

Who Sinned? Who Cares?

sermon digest

March 8, 2015

Genesis 3:1-13

larry dipboye

According to Greek mythology, Pandora was the name given to the first woman on earth. Zeus ordered her creation from clay as punishment to humanity for the theft of fire from the gods by the Titan Prometheus. The gods got into the act of creation by adding to Pandora's seductive gifts. Athena taught her to weave cloth and adorned her with a beautiful gown. Hermes gave her a shameful mind and deceitful ways, added the gift of speech to carry her lies and crafty words, and finally named her Pandora, "all-endowed." Finally, Zeus sent her off with a large jar, Pandora's Box. Although Prometheus warned his brother Epimetheus not to accept any gifts from Zeus, Pandora was too enticing. Epimetheus accepted Pandora and her mystery jar which she opened in ignorance unleashing untold evils on humanity. Hesiod notes that Pandora brought to an end the Golden Age of an all male paradise and ushered in the Silver Age in which humanity was subjected to death and women to birth.

The Hebrew story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden revolves around a forbidden tree, a seductive, talking snake, who informed the woman that the fruit of the tree will make her like God knowing good and evil. (For the record, please note that the story does not mention apples). The active disobedience of the woman and the passive disobedience of the man proved the snake to be right. Their eyes were opened, and their nakedness was exposed. Discovered by God, they confessed their disobedience, and they were banned from the Garden of Eden.

Both the Greek myth of Pandora and the Hebrew myth of Adam and Eve are theodicies that attempt to explain the source of evil in the world. Both stories put the weight of sin on the woman and make man the somewhat innocent bystander. Both stories carry sexual overtones that seem to make sexuality, for Adam and Eve nakedness, in some sense the root of evil. The Greek gods are mischievous and arbitrary in their treatment of humanity, hardly worthy of anyone's worship. The Hebrew God is about making laws and enforcing them and acts both to punish the disobedience and to provide for the continuation of human life and even immortality from a tree of life—a somewhat more descent deity than the Greek Olympiads.

The universal presence of evil in the world is the basic human problem. We do not have to rely on mythology to confront the polarity of good and evil in our world. The atrocities committed in Hitler's attempt to rule the world have served to remind my generation of the reality of evil, but it seems that every generation has its own examples in real history about human behavior beyond the bounds of belief. The Nazi-Jewish Holocaust was not only a genocidal attack on the Jews, it became the cause for questioning belief in God by both the victims and witnesses.

Almost every reference to evil in the world today seems bound to mention the horrors of September 11, 2001. Recently, we are flooded with images of atrocities in Syria and Iraq committed by the Islamic State known as ISIS or ISIL. The identity of Jihadi John and information about his childhood behavior provides us with a new "devil" to carry the personification of evil.

The word *fall*, as in the first sin or the fall of humanity from innocence into evil, never appears in the Genesis story. Walter Brueggemann (*Interpretation, Genesis*, p.41) declares, "Nothing [like the fall] could be more remote from the narrative itself." The word grew out of later Jewish and Christian thought about the origin of sin. In 1 Timothy 2:13-14, Eve is the problem: "For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." I recall sitting in a Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980's in which opposition to the ordination of women in a Convention Resolution was supported by reference to the above text calling women, "first in sin." Well, not according to Romans 5; Adam gets all of the credit for the introduction of sin into the world. Sin originated with Adam, the Man, so that Paul could credit Jesus as the Second Adam, the source of salvation.

Jewish theologian Martin Buber (*Good and Evil*, p.67) suggested that the Genesis story may be founded on a primeval myth of the envy and vengeance of the gods. The Old Testament in general is not interested in such abstract issues as the Fall, and quite often the Genesis story is read more like a cartoon from Sunday's funny papers than a serious statement of the human condition. The cartoon story is an exchange between the parent (God) and the child (Eve and Adam). The ultimatum "You

may not have this toy” is laid down. The child challenges with “acting out” disobedience to the unfair or irrational rule, and the story ends with the snake, Eve, and Adam getting tossed out.

The devaluation of women in myths of the Fall may be sufficient cause to dismiss the Genesis story along with other ancient folk tales. Whether the character is named Pandora or Eve is less important than the common distortion of placing the blame on woman. Mythology, storytelling, was a primary teaching tool for early religion that often provided half-answers and prejudice for human questions, most of which were the kind of issues raised by children or pressed by parents to enforce rules of behavior for the family.

Stories of the Fall are prone to be justification for scapegoats. Since Eve was tempted by the promise of “being like God” by eating the forbidden fruit, she has been accused of being overly ambitious and insubordinate in her behavior. If the woman had been properly submissive, so the rationale proceeds, the fall could be avoided. So the root of all evil has been identified as pride, exacerbated by the combination *proud woman*. The regular recitation of Proverbs 16:18, “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall,” was basic to my childhood instruction. The primary issue between parent and child was parental authority. The attitude of a good child was submission, regardless of the facts. The issue with Eve was about submission to divine authority with implications of male dominance. Was a proud and haughty spirit Eve’s problem? She certainly was not willing to accept the Garden rules without question.

About the time the Death of God theology was emerging on the American scene, Harvey Cox wrote *On Not Leaving It to the Snake*. Cox challenged the common wisdom, pinning the blame on Eve’s insubordination. One has to wonder about the rules in question. What is wrong with human knowledge of good and evil? It turns out the snake was right. The forbidden fruit did open the eyes and expose humans to the polarity of good and evil.

Cox attributes this reading of the fall to political interests. Monarchies, including Church authority, demanded obedience, submission, and conformity. Attributing sin to independent thinking and personal pride was expedient for the establishments in society. Jürgen Moltmann came out of Hitler’s Germany and discovered the gospel in a POW camp in Belgium. Moltmann admits to lacking trust in authority. His experience in Nazi Germany as well as centuries of Christian association of monarchy with a rigid monotheism led to resistance to monarchical dominance. The historical rationale tied the rule of God to the rule of kings. If God stands over humanity demanding blind obedience, why should kings and parliaments do any less? Moltmann found in the diversity and internal relationships of the Trinity a God of community who is more committed to loving relationships than parental or monarchical dominance.

Cox concluded that it is wrong for the church to pound away at pride as the tragic human flaw and to make a virtue of dependency. We cannot shove our responsibility to decide off on someone else, not even on God. So a careful examination of the Adam-Eve-sin story in light of the rest of the Bible is not about the lure of playing God so much as default to playing the fool. The human problem is apathy, *acedia*, sloth, surrender to authority without thinking, in Cox’s words, “leaving it to the snake.”

In *Theology of Hope* Moltmann assigned the root of all evil to despair, to apathy before the powers of destruction in this world. Stoic influence on early Christianity suggested an apathetic deity and proposed an uninvolved, unaffected, uncaring divine monarch.

Cox suggested that the whole picture of Eve and Adam’s defiance of petty conventions imposed by small-minded people leaves us with a secret preference for sin. So much of our picture of the saint is defined in negative terms of self-denial and benign piety that it is no wonder that sainthood is undesirable.

We are created for responsible behavior. The gospel calls us to responsible decision rather than blind obedience. Questioning authority is hardly the evil it has been made out to be in tradition. Without bloodshed or violence, Jesus challenged authority as he called his disciples to think about their decisions and their responsibility before God.

The Nazi officers charged in the Nuremberg Trials with crimes against humanity consistently passed on the blame for their behavior to their commanders. No one, it seemed, was responsible to question whether or not crimes were committed or justice served in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

The Vietnam My Lai massacre of March 16, 1968, led to public outcry against the slaughter of some fifty unarmed civilians and to a major change in military ethics. Based on the experience of Nuremberg, the court ruled that soldiers on the ground were responsible for making moral judgments before carrying out orders that might be judged as criminal. In a word, soldiers cannot pass off their moral responsibility to commanders.

Do you wonder why ISIS makes its recruiting appeal primarily to teens? Children are less likely to challenge authority or to question orders than seasoned adults. They are less equipped to interpret the Koran and the justice of God than their seniors who have lived awhile.

Martin Luther challenged the authority of the Church and suggested that Christians “sin boldly.” Although Luther has often been criticized for his earthy language and insubordinate behavior, his goal was not the development of a criminal society or to promote sin. He had found that the orders from the Church did not necessarily come from God, that Christians need to take the risk of making the wrong decision in order to accept the challenge of decision itself.

The celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the march to Selma, Alabama, commemorated people willing to suffer the consequences of challenging unjust laws in order to expose racist evil. For some “authorities,” God was on the side of the troopers swinging clubs and threatening lives to break the challenge to established Jim Crow Laws. For the people who risked their lives, God was more likely to be found in the hearts and minds of the people bloodied by authority, people who believed that God had created all people in the image of God for life in responsible freedom.

The question here is not about the necessity of law and order in a civilized world. In a world of fallible human judgment, the question is the right and necessity to question authority. All human authority, whether from church or state or from parents and teachers, even when claimed to be the voice of God, must be accountable to a higher holier justice.