

Sermon – “Just Say No?”

Sunday, March 5, 2017

Scripture: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

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This past Ash Wednesday many of us began our Lenten journey partaking of Holy Communion. In the “breaking of the bread” we remember the brokenness Christ embraced when he climbed the Tree of Life and in the “taking and eating” we say “Yes” to the new life Christ offers in the kingdom of heaven. As we continue our journey toward Holy Week, our first scripture reading in Genesis (2:15-17 and 3:1-7) takes us back to the Garden of Eden and to another “taking and eating.” When the first man and woman eat the fruit from the forbidden tree, they sought to become “like God.” Rather than gaining immortality, the consequences of this symbolic act were lost innocence and the facing of our mortality in the wilderness of life. Listen to the Word of God:

*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."*

*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, 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. Amen.*

We now turn to our second scripture reading, Matthew 4:1-11, which affirms that in Christ God chose to become “like man” embracing the limitations of mortality and joining us in the wilderness of life. The forty days of Lent commemorate the 40 days Christ spent in the wilderness preparing for his ministry. The fasting which strengthened Christ’s resolve also made him vulnerable. Listen to what the Spirit is saying:

*1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted 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, "God will command God's 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 splendor; 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 God.'" 11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

The title of the sermon “Just Say No”

The text: *“And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat...’” Genesis 2:17a*

Let us pray: Holy God, Give us the courage to embrace our humanity with all its limitations and the grace to live our wilderness life to the fullest even as you did in Christ. As we reflect together on the meaning of your Word, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

Forty is a symbolic number in our biblical stories. Forty days represents a very long time and forty years a generation or the completion of a life cycle. The forty years the Israelites spent in the wilderness before settling into their homeland was a time of testing, growing up, and maturing. Jesus’ forty-day wilderness experience in preparation for his ministry is understood as a time of testing, a rite of passage, and a coming into his own.

The year I turned forty, I received a gift from my mother-in-law, Ann Feely, who is an artist. When the heavy box arrived on our front porch I was curious as to what she would send me on this milestone birthday. After I worked my way through the many layers of paper in which it was wrapped, I found myself holding a marble sculpture of an apple with a stem, a leaf and a bite carefully chiseled out of one side. As I held this apple in the palm of my hands I began to sob. I was probably even more surprised at my response than Peter who offered his comfort by simply holding me. The tears rose like a fountain from the core of my being. Somehow this simple sculpture created by an Eve of one generation and passed on to an Eve of another held within it powerful symbolism from the biblical story that has shaped our identity and understanding of ourselves. This morning, I invite us to peel away some of the layers of meaning that have changed and developed for me over the years as I have grown.

As a child I understood this to be a story of simple disobedience. The rules were very clearly defined. “You may eat of all the trees in the garden except one.” Adam and Eve’s decision to disobey God was an act of defiance. Children accept that there are consequences when one breaks a rule so punishment is not unexpected. Over the years when teaching this story to younger children it has been helpful to explain that Adam and Eve leaving the garden is a permanent “time out.”

Reading the story from this perspective, the slogan made famous by the former First Lady Nancy Reagan is not only helpful, but appropriate. We need to teach our children to “just say no” because the truth is we cannot say “yes to life” until we have first learned to say “no” to that which detracts from the fullness of life. Studies in human development affirm the importance of “delayed gratification” in young children. Those who are able to wait, postpone, delay gratification live more accomplished, fulfilling lives as they mature and develop. We can never underestimate the importance of learning to “just say no.”

As a young woman studying theology the garden story became more complicated than simple disobedience. As theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer explores in his book Ethics, it was the knowledge gained in the eating that made the difference. When the eating was done, when the knowledge of good and evil was digested, instead of seeing God, this man and woman could only see themselves and their own possibilities. And here lies the paradox that the knowledge of good and evil was and is our undoing. Is not discerning what is good and evil...right and wrong at the core of Christian ethics?

Bonhoeffer says “no!” This ultimately becomes a self-centered approach to life and the world. It is all about me and my goodness. We become little gods believing we can make the world good rather than creatures recognizing the goodness of the One who is our Creator and who calls us into relationship and collaboration in caring for the world created good.

As a woman seeking a voice in the Church this story gained yet another dimension when I began to explore the meaning of Eve's role in the "taking and eating." It is no accident that the patriarchal society which gave birth to this ancient story understood the woman's role as so crucial. The serpent who seduced the woman was a symbol associated with the neighboring fertility religion of Baal. The life giving power of women's sexuality was considered dangerous, demanding strict obedience to the men that owned them. This ancient story served as a rational for the structure of a society in which women were dominated and controlled without a voice.

I continue to be amazed at the remnants of this thinking that are alive and well today. And so for me there was a lost innocence in the story as well as the characters. We cannot "just say no" to the fact that the politics of sexuality play a role in this ancient story of our faith, even as the politics of sexuality continue to play a role in our world today.

I would like to close with what seems to be at the heart of the struggle in this story and that is the difficulty Adam and Eve have accepting their mortality. In many ways this is a story about two people who "just say no" to a life with limitations. And yet part of the paradox for us as human beings, is that true freedom comes when we acknowledge and accept the confines of life. In his book *The Pastor as Minor Prophet*, Dr. Craig Barnes, President of Princeton Theological Seminary, highlights the significance that the tree of forbidden fruit was planted in the middle of the Garden of Eden. Every day Adam and Eve had to walk past this reminder that they were not created to have it all.

The Season of Lent is a time to acknowledge our mortality and our failure to accept limitations in the face of temptation. It is also a time to commemorate God's becoming mortal in Jesus Christ and Christ's refusal to be anything other than human in the midst of temptation. Christ was true to his humanity even as he hung on the Tree of Life and those who passed by yelled, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."

No, Christ did not turn the stones into bread, he did not throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, and he did not come down from the cross, not because he couldn't but because he chose to say "No." In Jesus Christ we have come face to face with our God and in this loving encounter we begin to understand what it means to be authentically human. By the grace of God, may we have the courage to embrace our humanity will all its limitations and say "Yes" to life in all its possibilities. Amen.