

## **A Most Un-Original Sin**

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Genesis 2: 15-17; 3:1-13 (Read from The Tanakh, Jewish Publication Society Translation)

Matthew 7:1-5

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My old friend, Dan Aleshire, former President of the Association of Theological Schools, tells the story about a student preacher at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville. He had just arrived at a small congregation in Kentucky and decided he should start by preaching some safe sermons on sin. So, the first Sunday he preached about the sin of smoking. Afterward, the head deacon cornered him and said, "Son, you may not know it but we're farmers out here, and about half our cash crop is tobacco. I sure hope you'll go a little lighter on the smoking thing." The next Sunday the young preacher decided he would play it safe by preaching on the sin of drinking. Seems this young man was from Texas and he'd never met a Baptist in his life that didn't think alcohol was a demon. But, his head deacon caught up with him in the hall after church and said, "Now son, you remember what I said last week about tobacco being half our cash crop around here? Well, corn is the other half and that corn is sold to make Bourbon. You really need to think before you preach." This kid was terrified now. The third week, with some trepidation he climbed into the pulpit with a sermon he was sure would not misfire: the sin of betting on horses. There was no fourth week.

I think this young preacher might have benefited from our Gospel lesson this morning, from Matthew 7: 1-5. Let us listen for the Word of God.

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Last fall I realized that I was wasting a lot of energy judging. It wasn't just judging others the way we often think of it. I didn't have a grudge against tax collectors and sinners. Well, maybe tax collectors. My judging was subtle, and, I suspect, more dangerous to my soul. And I had even received formal training in it. I was schooled to be a professional critical thinker. I'd written on the importance of sharpening your "hermeneutic of suspicion."

The problem is that judging of any kind is hard to turn off. And even if it just starts with critically parsing every comment we read in a newspaper or hear on television or in a casual conversation, it has a way of becoming a habit. And, at its very worst, it takes us through the backdoor into the domain of that judgment which sets us up as arbiters of the heart, the motives and intentions of others.

Years ago, Dr. Jack Stotts, the President of Austin Seminary, made the observation that something very important had changed in our society when people who disagreed made the transition from, "I disagree with you. You're wrong," to "I disagree with you. You're evil." The habit of parsing the actions, thoughts and motives of others is such a pernicious habit, we hardly notice how criticism moves from judging behaviors of which we do not approve (a sometimes necessary activity) to judging the heart and motives of another (an activity that we just aren't qualified to do).

As I said, I realized last fall that I had grown weary of judging. I wanted to stop doing it. I think I felt a little of what Anne Lamott describes in our passage for reflection this week. "I felt like a veteran greyhound at the racetrack who finally figures out that she's been chasing mechanical bunnies: all that energy and it's not even a real rabbit."

During a week long silent retreat in mountains of North Carolina I made it my goal to work on my

tendency to judge. What I discovered was that the whole problem of judging others is connected with judging ourselves, and both are deeply related to something most of us avoid talking about: the ancient Christian teaching of Original Sin. I think, probably, we avoid this doctrine because of the ways it has been misinterpreted over the centuries.

The doctrine of original sin has a long and sad history. Just to cite one example: a recent article in the Economist news magazine said that in ancient times some Christian congregations thought babies were evil because they were receptacles of unbaptized unredeemed original sin.

Can you imagine a more pernicious belief? I cannot think of anything more perfect than babies, baptized or not, especially if they are my grandchildren.

Various interpretations of original sin have been used by one group to control and subjugate another group, and to excuse all sorts of bad behavior in the name of God. This teaching has such an awful history of use and abuse. That's why the doctrine of original sin makes such a great foil for people who want to use Christian faith as a piñata.

Even wonderful people of other faiths have used some version of the Christian doctrine of original sin as a foil against which to highlight the good of their own faith's teachings. Pema Chodron, a Buddhist teacher from whose writings I have learned a great deal, writes, in her excellent book, "When Things Fall Apart" "... our very ancient wounds ... come not from original sin but from a misunderstanding so old that we can no longer see it..."

Now here's the thing: Without realizing it, in Pem Chodron's attempt to rebut abuses of the doctrine of original sin, she has actually restated the truth at the heart of the doctrine. And, also without realizing what she has done, she has found a handle for us on the passage of Scripture from which many of the misunderstandings surrounding original sin originate, the passage we just read a moment ago from the book of Genesis.

Let's read just the first very small portion of our Genesis text again: Genesis 2: 15-17.

"The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.'"

"Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." This is God's command to Adam and Eve.

In preparing for this sermon, I searched various commentaries. Centuries of preachers and biblical scholars and theologians have opined about what manner of tree this might be and exactly what it meant to eat of it. For some reason, a vast company have decided that the forbidden tree has to do with sex. I can't figure out why there's so much preoccupation with sexuality around this text, unless some biblical scholars just have dirty minds, because there's nothing here at all about sex.

Some interpreters have lopped off part of the name of the tree, as did an editorial writer recently in the New York Times, calling it merely "The Tree of Knowledge," an omission that opens the door to the glorification of ignorance in the name of God. Nope, that's not what the B-I-B-L-E says. It says you must not eat of the tree of a specific kind of knowledge, the knowledge of good and evil.

Other people have had fits over whether the fruit is an apple or a pomegranate or whatever, and debates have raged about what sorts of fruits grew in the Fertile Crescent at the dawn of human civilization. One preacher, I suspect originally from Georgia, claimed the forbidden fruit must have been a peach, because, he thought it was more suggestive. All of this seems fruitless. (I'm sorry. I'm sorry. That was a terrible pun, but it was just hanging there to be picked!)

Okay. To come back to the Bible again, the biblical text is clear about what the forbidden tree is all about: "the knowledge of good and evil." Not, you notice, the philosophical conundrum of theodicy (as theologians call the problem of evil and suffering) but the simple knowledge of what is good and what is bad.

I have to wonder why in the history of interpretation we have performed such elaborate mental gymnastics in order to avoid what is right in front of us. Don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad because you just can't handle the consequences. Humans aren't equipped to judge between good and evil. We can't discern the truth when it comes to the human heart. Only God can deal with the fruit of this tree. Our attempts to judge sputter and backfire.

One of the aspects of this biblical text I find most interesting is this: the snake, "that shrewdest of all the wild beasts" who mixes truth and fiction so well in his temptation of Eve. He tells her: "God said you will die if you eat of that tree? No way. God's just afraid that if you eat that tree you'll be as smart as he is. He's fooling you. No way you'll die."

Eve took a good look at the tree and noticed that its fruit did look delicious and it was a delight to her eyes. So she said, "Why the heck not! Let's have some. And it tasted so good that she said Adam's gotta try this."

Today, I'm going to stop right there before we get into the first occurrence of the whole gender blame-game made popular by husbands and wives and lovers and friends and pet snakes for centuries. I'm going to stop right here to note something that I hope we can hang on to.

God's commandment not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not an arbitrary commandment to test blind obedience. Obedience, per se, was not the point of God's commandment. Nor was it a selfish act on God's part to keep to himself an ability he just didn't want to share with us. God's commandment not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was an act of pure grace. God knew that if we think we share God's ability to judge between good and evil, whether about ourselves or others, it poisons us. Ultimately, this fruit has the power to poison every relationship we have, including with ourselves.

Original sin, you see, is about believing that our meager comprehension of what is good and what is bad qualifies us to judge. It doesn't. Not even ourselves. Only God can handle the fruit of this tree. Only God can plumb the depths of the human heart and soul. Only God's comprehension of good and evil is sufficient to judge. And God's ultimate judgement upon us is grace.

Notice just one thing more about this passage. Notice Adam's reaction to God: "They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of the day (I just love that translation, don't you?); and the man and his wife hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. The Lord

God called out to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?' He replied, 'I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.'"

Right here in these passages we see it happen: Shame breaks into the Garden of Eden. Guilt arrives on the doorsteps of paradise.

Adam and Eve incompetently judge themselves no longer innocent. They see their nakedness and misjudge themselves completely. They confuse their new "fashion sense" with morality. Rather than trust God to judge them, they rushed to judge themselves. They were the same two people who had strolled through the garden the day before unashamed and naked as the day they were created. All that had changed was their mistaken belief that they knew the difference between good and bad.

The doctrine of original sin is an odd sort of teaching. It doesn't demand anything, it just describes. This ancient teaching of the church describes by asking questions: "Have you ever noticed that life is a jumble of incongruities, aches, joys, pains, heartbreaks, falls, rejoicing, failures and successes? Have you noticed how the good gets balled up with the bad so that even the good we do often has unexpectedly terrible consequences, and the bad we thought we had done turns out bringing blessings instead? And have you noticed that it is hard to figure out if a failure isn't success in disguise? And how the blame game never stop once it starts; its guilty turtles all the way down?"

The ancient teaching of original sin is like a sign that points to what my Buddhist friends call, the persistent unsatisfactoriness of existence. Our poor mythological great-grandparents, Adam and Eve (and the Adam and Eve within every one of us) are unwilling to receive life as it is and to live through its persistent unsatisfactoriness without trying to place the blame.

It is a soul-depleting business for mere mortals. God never intended us to go into the judging business. And, according to Jesus, God wants us to get out of it. "Judge not, lest you be judged." says Jesus. I think it is particularly significant that this story stands right at the beginning of the story of God and humanity. It sets the tone for everything that follows. My old friend Cliff Kirkpatrick, former Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church, often says, "We were never called to sit on the judgement bench, just to appear in the witness stand."

Amen.