

Sermon for March 5, 2017 "Original Sin/Original Grace"

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Matthew 4:1-11

"Original Sin:" that is the label we Christians use to speak of the sin that started it all. When God created Adam and Eve there was no sin. They lived in a state of blessed innocence. The only commandment was, "Do not eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." In their innocence they had no first-hand knowledge of good and evil. Then the serpent invented something new: temptation. "Look isn't the fruit of that tree plump and juicy. Surely God won't kill you for eating it. God is Good. It will make you big and strong like God. Go ahead eat it. Hissss." And they ate. Now they knew first-hand what evil was. They had disobeyed their Creator; betrayed the one who birthed them into creation. The eyelids of innocence were drawn back and they could see, but they did not like what they saw.

"Original Sin," as a theological term, refers to the origin of sin, but it also refers to the results. Innocence and purity were taken away. With the comprehension of good came the first-hand experience of evil. Humans knew the evil of betrayal and guilt. And they knew the separation of evil; alienation from their God and Father. Sometimes I like to call original sin "original separation." Because of that sin, humanity was separated from its creator. As a result of that sin Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden where they had walked and talked with God. They went to live east of Eden, a God forsaken land where people live by the sweat of their brow. A place where the wild beasts of death captures all eventually. To this day their descendants are born in that land separated from their Creator.

Original Sin speaks of the origin of sin and its results, but it also speaks of our sin. Adam and Eve started a trend. Sin has become a family tradition for humanity. Paul said, "Therefore as sin came into the world through one human being and death through sin, and so death spread to all humankind because all sinned."(Romans 5:12) The first sin was a prideful betrayal of the God that had given life and everything else good. Every sin since then has basically been a repeat of that same betrayal. They say you always hurt the ones you love. God has loved us most and had been hurt the worst.

That's "Original sin," but what's "Original grace?" A good friend of mine in college was a Lutheran, Harold Jefferies. He's now a Lutheran Pastor. If Methodism can be characterized by "good works" then Lutheranism can be characterized by "grace." Grace, by the way, refers to any unmerited gift, unearned gift from God. With Harold everything was grace. I remember one time he even interpreted the fall as an act of grace. The fall, the source of all sin, sickness, and death, a means of grace! "Preposterous," I said. Of course this idea of Original Grace did not originate with Harold. He had read it somewhere. According to this idea of original grace, if the fall had not taken place, then we would have never known the joy of being saved. It was an act of grace for God to allow the fall so that we could experience God's amazing grace through salvation.

Now you and I might not go as far as my friend Harold, but I have to say I appreciate the spirit of his suggestion. Even in the origin of sin God's delivering/saving grace is present. God took the origin of sin and made it also the origin of grace. One might argue that we would have been better off if Adam and Eve had not eaten that forbidden fruit. But God was loving and gracious enough to offer us a way out of our situation of sin.

Just consider how graciously God punished Adam and Eve. According to the law, Adam and Eve were to die for their sin. And God after all is a just God, so justice would be served. But like a loving parent the punishment was given lovingly and with the most grace possible. God could have wiped Adam and Eve out of existence right then and there. God could have called for the earth to swallow them, or fire to come down from heaven to consume them. God had every right to do that. Instead of some instantaneous means of death, God decided to let them die of old age. "Old age, what's that?" Before this no one had ever aged before. This was an entirely new concept for Adam and Eve. So Adam and Eve began to slowly age and die. By the grace of God they died of old age; a very old age if you remember. This gave them a chance to live, have children, and even to mourn their sin.

Humanity has been sinful from the beginning, but God has been even more gracious from the beginning. In the beginning God made the rules simple, "Don't eat from that tree right there." But that was too hard for the first humans, and I seriously doubt you and I could do much better. Even that simplest act of righteousness was beyond them. So God had to punish, but God's punishment was gracious. Adam and Eve had children and they had children and so on until one of their descendants was Jesus, the son of man and Son of God. God graciously sentence Adam and Eve to a slow death which gave them time to produce descendants who eventually produced a Savior for all humanity.

And what Adam and Eve couldn't do Jesus could. They couldn't resist the temptation and remain righteous. But Jesus could. It is no accident that the first temptation was to produce food. Adam and Eve were surrounded by food but they still succumb to the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit. Jesus, after fasting for 40 days, refused to give in to temptation and make bread from stones.

The other two temptations were also fulfillments of what Adam and Eve failed to do. The serpent told Adam and Eve that the forbidden fruit would make them great, like God. Similarly the devil offered Jesus an opportunity to grandstand and to have the greatness of an earthly king. But once again where humanity failed, Jesus prevailed. Paul said, "As the trespasses of one led to condemnation for all, so the act of righteousness of one leads to acquittal and life for all."(Romans 5:18)

Like Adam and Eve, and Jesus, we all face temptations. Original sin reminds us that we humans tend to give in to temptation. It is a family trait. The mother and father of the race did it and we do it too. Like them we try to be like God and know good and evil. And like them we are ashamed when our eyes are opened to what we have done out of pride and self-centeredness.

Original Grace reminds us that God sent his Son to do what we couldn't. We couldn't stay righteous, but Jesus did. Humanity sinned when it was tempted, but Jesus told the Devil where to go. Humanity disobeyed God and shamed itself, but Jesus obeyed God and made his Heavenly Father proud.

We all face temptation and we all give in to it. When you give in to it, remember that God offers us the righteousness of Jesus to replace the unrighteousness we possess. God offers us forgiveness and a way to come home to our Heavenly Father when we have wandered away. But when you face temptation remember that you can't stand up to it. The mother and father of our race gave in to temptation. And the rest of humanity has followed in their footsteps. That is except for Jesus. He not only resisted temptation, but he even drove the tempter away. And he can do the same for us.

When you are tempted, don't trust in your own abilities or strength, because you are

sinful from your origins. Instead trust in Jesus and his strength, because God is gracious from the beginning. And remember: where humanity fails, Jesus prevails.