



**“Like God”**

**Scripture – Genesis 3:1-10**

**Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**

**Sunday, July 7, 2019**

What kind of fruit did Eve take and eat from the Tree of Knowledge? If this question popped up in a game of trivia, most of us would respond, “Well, an apple, of course.” Because we have this image in our minds’ eye of Eve holding out an enticing red apple to her husband as a crafty serpent looks on from the tree. Yes, it must be an apple.

Never mind that the story we’ve just heard refers merely to fruit. *When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes ... she took of its fruit and ate.*

There’s no apple in Genesis. But the fact that so many of us picture one when we think of Adam and Eve is a testament to the power of tradition. Through the centuries, this story and its characters — especially Eve — have taken on certain associations in our collective memory. With the help of artists like Dante and Michelangelo and Milton and — later — of cartoonists and Bible story illustrators, we have come to know Eve as the temptress who lured Adam and all humankind away from Paradise. But — when we take a closer look — we discover that this story is a bit more complicated. And a bit more hopeful, as well. So, today, I invite you to cast aside that red apple and — with it — your assumptions about this so-called “fall from grace,” and to open your eyes to the truth about who we are.

*When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes ... she took of its fruit and ate.* Now, when God gave the commandment *not* to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, life in the garden looked different. At the beginning of the creation story related in Genesis 2, there is only God and a barren earth. So the Lord forms the first *adam* — or human being — from dust and breathes into this creature the breath of life. Then God plants a garden and places the human in Eden to till and keep it. *From every tree in the garden you may eat,* God tells the *adam* — *every tree except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.*

Soon after placing this first human in Eden, God realizes something: *It is not good for this adam to be alone.* So the Lord sets out to make a partner for this solitary creature. God again reaches into dusty ground and, from the soil, molds turtle doves and mountain lions and hippopotami and presents them to the human. But none of them are quite right. None of them are adequate partners. Do you recall what happens next? God causes a deep sleep to fall upon the human and, basically, performs surgery. The Lord takes one of the ribs — or, if you translate the Hebrew differently, the Lord takes one of the sides — and builds that first human a companion. One becomes two. Now there is male and female. And, upon seeing the woman for the first time, the man exclaims in delight: *This — at last! — is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.* Though two, they are one flesh. So united are the man and woman, whom we come to call Adam and Eve, that they live together as partners in perfect mutuality,

with all the vulnerability and trust that entails. *The man and his wife are naked and are not ashamed*, the text tells us.

This gives us a glimpse of the world God intended. In the Garden of Eden, humankind lives together in harmony with one another, with the whole created order, with God. The man and woman have a purpose; they are there to care for God's garden so that it will sustain life. They have freedom; they may enjoy the gifts of the earth and the fruit of their labor. But they also have boundaries: there is one tree in the midst of the garden that is off-limits. So, as long as humankind heeds this commandment, creation is at peace.

But how quickly things fall apart. The proclamation that the man and his wife were naked and were not ashamed is still hanging in the air when the serpent slithers onto the scene. Now, the snake is the most *clever* of all the animals God has made; he is *cunning*. It is a word that discloses something of the snake's character, but also gives us a hint about what is going to happen. You see, the Hebrew word for 'cunning' is a mere vowel sound different than the word for 'naked.' *The two of them were naked* — 'ar-Ôm; *the serpent was more cunning* — 'ar-Ûm. It's a rather revealing pun — and I think it gives us a clue about what's in store for Adam and Eve.

*Did God really say 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?*, the clever serpent asks the woman. She is eager to correct him, but he undercuts God's commandment. *You will not die [by eating from the Tree of Knowledge]*, the serpent says. *For God knows that when you eat of [its fruit], your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.* And, hearing that the tree is desirable to make one wise, the woman takes and eats the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. And then she gives the fruit to her husband — who is beside her — and he eats. Turns out, the cunning serpent is right about one thing. Adam and Eve's eyes are opened. And the first thing they know is this: they are naked. They are utterly exposed; they are vulnerable. Now that these human beings have "wised up" they realize that they are laid bare before one another, before all creation, before God. The man and woman are no longer *unashamed*. So they scramble to conceal themselves — first, by grabbing at fig leaves; then, by lunging behind a thicket of trees in a desperate attempt to hide their nakedness. Now that their eyes are open, fear consumes them. Fear of being exposed. Fear of being vulnerable. Fear of being called to account. They cannot bear to confront the One they have disobeyed. So, instead, they try to build a barrier between themselves and their Creator by cowering behind a copse of trees.

Listen to what happens next: [God] said [to the man], "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom *you* gave to be with me, *she* gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The *serpent* tricked me, and I ate" (Gen 3:11-13).

Do you hear it? ... The first recorded edition of The Blame Game. The man points the finger at his wife; the woman promptly deflects blame to the serpent. And God is left standing, hands on hips, waiting for someone to 'fess up to the truth. I imagine many of you have been in a similar situation, as your children or grandchildren have casually blamed the dog for eating that plate-full of cookies, even though the evidence of their transgression is still on their chins and t-shirts. But none of them — not Adam, nor Eve, nor that clever serpent — none of them acknowledge the wrong they've done. So things fall apart. God imposes the consequences — hard labor in bringing forth children for the woman; hard labor in tilling the ground for the man — and sends the humans away from the Garden, to do the hard work of bringing forth and sustaining life beyond Eden. How fleeting it was ... that glimpse of Paradise.

I have to wonder — what would have happened had Adam and Eve simply confessed? ... had they responded to God's questions by saying, "Yes, Lord — you're right — we ate the forbidden fruit and we're sorry." Both of them had a chance to tell the truth; both of them had an opportunity to accept their vulnerability and admit their mistake. Isn't that what we practice in our prayers of confession? But, instead — blinded by fear and shame — Adam and Eve turn away from God and turn against one another. The man and woman who, moments ago, were

bone of bone and flesh of flesh now stand divided ... unable to name the pain they feel, unable to comprehend the magnitude of the breach of trust they've caused. They have no clue what steps to take toward healing these ruptured relationships.

The serpent had said to the woman: *When you eat of [the fruit], your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.* And, in a sense, the serpent was right. There is a claim that the passion — or suffering — of God did not begin on that Roman cross, but began at creation ... when our Creator chose to enter into relationships that would leave God vulnerable, a passion that began when our Maker chose to give human beings the freedom to turn away. Now that our eyes are open, we can begin to understand this vulnerability, for now we see the world as God does, in its beauty and its brokenness. Staying exposed to the pain of this world isn't easy. Lord knows there are times I wish we could return to a state of blissful ignorance, when humankind was sheltered from the knowledge of evil. I wish our eyes had *not* been opened to images of war-ravaged countries or of masses of panicked people fleeing from violence, to pictures of toddlers washed up on the shores of the Mediterranean or of a father and daughter washed up on the banks of the Rio Grande.

But — now that our eyes are open, now that we have been exposed to the pain of this world — our vocation to care for God's creation extends beyond the pleasantries of the Garden to the demands of more barren lands where we find ourselves tilling challenging soil until it bears fruit. A lot of ink has been spilled over Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden. But I see it as the first act of a sending God — a God who, Scripture tells us, sends prophets time and again. And, in a moment of true vulnerability, sent Jesus — the Word-Made-Flesh to draw us into relationship, to heal our brokenness, to remind us that we are still bone of bone and flesh of flesh. So, with eyes open to the beauty and the brokenness of this world, we continue to labor in the world beyond Eden. And, we have the choice in this world to turn away from one another in fear, or to turn toward one another in an effort to commit ourselves to the work of healing and wholeness.

I recently heard a story about a program in Washington D.C. for young people who have gotten on the wrong side of the law.<sup>1</sup> It's called Restorative Justice, and it connects these young people with their victims so that, together, they can find a way toward healing. If the process works, the juvenile offender walks away with a clean record. But, as you might imagine, the work isn't easy.

One of the participants in this program is a sixteen-year-old boy who — with a group of friends — assaulted a transgender woman on the subway. The goal of this Restorative Justice program is to create opportunities for communities to restore relationships, rather than imposing punishment or exacting retribution. So, one morning, this sixteen-year-old sits down with a facilitator, his foster mom, two mentors, and — of course — the woman he hurt. The purpose of this time together is to have a conversation and to repair — to the extent possible — the harm done. The young man tells some of his story: How he lost his father and grandmother; how he's estranged from the rest of his family; how he feels all alone in this world. "I don't believe in friendship. I don't believe in trust," he says. "I don't even trust my own mother." Those who have come together to support this sixteen-year-old are willing to help him achieve his goals. But this wounded young man doesn't want to grab the hands reaching out to help.

Then the conversation turns to the event that brought these people together. The young man admits that he was hanging out with the wrong crowd and that he didn't want to look weak in front of his friends. So, as the incident on the subway escalated, he spit on the woman. "You can change your life," the woman now says to the sixteen-year-old who assaulted her. "And you can leave the things that you've gone through in the past." She goes on to

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<sup>1</sup> Carrie Johnson, "Washington, D.C., Prosecutors Launch Restorative Justice Program For Juveniles," *All Things Considered*, NPR, July 2, 2019.

explain that she agreed to this process because she saw something in this young man's eyes. She saw fear; she could tell that he didn't want to assault her, but that he felt pressured to fit in with the crowd.

Then the young man asks his foster mom and mentors to leave the room. And, while sitting alone with the facilitator and the victim, he apologizes to the woman he hurt. And he promises to stand up for LGBTQ people who are being harassed, as she has asked him to do. In the months since that Restorative Justice conference, this sixteen-year-old has continued to make changes in his life. He has gotten into a better high school. He has found work in a barbershop, where he can pursue his career goals. He has even reunited with his biological mother, and has been working to heal that relationship.

Now, I'm no expert on the topic of Restorative Justice. And I'm in no position to advocate for this approach as a legal remedy across every circumstance. But what I see is this: I see a young man who had forgotten that human beings are bone of bone and flesh of flesh acknowledging the pain he has caused. I see people coming together — despite their fears — to embrace vulnerability and to open themselves to the possibility of grace. I see a community that has seen too many people turn away from their fellow human beings turn toward one another in ways that promote healing and wholeness. I see people doing the work to which we are called on this side of Eden. It is not easy, this work of bringing forth and sustaining life. But, with the Spirit's help, we can all be part of healing creation, of nurturing the hope that we can, once again, live in harmony with the world God intended for good.

### **The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson**

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts.

**We lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**It is right to give God thanks and praise.**

Eternal God – We come to this table, rejoicing that you are our God! You made all that is – earth and sky, trees of the field and birds of the air. You formed humankind in your image, breathing into us the breath of life. When your creative work was done, you looked upon your children, and proclaimed us 'very good' in your sight.

But we have denied our created identity and turned away from you. Throughout time, we have turned a blind eye toward injustice, abused the earth, and failed to love you with heart, soul, and might. Yet, you love us so much that you will not let us go. You have raised up prophets among us – men and women sent to call us back to you. When we have least deserved your compassion, you have led us with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. Nowhere is your grace more clear than in the gift of your Son. Jesus lived among us, teaching us how to love you and one another. Faithful to your purpose, he went to the cross and gave himself up to death. Rising from the grave, he conquered death that we, too, might live!

So we come to this feast with deep joy and humble gratitude, for we know that:

Breaking bread, Jesus feeds us with a hunger for justice. Pouring cup, Jesus invites us to join in the song of salvation.

As we gather around this table, we bring with us our concerns, our hopes, our fears, our prayers: We lift before you those who need healing, those who grieve, those who are without jobs or without homes, those who seek refuge or respite. This Independence Day weekend, we pray for our nation. We give thanks for this country in which we can worship you freely, and commend this land and its people to your merciful care. We pray for our

leaders, that you may give them wisdom and understanding; we pray for all who call this country 'home,' that they may experience the justice and peace you intend. Send us out from this table, to be a blessing to our neighbors near and far as we work always for your glory.

This we pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, who gave us words to pray: **Our Father...**