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Debunking Religion: Original Sin

Genesis 3:8-24

A few years ago, a licensed therapist who was part of my congregation asked if I could help her with a client who believed that she was going to hell. No matter how good she tried to be, she had been told from a young age that she was sinful at her very core and that eternal damnation was what she deserved.

That cruel belief was so ingrained that she was stuck. Although she was a wife, a mother, employed, and functioning, she couldn't seem to shake it.

You probably don't have that dramatic fear-but I venture to guess that inside even the best of us is a small voice that says bad things about us.

It's the name of a movie, entire libraries have been written about it, thousands of pieces of art try to depict it, songs are sung about it, millions feel badly about it... "original sin". Several different people suggested it as a topic for our debunking series. That's right, the award for greatest interest, the burning issue on our minds, and the top vote getter for a sermon is this: SIN.

Most of us learned early in our lives about the infamous sin of Adam & Eve. This story is a metaphor for how sin began in our world. You know the story... and just in case you need a refresher, it is printed in your bulletin.

The traditional reading of this story is that, in choosing to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the man and the woman sinned against God, and the punishment for this sin was death. In addition, all humanity somehow inherited this sin and we are under a curse given to Adam and Eve. The official name of this theology is Original Sin. Phil Rhea reminded me of a quote from Oscar Wilde about original sin when he quipped: "No sin is worth committing unless it is original!"

Because of this sinful condition, some Christians say that Jesus had to come as the sacrifice to save humanity from sin and death. I will be forth coming now and tell you that I completely reject the idea of original sin. And it's ugly stepsister, atonement theory, is another idea I cannot abide. As a minister, I have met and counseled far too many people who carry the guilt and shame of these beliefs deep inside. It takes years of therapy for some to learn that they were created in God's own image and blessed by God. Others never learn this truth. It is time for these beliefs to be exposed as the perversions of the Biblical story that they are. So, let me start today's debunking...

There are serious flaws in this interpretation of Genesis 3. First, the word “sin” is never used in the Hebrew of Genesis 2 or 3. The first time the word “sin” comes into the Bible is in Genesis 4 at the time of the first murder.

Secondly, death is not a punishment for their behavior. The first humans were created as mortals – they were always going to die. What the scripture says is that, with the new-found knowledge of good and evil, the couple is in danger of having to live forever with the awareness of their mistakes and those of others. God sends them out of the garden to protect them from the danger of immortality. Death is not a punishment; it is a gift of grace.

Third, the scripture says that people are now like God in that they know good and evil, and have a responsibility of making choices and dealing with the consequences. According to Genesis, humans are the only part of creation made in God’s image and given a conscience. Humans have a special role to play in the world, and God expects humanity to live up to this potential.

Several millennia later, Augustine cobbled together the idea of "original sin". Historians and theologians rightly assess that Augustine did this out of his own sense of guilt and self-understanding. Part of Augustine's reason for going into the priesthood was to seek absolution for his early uninhibited sex life. So, it's not surprising that he would connect sex as the primal transmission of sin from one generation to the next.

Instead, this story - if one listens with an open mind - is about something entirely different. One theme in the story starts with a tree named "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil". That's a long name for a tree. Surely the storyteller could have been more succinct... something more like Oak, Elm or even "an apple tree" would have been sufficient.

But the tree's name is best translated "knowledge", or more specifically, "knowledge with discernment" - the knowledge that one needs to make decisions between right and wrong. This is a story of the coming-to-age of the first humans.

The musical "Children of Eden" depicts the story of Genesis 3 with a poignant song shared between an older Adam (whose children have grown and experienced the pain of life) and Adam's Creator, God. I've asked Paul to sing it for us - and the words are on the insert in your bulletin - because I believe it demonstrates the real significance of the story in Genesis 3. **

Eric and I are in the transition of parenthood. Our children are all young adults. To heck with all the people who say that growing up is hard. Harder yet is being the parent of someone who is growing up.

* When do we speak and when do we stay silent?

* Is it our place to intervene when we see a problem but haven't been asked for our wisdom?

* What good is it to have all this experience and inside knowledge only to be on the sidelines?

The coming-of-age process is excruciating. Genesis 3 is a story to explain the painful process of gleaning knowledge, finding out what is good and what is not, experiencing pain and loss.

Here's something else. Have you ever noticed God's part in the story? God says, "Do not eat the fruit of the tree of good and evil. If you do, you will surely die". And the children eat it. What happens? Do they die? No. God finds them and has the opportunity to strike them dead. Instead, God's love intervenes. "Ok, you don't have to die", says God, "but you have to leave the garden". You can hear the anger and pain in the voice attributed to God. All of a sudden, however, God seems to see that they are naked and have only fig leaves to cover themselves. This really wasn't of God's concern anymore. After all, they had taken it upon themselves to show their independence. But in a loving gesture, God offers one more thing. "Before you go," God says, "Let me take you shopping for some new clothes." Sak's Fifth Avenue? Gucci? Prada?

I've known some people like that. Forgiving when it is not deserved. It reminds me of the story of the prodigal son whose father welcomes him back home when he only deserves his father's wrath.

Could it be that we have been misled? That Genesis 3 is not so much about sin as it is about God's grace? If you have a little voice inside your head telling you that you are –at your core- sinful...it is time to tell your inner child how beautiful and blessed you are- you are an original blessing made in the image of God. I'm glad to report that the woman who came to see me learned that she, too, was loved and blessed.

To spend energy concentrating on how sinful and hopeless human beings are is to fail to appreciate the incredible good that human beings are capable of - wonders of science and symphonies, art and generosity, the gentle touch, the healing word. Evil is not hard to find in human life, but neither is the ultimate and defining characteristic of humanity. We can spend an inordinate amount of time dwelling upon and struggling with the mystery of evil and sin, but the real mystery is where goodness comes from. It should come as no surprise that irrational urges toward violence and evil are part of our primal being. But the true wonder is in human beings showing signs of transcending those patterns with mercy, compassion, and forgiveness."

Living the Questions, session 11

Genesis 3 needs to be given a new life - or restored to its previous life. This is a story of the spiritual awakening of the first humans and the pain of knowing about good and evil. This is also a story of God's incredible love and mercy for humanity. That's what is original - not the sin - the love and grace of God!