell, Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul, page 30

¹⁰ John Philip Newell, Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul, page 39

¹¹ John Philip Newell, Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul, page 32.

convenient for imperial power, enabling empire to relativize people's worth rather than reverence their dignity."¹²

What happened was predictable: Pelagius was excommunicated and sent back to the Celtic lands, where his teachings have woven in and out of Celtic Christian teachings through today. Empire's history books recorded him as a heretic; we might recognize him as an early Universalist or non-dualist.

Neither Pelagius, nor Danielle Shroyer, deny that people mess up. "All have sinned and fall short of God's glory. We can leave it at that....When it comes to sin, we can say quite simply that we're human, and humanity carries potential for both good and evil."¹³

John Philip Newell says that Celtic theology is about "reawakening what we know in the depths of our being, that the earth is sacred and that this sacredness is [also] at the heart of every human being...."¹⁴

And this is not confined to a history lesson, not an academic question. This is at the heart of faith, today.

This matters because what we believe about people's essential nature - the way we view the world, creation, and all people - matters for how we organize our world. As Danielle Shroyer points out, she is "...wary of the idea of a sin nature because it devalues humanity. I don't mean that we ought to put humanity on a pedestal, but there's a direct correlation between how we value something and how we treat it. If we see someone doing something wrong, original sin gives us an easy way

¹² John Philip Newell, Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul, page 33.

¹³ Shroyer, Page 28

¹⁴ John Philip Newell, Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul. page 1.

to categorize him as evil. And if we feel justified in calling someone evil, or even bad, we tend to use very different criteria in the way we treat them.”¹⁵

If our faith says - people are born bad - then we can say, they don't matter, they don't deserve dignity, or fair treatment. They're separate. They're other.

But if our faith says, everyone, every human being, is born good, is born as an image bearer of the divine, then we must also say: every human being is beloved. Deserving of dignity and fair treatment. We are not separate. We are not other.

Let's apply this to a parable.
In the parable of the Good Samaritan,

every single person who goes by on their way

Is God's beloved child

The priest,
And the samaritan,
The Levite,
And the robber,
The innkeeper,
And, of course, the injured man.

Beloved. Born good. Made in the image of God. Holy. Sacred.

¹⁵ Shroyer, [age 38

Standing in Burlington, outside the doors of ICE, this is perhaps the greatest faith claim I have: That every single person who goes by on their way to or from those doors

Is God's beloved child

The lawyers

The Lyft drivers

The union rep who sees my collar and stole and stops to chat

The security guard

The officer in the Tahoe without plates

The mother shepherding her two middle schoolers

The baby in the car seat

The woman just out on her walk

Beloved. Born good. Made in the image of God. Holy. Sacred.

“When we live by original blessing, we have no excuse to treat others poorly. We are called instead to see everyone as bearers of God's image, and therefore creatures of inherent worth and dignity. And it then becomes our responsibility to respect and uphold their dignity as well as our own.”¹⁶

In the words of Pelagius, everywhere, “narrow shafts of divine light pierce the veil that separates heaven from earth.”¹⁷

Amen.

¹⁶ Shroyer, page 41

¹⁷ As quoted by John Philip Newell, Listening for the Heartbeat of God, page 10.

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