

**“Off to a Good Start”**

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First Presbyterian Church of Willmar, MN

May 27, 2018


Genesis 2:4b-3:24

*Today's Scripture Lesson will be read from the  
“Gold & Honey” Children's Bible*

When I was a child, some of my favorite stories were the stories of mythology. While my mom gave piano lessons in De Smet on Saturday afternoons, I would walk down to the public library and be transported to a world where Daedalus endeavored to free himself and his son Icarus from prison by harnessing the power of flight, where siren song serenaded sailors, and where Pandora was given a box. They were fabulous stories filled with magical creatures and larger than life heroes. But they were more than that. Myths, like these stories from Greek mythology, were the stories people told to explain their reality. And, inherent in the telling of those stories, were lessons about how to live in light of that reality: listen when your father tells you not to fly too close to the sun; don't be so enamored of a pretty song that you miss the rocky shore; once you open the box, you can't unopen it, so be careful what you set free in the world. These stories were morality tales as much as they were entertainment.

If you were listening to today's Bible story, you may recognize that it sounds an awful lot like one of these myths – and in many ways it is. It is a story that the ancient Hebrew people told to explain their reality. And it offers a warning that there are consequences when we don't follow instructions. From this story we might learn: listen when God tells you not to eat the fruit; snakes will lure you in and deceive you; once you eat the fruit there is no going back. And that's great. When we heard this story as children we were learning that when God – or our parents – set a boundary in our lives, it's possibly for a good reason. We were learning the difficult lesson that some people we encounter are snakes who lie to us in order to manipulate us - you can't always trust everything everyone says. We were learning that the shiny, low-hanging fruit isn't necessarily good for us; picking it, and eating it, may have consequences for us and for the world that will make our lives difficult.

I think we learn from this story that ignorance was bliss.



We were created *good* – living lives of equity and harmony with each other and with creation. We were created *very good* – and blissfully ignorant of the darker potential within ourselves. In today’s story we learn that somewhere along the line humanity exchanged blissful ignorance for the weight of responsibility of knowing just how much harm humanity is capable of doing to itself and to our planet. We exchanged blissful ignorance for the weight of responsibility of knowing there are consequences for our actions and our choices. We exchanged blissful ignorance for the weight of responsibility of knowing that now that we know, we can’t unknow.

Here is the truth of the story we may have missed as children. Eating the *fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* wasn’t as simple as spoiling our dinner by sneaking into the kitchen to steal a cookie. Eating the *fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* opened our awareness to a world we may have been better off not knowing about.

Let me unpack that a little bit. As adults who care about children we want to protect them. And for a while, we can: we control how much of the world they are exposed to and what people they encounter; we limit their access to television and music; we set boundaries around their activities, we make sure all of their basic needs – food, shelter, safety, belonging – are met. But we can’t protect them forever; we can’t shelter them indefinitely from the pain of the world. So, we do our best to prepare them for what might happen and grieve with them when it does. Our hearts break the first time they learn that other kids can be really mean, and when they learn that adults don’t always keep their promises. We cry with them and try to explain the unexplainable when they lose a favorite pet, or a grandparent. We grieve that we live in a world where we have to teach them about stranger danger, and that *no means no*, and that it’s really easy for people to lie on the internet.

Eating the *fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* means we know things we would rather not know. But it also means we know something important and valuable. “The fruit of the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil* provides the self-consciousness that gives humans the ability to make moral choices (CEB Study Bible Notes Gen 2:16-17).” We may know things we would rather not know. But we also know that we have a choice. Knowing means we understand that our choices create a ripple effect, and we can choose what kind of energy we are sending out into the world. Knowing means we are hard-wired with empathy so that we can recognize and respond to another’s

hurt. Knowing means we are aware of the brokenness of the world - a brokenness to which we have contributed - so that we can become part of the solution and healing of those wounds.

Because, remember, we were created *good*. We've done a few bad things along the way. But the *good* with which we were created is still in us. Some days it's easier to find than others. But we are still *good* and we are still loved. And because we are still *good* and still loved, we can *do good* and love others. But, on a daily basis we have to remember that we possess the *knowledge of good and evil*. We have to pause, and reflect, and discern, and use what we know to be good caretakers of creation and of other human beings. We need to pause and notice that we are all part of God's *good* creation and recognize our shared humanity.

Our Wednesday morning women's study has been reading "The Book of Forgiving" by Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho Tuto, and they say this about our shared humanity and the importance of recognizing the dark and light that occupy us: "We are able to recognize that we are all fragile, vulnerable, flawed human beings capable of thoughtlessness and cruelty. We also recognize that no one is born evil and that we are all more than the worst thing we have done in our lives. A human life is a great mixture of goodness, beauty, cruelty, heartbreak, indifference, love, and so much more. We want to divide the saints from the sinners, but we cannot. All of us share the core qualities of our human nature, and so sometimes we are generous and sometimes selfish. Sometimes we are thoughtful and other times thoughtless, sometimes we are kind and sometimes cruel."

But we are all part of each other - bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh - and we have been charged with the responsibility to care for and serve one another and all of creation. Some days we do that better than others. Some days our pride and arrogance lead to playground feuds and global crisis. Some days we are lured in by the temptation of power and certitude. Some days we unleash all kinds of garbage on our families, and friends, and neighbors. But some days we are better than that. Some days we set aside selfish ambitions in order to work for peace. Some days we offer kindness and compassion to the world. Some days we sacrifice our own comfort and safety to ensure comfort and safety for someone else. Because now that we know better, we can do better.

God got us off to a good start; let's keep being the good in the world.