

Are there any of us who are not at least generally familiar with the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? Chapter Three of the Book of Genesis comes immediately following the two versions of the creation story. In the first, God created the earth and all that is in it, over the course of six days. That included humankind, male and female, created in God's own image, blessed to be fruitful, multiply and have dominion over every living thing upon the earth. The first creation story takes place over six days; then God declared it all good and rested on the seventh day.

The second creation story, not nearly as systematic as the first, begins with God's creation of the man from the dust of the ground and God's commandment to the man that he should not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, an order backed up by God's admonishment that if he does, he will die. It is after this specific instruction that God decides the man should not be alone and creates the animals and birds, seeking to find a helper and partner for him. When none of them is found to be appropriate, God creates a woman from one of the man's ribs.

Everyone is happy, it seems, until the serpent comes along, more crafty than any other animal God has made. The serpent tempts the woman, who has apparently heard from the man of God's warning not to eat fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden. God warned of death as punishment; but no, the serpent says, you will not die from eating this fruit. Your eyes will be opened and you'll know good and evil just as God knows. So the woman ate the forbidden fruit, gave some to her husband who was with her, and he also ate. They didn't die, as God had warned them, but their eyes were opened just as the serpent promised. In today's passage, we hear what happens when they're caught, hiding from God because they know they disobeyed God.

Spiritual tradition tells us that this is the story of original sin, the explanation of why humankind shall be forever punished for the bad choice made by the original woman and the original man. For those of us who like to argue semantics, it's noteworthy that the word "sin" is not mentioned even once in the first three chapters of Genesis, but is introduced in Chapter Four, when God disdains Cain's offering from the fruit of the ground. God says to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." Perhaps we can suppose that by this time the horse is already out of the barn and it's appropriate to call sin by its rightful name.

So what does that say to us about sin from the perspective of today's passage? First, that sin is a conscious and deliberate act of disobedience. The disobedience is obvious, and despite their arguments, it's also obvious that the first man and woman made a clear choice to eat the fruit they had been forbidden to eat. They took for themselves something God had not yet given them or permitted them to know about: that is, the ability and freedom to make their own decisions, right or wrong. We might wonder if, in time, God would have taught them the moral values that we as children of God, thousands and thousands of years later, have been forced to learn from our elders and through our own mistakes. As Paula Franck writes, "without the freedom to choose, obedience to God would have no moral value."<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the sin committed through disobedience of God's commandment in this story, we can also see here the roots of a couple of other negative behaviors that are all too familiar to us today: specifically, the ability to be easily coerced, and the tendency to blame someone else for our own choices. As long as we're calling this the story of the original sin, let's also call it the story of the original peer pressure and the story of our original loss of self-accountability. We *do* give in to temptation too easily when our guard is down, not necessarily on the scale of eating the forbidden fruit, but in subtle—and not so subtle—actions and words that lead us to squander the creation God gave us dominion over, and to disregard even the two basic commandments: to love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and spirit, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Paula Franck in *Synthesis, Year B, Proper 5 – Tradition*, June, 2012.

And let's admit it, every one of us has said something equivalent to "the woman gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate," or "the serpent tricked me, and I ate." Aren't these sins also?

When we do sin, we know we've done the wrong thing, just as this first man and woman knew. That's why we can identify with their hiding themselves from God's presence. We would like to do the same thing, if the truth be known, despite our belief that God is always watching us, that God knows all that we do and all that we say and even all that we think but don't say? It's bad enough that we know we've made a mistake; we would prefer that God not know about it too. Yet we cannot have a God who knows all and sees all and still believe that we can hide from God or keep secrets from God!

From today's story about sin as taught in the first book of the Hebrew scriptures, it's easy to transition to our Lord's words about sin in the first book of the Christian scriptures. After telling "the crowd" a parable about Satan, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." Although our passage from Genesis doesn't mention forgiveness, what we know of the story tells us that God had warned the man and woman they would die if they ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge. But when they did, even after they were confronted by God, they did not die; they were cast out of the garden—perhaps God's original act of forgiveness.

We know through the scriptures of many other times when God forgave God's people for their transgressions. But from Mark's Gospel we hear Jesus condemn for eternity whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit. What does that mean exactly? In the *Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Peter Angeles writes that blasphemy is first, impious, mocking, undignified speech about or attitudes toward God, sacred, or religious things; and second, "claiming the powers, privileges, and authority of God or attributing them to someone who is not God. Regarded as a sin." Another commentator writes that "to insist that one's rebellion against God, however it has been fashioned, is *something in which one will persist forever* is to be guilty of an 'eternal sin,'" and continues, "Anything can be forgiven, apart from *the determination* (by persisting in one's evil ways) *not to be forgiven!*"<sup>2</sup> I'll ask for all of us: how can we persist in evil ways forever, or even repeatedly, and still worship a God who loves us and forgives us, again, and again, and again?

Rachel Naomi Remen tells the story of a well-known rabbi at a Yom Kippur service<sup>3</sup>, when Jews everywhere reflect on the year just past, remembering their shortcomings and unkindness, and hoping for God's forgiveness. But on this occasion, the rabbi didn't speak about God's forgiveness. Instead, he walked out into the congregation, took his one year-old daughter from his wife, and carried the child with him to the podium. She was adorable, smiling at the congregation from her father's arms, and every heart melted. As he held her, the rabbi began his sermon about the meaning of the holiday.

Feeling his attention drift away from her, the baby girl grabbed his nose. Gently he freed himself and continued the sermon. A few moments later, she put his tie in her mouth and everyone chuckled. He rescued his tie and smiled at her. Then, looking out over the top of her head, he said to his congregation, "Think about it. Is there anything she can do that you could not forgive her for? Just then, she reached up and grabbed his eyeglasses. Everyone laughed out loud as the rabbi retrieved them, put them back on, laughed with them, and waited for silence. Then he asked, "And when does that stop? When does it get hard to forgive? At three? At seven? At fourteen? At thirty-five? How old does someone have to be before you forget that everyone is a child of God?"

That's how God sees us: as God's own children, loving us, perhaps punishing us when we need to be punished, but always forgiving us. All that we have to do is remember that God is God; and we are not. And that shouldn't be too hard! *Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> King Oehrig in *Synthesis, Proper 5, Year B – Postscript*, June, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.