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First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
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Genesis 3:1-7, 22-24

The Knowledge of Good and Evil

Along with the children and youth in Sunday School, from now until Advent, we will be considering in worship some of the oldest stories in the Bible. The first of these stories is about Creation and Adam and Eve found in the first three chapters of Genesis. It is important to be familiar with these stories because of what they might teach us about whom God is and what human being is.

Nevertheless, a great divide has opened between the church and secular society because of these stories ever since the beginning of the modern era. Some good people seem to think that in order to be Bible believing Christians they must understand these stories to be literally true. It seems to me that the issue is sometimes put almost as a test of Christian courage, a sort of measure of one's spiritual testosterone if you will, whether or not one has what it takes to stand up for the literal interpretation of the first three chapters of Genesis against the secular humanists, secular humanists being a favorite name fundamentalists like to call those who disagree with them. Tragically, and I think tragically is not too strong a word to use for those of us who love Christ and the church and believe that intelligent religious faith is critical to healthy human being and healthy societies, tragically, the indirect message people may have received over the past hundred years or so from many popular Christian writers and teachers and preachers is that one can not be a smart, educated, reasonable person and also believe the Bible, that a choice between the two must be made, and some people, concluding that they must leave either their brains or their faith behind, have opted to keep their brains.

One thing I have tried to do throughout my ministry is to communicate an understanding and experience of Christian faith which refutes such either/or thinking between faith on the one hand and science and reason on the other, as a false choice. I am a Bible believing Christian, but I do not believe that the first three chapters of Genesis are literally true. I do not believe that the earth and the universe were created in seven literal days. I do not believe that Adam and Eve were suddenly the first two and only humans on earth. I do not believe that their offspring needed to mate with each other in incestuous relationships to keep the human race going. I do not believe in a literal Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil nor in a literal Tree of Life, nor in a literal particular Garden of Eden located someplace hidden in the world with a cherubim now stationed at the east end of it and a flaming sword turning through the air to guard against anyone

entering it who might some day stumble upon it. I do not believe that a snake talked. Rather, I affirm that like other ancient literature, the biblical accounts of Creation and Adam and Eve gradually developed over centuries by story tellers passing down from generation to generation entertaining and sometimes sensational narratives about how everything got to be the way it is. And what those story tellers really did, and I think they would have agreed with this, because they were not scientists, ultimately what the ancient middle eastern story tellers did was reveal the spiritual and moral truth behind the beginning of things, the spiritual and moral nature of God and of people. That's why those stories are in the Bible and that's why we need to continue passing them down by teaching them to our own children.

A wonderful book about interpreting the first few chapters of Genesis is one by Rabbi Harold Kushner called, *How Good Do We Have To be?* It is in our library here at the church. I consulted it in preparation for this sermon, and, Josephine will be pleased to hear, I put it back, so I know that as of now it is available. The call number is 296.7. I recommend it. Harold Kushner is the man who also wrote the more famous book entitled, *Why Bad Things Happen To Good People*. He has an effective way of explaining some perplexing life questions in terms and phrases that make sense.

Along with many of us, Kushner shares a frustration with literalistic interpretations of the Creation and Adam and Eve stories, not just because those interpretations are anti-scientific, but because they miss important spiritual and moral points. Here are two paragraphs from Kushner's *How Good Do We Have To Be?*

The starting point of this book, Kushner writes, is my contention that over the years, Jews and Christians have misunderstood the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. We have read it as a story of disobedience and divine punishment, and learned to believe in a God who would punish us severely if we ever did anything wrong. In this book, I will be offering a radically different interpretation of that story, one that will permit us to think better of our first human ancestors as well.¹

Kushner goes on to say, *I don't believe that the story is the story of two people who could have lived happily ever after had they done everything right but instead were punished forever for making one mistake. I don't think it means to teach us the lesson that if we ever do something wrong, God will stop loving us and will punish us instead. I don't take the story of the Garden of Eden as a newspaper report of an actual event (though I know that some people do), describing the human race as beginning with two full-grown, Hebrew speaking adults and a talking snake. But I do believe that the story of the Garden of Eden tells us something profoundly true about the emergence of the human race, and that we will become more comfortable with ourselves as imperfect human beings only when we have learned what the story is really about.² End quote.*

Well, then, what is the meaning of the tale of Adam and Eve? The meaning is that our human race chose to progress from a state of innocence to one of moral responsibility, from simple animal existence to human being, and that choice has ever since had both difficult as well as glorious consequences for us. Actually, the story implies that there was really not much choice in the matter at all.

Eve was curious. Eve wanted to know things. The fruit looked delicious to her because she desired to become wise. To eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was her shot at an education. She wanted to learn and this was her opportunity.

Now, should we blame Eve for this? Was it a bad thing she did? After all, was it not God who made Eve as God did Adam? Was not their curiosity something that God instilled? Would not God have known what they would do in the garden? Why put the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil there if they were not to eat from it? Just to tempt them? How does that square with Our Lord's Prayer, *Lead us not into temptation?* Did Jesus suggest that we ask God not to do something in relation to us that God wants to do? How would that square with, *Thy will be done?* The best idea to my mind is that God did know that they would eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, that God even wanted them to eat of it, that God was waiting with fond anticipation for that day. Where does it say in the text that God did not want them to eat the fruit?

Going back to the second chapter of Genesis we read, *The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. (By the way, Adam is already working here while still in the Garden.) And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree in 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. –Genesis 2:17-*

You may think it a stretch, but given the metaphorical nature of the text I think it can be observed that God does not say to Adam, "I don't want you to eat it!" Instead the text reads, "You shall not eat it!" Based on the pronounced consequence, might we understand the injunction even to carry the idea, if you eat it there will be consequences! *for in the day that you eat of it, the text says, you shall die.* And that is what happened, when human beings learned the difference between right and wrong their innocence died and they were never the same again. They did not morally die at that moment, as fundamentalists might suggest, because they disobeyed God. When Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, their childlike innocence died. It was the day of their Bar Mitzvah, their Confirmation Day. It was their spiritual coming of age. It was the birth of their moral responsibility. All our dilemmas, complications, shames, embarrassments, anxieties, and guilt are ours because we are moral creatures and understand that what we do affects other people. All our sympathies and compassions and so also our sadnesses and heartbreaks, we experience them all because we have a sense of right and wrong. And would we want it any other way? Would God?

Would we even be creatures made in God's image if we were only like other animals and did only what nature and instinct required? For sure things would be simpler, as indeed they are when we ignore the moral dimensions of our actions as we sometimes do, as some people seem almost always to do. It is certainly simpler to live just thinking of ourselves, but then that's all we would have, and all some do have, themselves. Because we know right from wrong we must work hard, for others depend upon us, others need our talents or provision, and birthing new life will hurt and women will do it anyway because caring for others is such deep satisfaction for moral creatures, and raising children in families for long periods of time will make us weary and sometimes bring us trouble, but we will have children and families anyway because love compels us.

To interpret the consequences of Adam and Eve's eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil as simply punishment is to make human beings so much less than God made us. It is to think of ourselves as basically flawed, basically rebellious, basically arrogant and presumptuous, and/or unwise and naïve, not the beautiful intelligent creatures that after God finished creating God called good.

I like to think of a little afterward which might be added to the story. It would be God meeting Adam and Eve as they left the Garden, not to badger them or make sure they received the full measure of divine justice, but rather to receive them with open arms and a smile, and words like, "Welcome. Welcome to this place. Here you will work hard and know pain and heartache, here nothing will just be handed to you and here you will need to make ever more complicated decisions because you have proven yourself worthy by making your first decision which was to know the difference between good and evil. You have earned the right to be here. It is a marvelous place. You will now know grief and heartache because here you will also know the glory of love and joy."

¹ Harold S. Kushner, How Good Do We Have To Be?, *Little, Brown and Company*, Boston, 1996, pp. 12,13.

²Ibid., pp. 14,15.