

"Caught in the Drama of Desire"

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Based on Brian D. McLaren *We Make the Road by Walking*, Chapter 4

Texts: Genesis 3: 3-13; Philippians 2: 3-11

"In the ancient wisdom of storytelling, Genesis tells us that we are part of God's good creation. It then tells us we have a special responsibility as God's reflections or image bearers. It tells us that in order to reflect God's image, we have to desire the Tree of Life, not the tree that feeds our pride so that we think we can play god and judge between good and evil. [Further], the story of Adam and Eve doesn't need to be about literal historical figures in the past to tell us something very true about us, our history, and our world today. We humans have consistently chosen the wrong tree. Instead of imitating and reflecting God as good image bearers should do, we start competing with God, edging God out, playing god ourselves." (McLaren, 15)

Ah, Adam and Eve, serpents, and apples, "she made me do it" scapegoating, primordial sin or "the fall" which leads to ransom crucifixion, male irresponsibility, ... let's see ... what else can we wrap up in this story to screw

ourselves up? I mean, really, we have put a lot of stock in one short story from our scripture. We don't even take the time to figure out what the original writers of Genesis were trying to explain or communicate, we just have it all figured out: other people are sinners, and unless they find the faith that we decide is true, they are destined for eternal punishment. We base this, not on Jesus' words very much, nor much of the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible). Instead, it's based on a lot of social construction over the years that just seems to get worse as time goes by. Have you ever noticed that so much talk of sin is about other people, and little about ourselves? Even though many say, "Jesus paid it all", we still act as though we earn our salvation? So much is screwed up in the interpretation of not only this text, but of several others, that I get tired just thinking about how to stand in some other place when it comes to these issues. But I'd like to try. Don't be surprised if some of what I say is upsetting or is something you have never (or rarely) heard before. And funny thing is, when we hear something different or new, our first reaction is to be against it. Here is the gist of what I want to tell you: God has always loved you and humanity. There is nothing we can do to earn it. And there is nothing we can do to have it taken away.

Because the truth is God's love isn't about us. Well, that's kind of untrue. It is about us, but not about what we do. It's about who God is. Most of us grew

up with moralism, rather than healthy morality. Moralism is the reliance on largely arbitrary purity codes, needed rituals, and dutiful “requirements” that are framed as prerequisites for enlightenment. “Every group and individual usually begins this way. I guess it’s understandable. People look for something visible, seemingly demanding, and socially affirming to do or not do rather than undergo a radical transformation to the mind and heart of God.” (Richard Rohr, Participatory Morality, Daily Meditations from the Center for Action and Contemplation, September 9, 2021). Further, “moralism and ritualism allow us to think that we are independently “good” without the love and mercy of God and without being of service to, or engaging deeply with, anybody else.” (Ibid)

Put another way:

Our carrot-and-stick approach to religion is revealed by the fact that one is never quite pure enough, holy enough, or loyal enough for the presiding group. Obedience is normally a higher virtue than love in religious circles. This process of “sin management” has kept us clergy in business. Hiding around the edges of this search for moral purity are evils that we have readily overlooked: slavery, sexism, racism, wholesale classism, greed, pedophilia, national conquest, LGBTQIA+ exclusion, and the destruction of Native cultures. Almost all wars were fought with the full blessing of Christians. We have, as a result, what some cynically call “churchianity” or “civil religion” rather than deep or transformative Christianity. (Ibid)

And often, that “civil religion” arises from the misinterpretation of the whole saga of the Garden of Eden.

The real “problem of the Garden of Eden” is our getting caught up in the desire to have “more knowledge than trust” (Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation Bible Commentary*, 49). And with that we now know more than we could have wanted to. And there is no place to run. (Ibid) So, what do we do? We hide. If you ask me, the real sin of the garden of Eden was not the eating, or listening to the snake, but much more so the hiding and saying to God, “I was afraid”. Living out of fear of God has caused more moralism and more harm to the people of this world, than anyone can probably quantify.

As a short aside, the word *fear* in the Bible always means, “to have respect for.” God desires relationship with us. God desires our respect. But most of all, God desires us to be willing recipients of a love that will not let go of us. The death that was warned when the garden was first inhabited was not death from God, but death at the hands of another, but Cain and Abel is another week. This is, in fact, “not a simple story of human disobedience and divine displeasure. It is rather a story about the struggle God has in responding to the facts of human life. When the facts warrant death, God insists on life for his creatures.” (Brueggemann, 50). “In God’s garden, as God wills it, there is *mutuality and equity*. In God’s garden now, permeated by mistrust [and hiding], there is *control and distortion*. But that distortion is not for one moment accepted as the will of

the Creator.” (ibid) The real agenda, then and now, is “how to live with the creation in God’s world on God’s terms.” (Brueggemann, 51).

What we fail to understand is what God’s terms really are. They are love, grace, mercy, reciprocity, ... I don’t know ... what else did Jesus show us? He showed us the same God who began the creation, in biblical terms, created a humanity and called it good, and then watched humanity miss the point. And even in missing the point, God over and over and over and over and over and over again tries to show us what God tried to show us in the first place: “Failure to trust God with our lives is death”. That is true. But we seem to think that the death comes from God. And that could not be further from the truth. When we don’t trust God, we kill ourselves and we kill one another. That doesn’t mean we do nothing, but it does mean that there is something bigger than the individual, both in responsibility and in possibility. We need other humans, and we need something bigger than ourselves. “So what is urged, if not knowledge? Ignorance? No, not ignorance, but trust,” says Walter Brueggemann in his commentary on the passage for today.

Our mistake, then and now, is to pursue *autonomous* freedom. And just about all of us are conditioned toward that end. What, then, instead? We’re

invited to free ourselves from the drama of desire. When we stop desiring to play God by pronouncing misjudgments on one another, we've taken a step. When we stop desiring what others have and start being thankful for what is ours to manage, we've taken a step. When we stop thinking ourselves better than another, we've taken a step. When we stop deciding we're worse than another, we've taken a step. When we finally stop using this story as account for what is wrong with the world, and instead see it as another episode in God's care for us, we've taken a step. And one step at a time, sometimes forward and sometimes back, God patiently waits, encouragingly cajoles, and powerfully forgives. God has no desire for you to see yourself and others as fallen. Fallible, maybe. Misdirected at times, sure.

I don't know how to say it in ways people can hear, but I'll never understand why it is that we believe clergy and other religious folks when they tell us we're no good for God, but we'll fight to the teeth someone who says God loves us without reservation or hesitation. So, I just keep saying it week after week, month after month, year after year, the story of the garden of Eden is not all about us (boy, we're self-centered sometimes!). No, it is about God and even though we couldn't live in the garden the way we had, we never lost our place as God's good creation. Why is that so hard to believe?

I believe God has the same question. "Why won't they believe I love them?"

Amen.

