

**"The Way of Jesus: Devotion"****A Sermon for University Congregational Church****Sunday, June 27, 2021****Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson**

## Traditional Word

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." Genesis 2:15-17

## Contemporary Word

"To journey for the sake of saving our own lives is little by little to cease to live in any sense that really matters, even to ourselves, because it is only by journeying for the world's sake - even when the world bores and sickens and scares you half to death - that little by little we start to come alive." — Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey: A Memoir of Early Days*

**"The Way of Jesus: Devotion"**

Last week, our guest preacher, Keith Williamson, shared how as Christianity grew and flourished, particularly in the early medieval period, it was assisted by the physical architecture of its buildings: its churches, cathedrals, and basilicas. The way these buildings "looked" told a story. And the story for our medieval forebears was basically this: Once, humankind lived in a garden filled with splendor. The days were spent in leisure and the nights spent contemplating and worship the God who

had built this paradise, this Garden of Eden. The classic story continues: Humanity disobeyed God's simple rules and was cast out of the garden to be forever exiled from its splendor. So, as Diana Butler Bass so eloquently explains in her book on the Way of Jesus: "Medieval spirituality was marked by its sense of exile and longing to return as Christians sought holy reunion with God in this life with hope for the next." To this way of thinking, our entire life is a journey, a quest, for us to somehow return to Eden.

Let's listen to the story as our Jewish mothers tell it: "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." Genesis 2:15-17 But then just a few lines later, we hear God's punishment for their disobedience. 22 Then the Lord God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"— 23 therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. 24 He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden, he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life. Genesis 3:22-24 This story is often referred to as "The Original Sin," but the word sin is not used in the Hebrew Bible for this particular act of disobedience. There's room for interpretation here.

For my purposes this morning, though, I would like to point out that Adam and Eve's eviction was a blessing. When they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the serpent said that they would..." 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." Adam and Eve had become as gods, and the Holy One was left with a choice—allow them to remain in Eden—as gods. They were forever cursed with both their knowledge AND their immortality. Instead, God took pity on his creation and expelled them into the wilderness where they would come to know pain and eventually death. God spared Adam and Eve the living misery of immortality and provide a frame to their lives—a way to make meaning by introducing to them the concept of an end. Their deaths.

And thus began Adam and Eve's long journey into the wilderness—humanity's journey through the ages. Our lives take on similar journeys, do they not? We're born into the bliss of infancy, or at least I can claim that since I don't remember it. But the metaphor works—we leave the safe embrace of our mothers, our personal Garden of Eden, and are sent out into the world—the wilderness. And what do we find when we leave the Garden? Other people. Other people's problems. Other people's projects. Other people's wars. When the leaders of the tribe look around, all they see are people who have forsaken the ways of the Holy One.

Diane Butler Bass writes of this realization: "Absent God, the world devolved into a tragedy of pride, violence, and sin. Thus began the long human quest to regain paradise, to somehow find a way back to God's presence." We are on a

journey—all of us—we are trying to find our way back to the Garden. We are trying to return home. We can add "home" to one more descriptor for the church. For some of us, the church is home. And if the church is home, then it needs a house to live in, no? And this community of friends has been living in this building since the late 1980s. We have taken our theological claims of being a family of God and extended this claim into the architecture of our building—complete with the steeple—that design element that looks like it is actually touching heaven—the angles of the steeple disappear into the sky. The design of this church tells people that something sacred happens here. We're stating that this is a place, a spot on this earth, where we've created a thin place—a place where we might, hopefully, on occasion, or maybe every Sunday, but where we might catch a glimpse of the Holy. Where we might hear an angel's voice. A place where God might touch our hearts and change us into what we're supposed to be. A place to show our immense love of the Holy One through our extra-ordinary outreach to our neighbor.

As the medieval church expanded into real estate, other theological issues were popping up: such as what to do about visual depictions of the Holy One. We've been arguing for a very long time about how to depict God visually. In the year 600, Bishop Serenus of Marseilles ordered every picture in every church in the city to be destroyed as he felt that "images somehow cheapened the sacred words of scripture." Interestingly, Pope Gregory was pretty unhappy with the bishop's actions—we have this chastising letter that survives that reads like this: "It is one thing to worship a painting, and quite another to learn from a scene represented in a painting what ought to be worshipped. For what writing provides for people who

read, paintings provide for the illiterate who look at them, since these unlearned people see what they must imitate; paintings are books for those who do not know their letters, so that they take the place of books especially specifically among pagans." (102)

There's an aspect to medieval life that we tend to take for granted. Death surrounded them. In our world today, we have hospitals and hospices and retreats-- numerous other places where we can hide all of our deaths. We close the door, and we are hush-hush; we gingerly dance around the subject with euphemisms and code words—this was not so in the medieval age. Diana Butler Bass spends the last portion of this chapter focused on dying well and what this might mean for us as modern followers of Jesus. Butler Bass introduces us to Jean Gerson, a professor in Paris who wrote a mystical theology of dying that was popular among medieval clergy. A shortened form was published publically and to wide acclaim.

For Jean Gerson, a professor during some of the darkest of the dark ages, the end of the 1300s and the beginning of the 1400s., dying well means that we embrace both lament and hope—we've arrived at the end of our lives with our projects, significant and trivial, completed and our spirits filled with the love we've spent a lifetime collecting. Medieval professor Gerson outlined six actions one should take in preparation for their death. These are:

A person should believe "what a good Christian is obliged to believe."

He or she should acknowledge sin

The dying person should swear to amend their ways if they recover

The dying person must forgive those who have offended and seek forgiveness from those they have offended

Restitution must be made

The dying person must acknowledge that Christ died for them

Those were the six primary points for dying well in the medieval age. And don't forget, you had plenty of time to do all of that because your deathbed was a protracted thing—hopefully. This book on Dying Well reminds us that while "the death of the body is most terrible, it is no way comparable to the death of the soul." (118). In medieval days we were able to take the time afforded us by a long illness to get our affairs in order and make our "peace with God." Therefore, death is not to be feared but to be welcomed—it is the soul's return to God, and we should celebrate that. But it also means that the soul is no longer in our presence—and that is why we mourn. We miss the physical presence of our loved ones. We miss the hugs, the touches, the smiles, the voice—all of the attributes that made them our loved-one. It's hard to celebrate the soul's return to its source when that means giving them up. But the promise of hope in the gospel message tells us that we do indeed return to God, the source of all life—so there's hope in that for all of us.

The word passion means to suffer—so when we talk about Christ's passion, we're talking about the physical misery inflicted upon Jesus by the state. His suffering—his torture—at the hands of the Romans. When we experience compassion, we are suffering with someone. Compassion is an act of empathy because we are feeling the suffering with the person. We feel their agony—their loss—their

sense of defeat. Just one more reason that church is good for us—it reminds us of the suffering of others. Church can make us more compassionate because it introduces us to stories of suffering that we can relate to and learn from.

It is interesting to note that Professor Gerson's six steps for the dying mirror almost perfectly the twelve steps in a twelve-step recovery program. Addicts often talk of facing their deaths (through their use of alcohol or drugs) and then move through the steps of remorse, repentance, and forgiveness, complete with all of the temptations and spiritual victories they will face along the way. Every day addicts "die" to their old way of life and find a new life beyond the one they knew. Perhaps this idea of dying well can be applied not only to the terminal end of our life but also to the myriad other things, people, and places we "die" to throughout our lives. The behaviors we end—the relationships that die-off. Every day we encounter a bit of death.

Gary Cox, University Congregational Church's second Senior Minister, gave us a model for how we might complete our journeys together. Gary was diagnosed with kidney cancer in April of 2005 and would fight the disease for the next sixteen months before succumbing in August of 2006. For Gary, there was no place he would rather be than in this pulpit, teaching and preaching to us, and he remained in this pulpit up until just two weeks before his death. Gary's journey through life and towards his death was in the company of his church. He allowed us the sacred privilege of walking beside him as he journeyed to the end of his days. It was an extremely generous spiritual gift. I don't know if I could do it. My temptation would

be, like most of our I assume, to retreat, to close off the world, to only draw around me my closest friends and loved ones. But, if you knew Gary and knew his theology and spirituality, you would see that he could never do that—because we, this congregation, this ragged band of survivors, this ready band of thrivers, this little congregation on the prairie—this beloved community—we, all of us, were Gary's friends and loved ones. He felt a profound responsibility to us and to this place, and that conviction is what drove him to be present and alive with us as much as he possibly could. It was a loving example of a way we might die.

Frederick Buechner, contemporary author and Presbyterian minister, said in his book on *The Sacred Journey* that: "To journey for the sake of saving our own lives is little by little to cease to live in any sense that really matters, even to ourselves, because it is only by journeying for the world's sake - even when the world bores and sickens and scares you half to death - that little by little we start to come alive." I think we all sense that here—we sense that by working together, working on this church's projects and missions, serving on our boards, assisting with our Sunday worship, we journey together. I've always thought that on this journey through life, it is best to walk with friends. And this congregation of friends walks an exciting and interesting, and intentional journey—a journey that includes our love of God and our love of neighbor. May we walk together in joy and conviction, knowing that the Holy One walks with us. We are not alone. Ever.

Amen.

RESOURCES USED:



Diana Butler Bass. *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*,  
HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2009.