

Original Sin

The concept of original sin goes way back in our faith.

The idea that one guy, our proverbial first dad, could blow it, and wreck life for the rest of us, leaves some folks scratching their heads and others just laughing at the whole crazy idea.

And yet, we don't have to look far in this world to see that we as a human race are certainly infected with something that seems determined to keep us from being at peace with ourselves and one another.

Chest thumping and looking out for number one, driven by anxiety and fear of the unknown, certainly seems to be all the rage these days, at least if I can believe what I read in the fake news!

So what about this idea of original sin?

What might it be and how do we catch it?

You know, whether you're a believer in a literal Garden of Eden, or whether you see the Genesis story as a profound metaphor that brilliantly reflects on our origins and on our current situation, there is a ton of truth in what we hear from this first book in the Bible - a book that one distinguished scholar argues very persuasively was written not by a scabby old priest, but by a woman!

For in this story of our beginnings, I believe, is the very definition of our original sin, a sin that remains with us today, a sin that Jesus comes to take away....

Genesis tells us that the Original Sin infecting every single human being is **judging what is good and what is evil.**

That's because the forbidden tree is not, as many seem to say, the tree of the knowledge, as if God wants us to be dummies, it is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Now sit with that for a minute.

We've looked at this before, but it's never easy to look at it again, because what it's telling us is if you've ever decided what's good and what's evil, you are infected with Original Sin.

Okay, you're thinking, this time he's actually lost his mind, not just misplaced it!

Telling right from wrong is original sin?

We decide right from wrong 100 times a day, from stopping at red lights to not stealing candy to choosing who to vote for.

What's wrong with that????

And yet Genesis is as clear as day: telling good from evil gets us the boot from the Garden of Harmony.

Why?

Maybe because when people decide what's good and evil, there's no harmony.

Maybe because judging others leads to "us against them" mentalities, to nationalism and racism and sexism, which all lead to death: dead relationships, dead hopes, dead dreams.

Deciding what is good and who is evil puts every one of us in a place that only God is equipped to occupy.

That's why Jesus says let the weeds and wheat grow together, pushing back against our love affair with the specks in my neighbor's eye while ignoring the log in my own eye....

Not long ago, a caller asked two evangelical ministers on a radio show about Jesus' forbidding us to judge each other.

Their response amazed me.

They said that while it's true Jesus says such things, he obviously doesn't mean it, because Jesus himself judges people....therefore, they said, if Jesus judges others, so must we.

And I nearly gave birth to an elephant right there in traffic!

Of course Jesus judges!

He's the judge of heaven and earth.... but he judges with mercy and restoration and the wisdom of God....which is the whole point of why **we** are forbidden to judge... because we don't judge that way!

I can hear you thinking, this is nuts!

If we don't judge people, places and things, why, the world will go crazy!

How else can we stop wars and poverty and wrong-doing if we don't decide what is good and evil.

That's the answer Jesus comes to give us...

It begins by getting us to acknowledge that we are lousy at judging....just look at the wars and poverty and wrong-doing that runs rampant throughout our time and all of history...if our judgments worked, would we still have these things...?

And if I can start by at least recognizing that I am a lousy judge, maybe the next time I'm ready to wind up and throw some judgment at someone..... I can take a step back, and ask if that's really where I want to go....

And if we stick with it, we might even get to the place where we can begin to understand that our efforts to seize control of other folks, other situations, is a fools game.

And then, we might slowly work our way back to the place Jesus calls us, a place he endures those 40 days in the desert, a place he endures his whole life long....trusting that God will take care of who is right and what is wrong, which frees us up to be servants among the least of us, to be non-violent witnesses for peace in the world, without demonizing those who oppose us, to welcome the stranger and the widow, even if the powers-that-be seek to deport them....

It is into this kind of reflection that Lent invites us...

And Lent invites us to this place too, a place where we can finally and at long last forgive ourselves.

Psychologists long ago figured out that when people feel frightened or vulnerable, they often project onto others anger and certainty, and it is only after coming to grips with the underlying fear and vulnerability, that the true nature of the person can safely emerge, a person who is no longer angry or sure of everything, but a person at peace.

Lent gives us that chance to face who we are, and by the grace of God, to let go.

In the desert, Jesus waits patiently for food, trusting his needs will be met, in God's own time.

He rejects power and wealth, teaching us that God's kingdom of self-giving love cannot be bought with money.

Jesus allows us to see that God defines "good" as rejecting idols: whether the idol is eternal youth or financial security or military might.

For God, "worship" and "trust," mean exactly the same thing.

And God insists that we trust only him.

That's a scary thing.

If we trust God, what will happen to us?

After all, look what happens to Jesus!

And that is the other side of today's readings.

It is by enduring suffering that we become who we are meant to be.

It is by going to the dark places that we are able finally to see the bright light of God.

These 40 days of Lent, like Jesus' 40 days in the desert, invite us to go where we would rather not go, to confront our demons, and to finally surrender our need to say what is good and what is evil, to leave those judgments to God.

This first Sunday of Lent, to really hear the Good as God intends it, look to Jesus: to his work, his words, his life, his death.

Because yes indeed, look what happens to Jesus when he places all of his trust in God....

Rather than turning stone into bread, Jesus, in his trust, becomes the bread of life.

Rather than throwing himself off of the heights of the Temple, Jesus himself becomes the Temple of God.

And rather than becoming king of the world as the devil offers, in his trust, our Lord is raised from the dead, as you and I shall also be, and proclaimed king not just of the world but of all that is!

What we cannot do for ourselves, God does for us.

".....for just as one man's trespass condemned us all, so one man's faithful trust gives life for all. " Rom 5:19.

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