

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, ruler over all creation, we feel small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things. We see the world, all of its goodness and all of its darkness, and we feel powerless to be a significant piece in taking part in your plan for the world. But we are not powerless, for you are with us. You fill us with strength when we feel at our least; you give us guidance when we feel we are lost. You give us wisdom when we feel foolish; you give us your presence when we feel alone. Walk with us in our times of certainty and uncertainty to be people of faithfulness that steer through distraction. We lift those things that burden us and uplift us, those mentioned here and in our hearts to you, Great God.

We are ever human, God, and focus on what we can do instead of what we should do. Your words are filled with a calling for us, permission for us to be fully who we are, and prohibition to create faithful boundaries that keep us faithful and healthy. As people who desire control, we tend only to hear the last part and fixate on what we cannot do. Walk with us, God, to create a better sense of who we are, what we can do, and what we should not do to be the most faithful to ourselves and to others. You know us better than we do, gracious Creator, and you know how we best run as human beings. Help us to grasp these difficult concepts and to live to our fullest. We pray all these things in the name of the pinnacle of humanity, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying...

SERMON

When my sister went to college, I was in Junior High, heading to High School. One time, she took my family to visit the radio station where she was interning in Fremont, NE. I'll confess...it was boring to me. I was looking around for things that may interest me, and I saw a vending machine. It had one of my newest passions in it: Coca-Cola. (After all, to

this point, I was raised in a Pepsi family). I wanted so much to get one. My father told me that we'd get drinks at a restaurant later, so I should hold off. His answer was not satisfying to me, as the restaurant he mentioned only served Pepsi products. I was not convinced. So, I took matters into my own hands and I bought that Coke. It tasted great. My father didn't take too kindly to my showing of disobedience, and he did tell me about it.

Obedience has two possible sources of authority behind it. The first is fear; fear can create a sense of obedience, but that doesn't promote any sense of care and nurture. We think it can be the most motivating. The other source of authority behind obedience is trust. When we obey because we trust the other person, then we find that there is a sense of life and care behind the obedience. In this situation, it was clear there was trust lacking. The bottom line is not simply that I was disobedient, but that I didn't show any sign of trust.

Our scripture today comes from one of the first stories of Genesis, what Christianity has popularly termed "the Fall." That may be a bit unfaithful to what the text really says here, but at the same time, the text provides understanding on how we should live thanks to the example of Adam and Eve. Let's look at our scripture today to gain a better understanding of this momentous passage, see how God provides calling, permission, and prohibition, and how faithful understanding of all three feeds into a well-balanced life.

This is a popular passage that we've heard time and again since we were young children. The great thing about the bible is that there's always something new to learn, so let's go through it again. Off the tree of good and evil, they pick...what? An apple? Actually, the passage doesn't say that. We've filled that in along the way as the most popular image. Adam and Eve are tempted by whom? Yes, a snake, but we often go farther. Actually, the text doesn't say Satan anywhere; it only says a snake. And it goes into great detail to talk

about the snake as a snake only; if the text really wanted us to reference it as Satan, wouldn't it have said so? We easily put a lot on this text that isn't originally there, so we need to take this text on its own terms. It can be hard with all of the interpretations we've heard along the way. To the Ancient Hebrews, this was a poetic understanding about humanity's beginnings, not the crux of how it all went wrong. Later Christian interpreters have made this a theological focus, calling it The Fall, but that's not the lingo here. This is how we came to be, for better or for worse, not where we need to put all the blame.

Instead, we must focus on verses 15 through 17 to show us God's original and continuing purpose: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 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, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'" Now, on first look, we think of it as scary. We hear the voice of God, deep and resonant, something like James Earl Jones: "THE DAY YOU EAT OF IT YOU SHALL DIE!" No, no, no, it's not DIE! It's die. We hear this with the voice of a loud strict parent. True devotion and faith should never be based out of fear, only out of love and trust. Part of the problem is that we mostly hear one part loud and clear. But, as I said, this is a three part calling, according to Walter Bruggemann in Interpretation: Genesis.

We are called to trust God and God's command. There is vocation, permission, and prohibition. The vocation is simple: "the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it." Vocation is simply another word for our purpose, our task as humans and people who have specific qualities and gifts for service. God gave Adam a clear task and purpose in this place that worked with his gifts: to till and keep it; in other words, to take care of God's wonderful creation. That vocation hasn't changed to this day. God

also supplies permission: "You may freely eat of every tree in the garden." All said, we really have a lot we can do throughout the world. Creation was made for our enjoyment, for our fulfillment, and that is something that God wants us to take advantage of. However, just because we can do anything, because we have the means to do anything doesn't mean that we should do anything. God is a God of Freedom, but freedom also has responsibilities. Almost everything in the garden is open for use...almost. What comes next is prohibition: "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." Like I said, this is not a violent speech but a warning, the creation of a boundary. God is not threatening them with death; it is a boundary. It's quite amazing, for as Bruggemann says, these are three facets of the divine purpose. Not one of them will do; they require that they live in tandem for us to be fully human and healthy.

This means a lot to who we are and what we should do. No matter what, these three aspects of life do not go away. When we do, we quickly become unfaithful to ourselves and to others. When we reject one of those, we fall into some easy traps. What is permission without prohibition? We go around doing what we want without knowing how much is healthy and how much is not. What is prohibition without permission? We have no idea of what is good; we only know what we cannot do. What is either without vocation? We have no direction in our lives. What is vocation without the other two? We don't know how to live with good boundaries about what is best for us and what is destructive. The fullness of life is found in appropriate balance, care, and nurturing all three areas of God's direction. We do this not because we fear God, as if God was a lording-over parent that throws out commands for their own sake, but that we trust that God has our well being in mind.

The discussion in verses 1-7 in chapter 3 change the discussion. What happens here

is that trust goes away, and the consequences of that are real and dramatic. As Bruggemann explains, God becomes objectified, obedience gets thrown out the window, and the focus becomes more on what they can do and what they want instead of what God calls them to do. Vocation gets lost; there is no focus on the tilling, keeping and care of creation. All we see is what matters to the self. The blame here is the loss of focus on what matters. One of those three parts got lost, and obedience, with its trust, went away.

Without trust in God and the obedience that sparks, we can go to some very dark places. Ever hear of the “self-made person?” This is the loner that creates a life for him or herself, doing it all by working his or her way to the top without any help. We laud those kinds of people for their individual ingenuity, that can do all things by themselves without any help at all, but you know what? They don’t exist. To try to do so goes against God’s calling from the beginning. It says, “Why should I trust you? I can figure all this out on my own!” That’s what happened in the second part of our Genesis reading. Adam and Eve violated the boundary God faithfully set, with their own desires in mind. It wasn’t in our scripture reading for today, but verse 18 talks about the creation of Eve, with God saying, “It is not good for man to be alone.” It’s not good for any of us to be alone. We’ve talked about it before, but we have an indwelt need to be with other people, to take part in their lives, to have friends, family, and companionship. That statement from scripture works on so many levels, for it blows out of the water the today’s fallacy of individualism’s glories.

We have a pretty screwed up image of individualism today. It’s all about me, I can do things all by myself, and so on and so forth. God did not create us to be alone, so why do we try to prove something that is foolish to prove anyway? As Christian writer Terry Hershey emphatically proclaimed, “No one, no one, no one, no one, no one, no one is a

Christian alone.” These three callings of vocation, permission and prohibition work on both levels of the individual and community to create right living. The point is clear when you look around and you look at yourself sitting in this seat, in this place, in this time each week. If we believe that anyone can be a Christian alone...what are we even doing here?

We do great harm if we blame Adam and Eve...more pointedly Eve for this sin. It has been used unfaithfully in the past to blame women for this first sin. But do Adam and Eve deserve our scorn? Would we be in this situation without this story? I don't think so, for we were human from the beginning. It was inevitable, and we engage in nothing but idle speculation about “what if's.” That doesn't matter with how we live in the here and now. The calling is the same. God lays out a three-part direction for our lives, and we often work against it. Since we have a free will, which they also had, it was inevitable. God lays down the direction, but God does not move us like a puppeteer. Instead, God knows how we work, God knows we need to be given a calling, the permission to go about and be fully ourselves, but also the prohibition not to violate important boundaries. They work in tandem, not with one being louder than the others. This is not the calling of a strict parent, who directs through fear, but this is the calling of a parent we must trust. This is not the voice of harshness, but the loving voice of care. When we violate that trust, we tell God that we are islands, all by ourselves. We want to be self-made people. But we know through scripture that it is not good that anyone should be alone, that none of us are self-made. Ultimately, we remember that humanity is blessed; it was blessed by God from the beginning as a good creation and that blessing was never taken away. We are fallible, but God always brings us back into the fold. Thanks be to God for God's wonderful direction and grace when we go astray. Amen and Amen.