

**Genesis 3:1-13**

**Romans 5:6-21**

**March 30, 2014**

**Fourth Sunday in Lent**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **SIN WITH A CAPITAL “S”**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

For Christmas 1974, my dear high school friend, Brad Greenway, gave me a book in which he wrote, “To Phil: for a friendship that can’t even be described by the wisdom of Twain.” The book is called *Man is the Only Animal That Blushes . . . Or Needs To: The Wisdom of Mark Twain*. The book’s title seems to be a good comment on the Bible stories we heard this morning from Genesis 3 and Romans 5.

About the story of Adam and Eve in the garden, Mark Twain wrote, “Adam was but human — this explains it all. He did not want the apple for the apple’s sake, he wanted it only because it was forbidden. The mistake was in not forbidding the serpent; then he would have eaten the serpent.” In another place, Twain spoke the truth when he wrote, “There is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable.”

Twain’s observation certainly describes the conversation between the serpent and Eve there in the garden. Notice how subtle the serpent is when he croons to Eve, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’ . . . You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” That’s kind of like saying to the small child, “Don’t touch that hot stove!” Well, what do you think most kids are going to want to do? It’s not that they want to get burned. It’s just that, all of a sudden, a new possibility opens up for them. Maybe Mom and Dad are holding out on me! Maybe Mom and Dad are just trying to make my life hard! Maybe I know better than Mom and Dad!

Adam and Eve’s story is the go-to story about “original sin.” Original sin is “Sin with a capital S.” Their sin is not their nakedness. Their sin has nothing to do with their human sexuality. Their “original sin” is simply this: they disobeyed God. They thought maybe God was holding out on them. They thought God was just trying to make their life hard. They thought they knew better than God. As soon as Adam and Eve ate of the fruit (and, despite what Mark Twain says, the Bible never once calls it “an apple”), their relationship with God was changed forever. Upon reading their story, someone made the comment, “That story is still true today.” Bingo!

The original “Sin with a capital S” sets off a cascade of dominoes tipping over. The relationship between Adam and Eve and God is forever changed — but so is their own relationship. When God asked Adam, “Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” Adam pointed his finger at Eve: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate.” When God asked

Eve, “What is this that you have done?” she answered, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” What do you think the serpent would have said if God had asked him, “What is this that you have done?” Maybe he would have said, “Well, you created me!” There’s enough blame to go around in this story and to be shared by Adam, Eve, and the serpent. But Adam and Eve won’t take responsibility for their actions. It’s as if they say, “Well, God, I don’t know. It just happened!” And, when you get right down to it, what they’re really saying is, “It’s your fault, God. . . *you* gave me the woman . . . *you* gave us the serpent.”

Down through the centuries, Eve’s succumbing to the serpent’s temptation has been used to place blame on women for all sorts of things. But let’s think about that for a minute. In 1638, Rembrandt produced an etching of this scene from Genesis 3:6 that says, “and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.” Rembrandt’s etching was and is notable for several reasons. First, he pictured Adam and Eve in their innocent nakedness, instead of covered up, as most other paintings of the time did. He figured they had not yet eaten the fruit, so they wouldn’t have known they were naked or been ashamed. Second, he didn’t show them as an idealized couple — they are just ordinary human beings, with all of their physical flaws. Third, and most noticeable of all, is what Adam is doing in the etching. Eve stands there with the fruit. With his right hand Adam is wagging his index finger at her as if to say, “What have you done? This is wrong!” At the same, his left hand is reaching out for the fruit. Rembrandt’s picture of Adam and Eve is a wonderful interpretation of “Sin with a capital S.” Adam is caught in the act, but he can’t confess what he has done when God asks him, “Have you eaten from the fruit of the tree?”

When you turn to Romans 5, you find that Paul missed a golden opportunity to stick it to Eve and blame her for all of humankind’s woes. Paul is sometimes portrayed as a misogynist, a woman hater, someone who thinks women ought to be quiet in the church. You would think, then, that Paul would welcome the chance to cast Eve as the main “baddie” in this story about the fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. Did you hear, however, that in Romans 5, Paul *never once mentions* Eve? Instead, this is what he has to say:

- \* “just as sin came into the world through one *man* . . .”
- \* “death exercised dominion from *Adam* to Moses . . .”
- \* “if the many died through the one *man’s* trespass . . .”
- \* “not like the effect of one *man’s* sin . . .”
- \* “because of one *man’s* trespass, death exercised dominion through that one . . .”
- \* “just as one *man’s* trespass led to condemnation for all . . .”
- \* “just as by the one *man’s* disobedience the many were made sinners. . .”

Man, that Adam surely messed things up for the rest of us! Too bad for him! Yes, but too bad for us, also! Listen to what Paul says is the result of Adam’s “original sin”: “death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned . . . sin ex-

exercised dominion in death.” It’s that phrase — “because all have sinned” — that can be a real sticking point for many of us.

Do you remember the comic strip “For Better or For Worse”? In one of the first strips from April 1, 1983, the mother, Elly, finds her little boy, Michael, sitting on the couch, looking sadly out the window. She asks, “Why are you looking so thoughtful, Michael?” With a dejected expression, Michael says, “I think it’s sad that Jesus died — that’s all.” Mom takes him by the shoulders and, with a smile on her face, says, “He had to die, honey. He died to save us all from our sins.” In the last panel, Michael points to himself and, with a bewildered look on his face, says, “But, Mom! — I haven’t DONE anything!!!”

Michael’s bewildered complaint — “I haven’t DONE anything!!!” — echoes Adam’s answer to God — “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate. . . But, God, I haven’t DONE anything!!!” The truth is, we *have* done something, and we continue to do something, and it’s more than just the sum of all of the different, “small” sins or “mistakes” we make in life. Martin Luther said, “The sin underneath all our sins is to trust the lie of the serpent that we cannot trust the love and grace of Christ and must take matters into our own hands.” Robert Farrar Capon, who was an Episcopal priest who wrote about the radical grace of God in Jesus Christ, said something similar, “In the Bible, the opposite of Sin, with a capital ‘S,’ is not virtue — it is faith: faith in a God who draws all to himself in his resurrection.”

Sometimes I use these words from 1 John 1 as a call to confession in our worship: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” (1 John 1:8-10) But there’s the rub — it’s hard to admit we are sinners. Oh, yes, we make mistakes. Oh, yes, we don’t always do what’s right. Oh, yes, we could do better. Maybe we even *want* to do better. But a “sinner”? I don’t know...

Our closing hymn this morning is “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound.” It is #1 on many different lists of “Most Beloved Hymns.” You know how it goes: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me . . .” Uh-oh, hold on a minute! A “wretch”? That’s pretty strong language! In fact, some contemporary versions of John Newton’s hymn have substituted phrases such as “that saved a soul like me” or “that saved and set me free” or “that saved someone like me.”

In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris writes, “People want grace, it seems, and will admit to being ‘lost’ and ‘blind’ in John Newton’s fine old hymn. But don’t ask them to admit that it make take knowing oneself as a wretch to truly know grace for the wonder that it is . . . It seems to me that if you can’t ever admit to being a wretch, you haven’t been paying attention.”<sup>1</sup>

As we draw closer to Holy Week in this Lenten Season, we begin to think more and more, not just about the glory of Easter Sunday morning, but the sobering worship of Good Friday. Our Good Friday service this year will blend scripture readings, choral

music, congregational singing, communion, and confession of our sins — all of which will help us contemplate once again the price God paid to forgive us for our many sins — and our Sin with a capital S, when we cannot “trust the love and grace of Christ and must take matters into our own hands.”

Lent is a time of introspection and taking stock of our Christian lives. If we are honest with ourselves and with God, we will confess that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” including me and you. We might want to say with Michael, “But I haven’t DONE anything!!!” But, the truth is, we have done something, whenever we trust in ourselves or anything else more than we trust in God through Jesus Christ.

The good news this Lord’s Day and every day is that God has DONE something for us — “while we still were sinners Christ died for us . . . while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son.” We have been justified, put into a right relationship with God because of what God has done for us. We have received the free gift of righteousness. We have received God’s amazing grace. We have received the promise of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

It has been said that “every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.” Our future as sinners is entirely in God’s hands and due to God’s grace in Jesus Christ. When Nelson Mandela died in December, he was hailed as one of the most influential world leaders because of his remarkable life and leadership in South Africa. Even when he was alive, Mandela was highly revered by people all around the world. It would have been easy for him to let all of that praise go to his head and to think more highly of himself than he ought. However, Nelson Mandela said this: “I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying.”

That’s a wonderful phrase: “a sinner who keeps on trying.” That’s what we are called to be as followers of Jesus Christ — “sinners who keep on trying.” We are called to keep on trying — not by our own efforts; not because of our good deeds; not following our own way — for Sin with a capital S can somehow use even our best efforts to deceive us. We are “sinners who keep on trying” because we have the amazing grace of God in Jesus Christ who, at the right time, died for us and made things right between us and God once again.

Martin Luther said, “Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly.” In other words, live your life for God to the fullest, confessing you are a sinner, but a sinner with a future because you are a sinner who keeps on trying, by the amazing grace of God in Jesus Christ.

***Let us pray: Merciful God, you gave your Son to suffer the shame of the cross. Save us from hardness of heart, that, seeing him who died for us, we may repent, confess our sin, and receive your overflowing love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

NOTES      <sup>1</sup>Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), pp. 166-167.