

Sermon, 9/17/17

Chapter 2, *The Path*

If you were here last Sunday, you heard my sermon based on the first creation story in Genesis 1, which is also in *The Path* chapter one. The main point from that part of the Bible is that we are made in God's image; that being human is good; and because we are made in God's image, like God, we can use language to create goodness. There were other things covered—that we are responsible for God's creation as caretakers; and that God set the example for us to rest on a regular basis—at least once a week—so that we take time to relax, enjoy, and appreciate God's creation.

That's a lot of good news! So what went wrong?! Sin. I mentioned it only in passing last week because it is totally absent from Genesis 1. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we believe that sin is part of the human condition. Now different parts of our tradition define sin in different ways, but simply stated, sin is alienation from God that leads to harmful actions against others. So according to these first stories of the Bible, how did sin enter the picture?

Most of us know the story (it was in last week's first chapter from *The Path*)—the story of Adam and Eve and the apple. It is an ancient Hebrew folk story that was first told to let our ancestors understand what went wrong. It has been used over centuries in some good ways and some not so good ways. It has been used to justify mistreating snakes, for example. More importantly, it has been used by many in the church to blame women for what went wrong with humanity. That interpretation is full of mischief and has caused many problems not only for women but for all of us.

Yet this ancient story is important and powerful if we use it wisely. There is one little verse that I believe holds the key to human sin. After Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, they missed a date. You see, we're told that God used to walk in the garden in the cool of the evening. God would meet up with Adam and Eve, as friends do, and visit. But because they knew they had done wrong, we're told that Adam and Eve hid from God. Our sin originates in that part of us that seeks to hide from God.

In modern language, we would say, "It's not the crime; it's the cover-up." Imagine a different outcome if Adam and Eve had joined God for that walk in the cool of the evening. If they had confessed, "Lord, we disobeyed you and we are sorry." What might the conversation had been like? There may have been similar consequences, but they would have been given in the context of a continuing relationship with God. But that did not happen—Adam and Eve hid from God and that has been the root cause of our sin ever since.

This becomes clear in the story of Cain and Abel that we just heard read. Like the story of Adam and Eve, the story of Cain and Abel is one that most of us know. It is the first act of violence in the Bible and in that sense, the first sin. The first sinful act was violence between

brothers based on religion. Throughout time and still in our world today, religious violence is a recurrent example and persistent pattern of sin.

You see, Abel and Cain made different types of sacrifices to God. The details do not matter, but the response of Cain does. When his brother's sacrifice pleased God while his did not, Cain became angry. He was probably angry at God, but he expressed it in his plans to seek revenge against his brother. The Lord discerned Cain's primal response and sought to intervene and redirect Cain. The Lord made clear that Cain's angry response of violence against his brother was not inevitable. God described sin as a lurking animal that must be mastered, but Cain ignored the Lord's counsel.

So like his parents, Cain hid from God. In this case, Cain tricked his brother, called him out to a field, and murdered him. But even though he did it in secret, the Lord knew and asked Cain "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain gave the infamous response, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain did not confess to his crime and became estranged from God. Like with his parents, the Lord gave consequences that seem to combine justice and mercy. But what if Cain had simply listened to God and struggled with the sin that lurked at the door of his heart instead of killing the brother that he envied? But that is not the story.

So how do we translate these primal stories into modern beliefs and real world practices? First, it is important to remember that sin exists, it is real. As beautiful and good as humans can be because we are made in God's image, we also have the capacity to do great harm. Often we exist somewhere in between, fluctuating from fulfilling our high, God-given potential; to hiding from God and committing violence against others.

We saw this played out at so many levels during the recent hurricanes: people who came to the rescue of their neighbors in john boats; people going crazy and buying way too much stuff from the grocery store so there was not enough for others; some store owners price gouging; other store owners giving goods away; some people looting in the wake of the storm; public institutions trying to do good in trying situations; some parts of our communities—usually the poor—not getting what they need as soon as others; and probably most of us hunkering down and watching TV and worrying. That spectrum represents humanity at our best, made in God's image; and at our worst, hiding from God.

Where are we on that spectrum? Not just in our response to a hurricane or other natural disasters; but in how we live our daily lives. A good way to find out where we are on the sin spectrum is to take time to reflect on whether—and if so, how-- we are hiding from God.

I read somewhere that many people who say they are Christians live as functional atheists. They make decisions and take actions and maintain attitudes without much care for what God thinks. That takes many forms. One of the obvious ones is, "Do we pray?" In the leadership training I gave this past Thursday, I discussed that prayer is the first skill that leaders need. Not only because the job is hard and we need to pray, something like "God, help!" But

because prayer is a primary way that our hearts and our lives are transformed so that we fulfill our calling as humans made in the image of God.

Here is how one person said it:

*“Our hearts are narrow; prayer expands them and makes them better able to love God.”*

If we take time to be still, be silent, and open ourselves to God, there is a better chance that we will change how we live. We can do simple things, like say The Lord’s Prayer on a regular basis. We can combine our times of prayer with reading a passage of Scripture, like the chapters we are reading from *The Path* or the Sunday Gospel. Prayer and reading Scripture are ways for us to come out of hiding, so to speak, so that we maintain a relationship with God that gives us life.

Another way we hide from God is by ignoring people that are not like us. Rich people tend to ignore poor people. Healthy people tend to ignore sick people. Young people tend to ignore old people. Our differences based on race, religion, language, gender and so forth are all ways in which we may ignore one another and even come to despise one another. And when we do that, we are hiding from God. All the different types of people in our world are holy sacraments that help us understand the mystery of being human and being made in God’s image. Intentionally spending time with people who are different helps us to enter into a deeper relationship with God as well as one another. Staying in our natural tribes is one of the ways we hide from God.

Here is the good news-- when we get out of our hiding places, an amazing thing happens—we enjoy being with God! That was God’s original intention for us—to be in relationship with God as a community. That is when we bless one another—use our language to create good. Not only blessing our family and friends and fellow church members; but we can bow up our courage to love and bless strangers, even enemies. It says in the Bible that we are blessed if we do that. But we need to listen to God and by grace do what he commands.

That is why we do things like what the youth are doing this morning, going down to Church of the Common Ground to worship with a community of faith primarily made up of people who are homeless. We make lunches that we bring with us. But the point is being with people who are different in some ways and like us in other ways. It stretches us and helps us walk with God in the cool of the evening instead of hiding in the bushes of our lives.

So this year, as we move through the stories of the Bible using *The Path*, let us remember these first things from the first two weeks: we are made in God’s image and made to use our words to create goodness; we are commanded to care for God’s creation; and to rest as God intends for us. And when we fall short, we are invited by God to seek forgiveness and find ways to continue the conversation of grace and the actions of love with God and with one another. Amen.