

Sermon: Just to be Clear  
Text: Genesis 3  
Date: June 26, 2016  
Context: WWPC  
#3 in summer sermon series  
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*. . . she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband,  
who was with her, and he ate.*

### Genesis 3:6

Two weeks ago we launched a new summer sermon series, focused on the big stories of the Old Testament. If you were here that day you may remember that my inspiration for this idea was a lecture given at the Festival of Homiletics by David Lose, the President of Lutheran Theological Seminary.

David was candid enough to say that he drew his own inspiration for recommending this idea to his listeners, the idea of preaching such series, from an unusual source.

It came to him from a trend that is occurring on modern television. A growing number of major networks are developing shows that are framed around long narrative arcs. That is, they are telling one story during a given season, over a number of weekly episodes.

As part of this trend, and to help viewers remember what happened on the previous episode, these shows always do an up front bit that goes something like this:

*Previously on Game of Thrones...*and then they recap what has gone before.

So we're going to follow this example. *Previously at Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church...*

Two weeks ago, on the first Sunday of this new series, we compared and contrasted the two differing creation stories that come to us in Genesis 1 and 2. We concluded that the second of these two accounts is perhaps less of a creation story and more of a love story, as it ends with God blessing Adam by creating an equal partner for him, someone with whom he can tend and enjoy the garden paradise in which they find themselves.

Last week, Beth looked at a story from Genesis two about the power of names, and explored the vulnerability and intimacy that is built into calling one another by our names.

Which brings us to the story I read a moment ago, from Genesis 3. This ancient fable, starring a wily serpent and two innocent and freshly minted human beings, surely ranks amongst the most notorious and consequential stories in all of scripture.

On a basic level, the story is so simple it's suitable for children. And it does what fables are supposed to do. It explains things: why snakes have no legs and a venomous bite. Why childbirth is so painful. How hard labor and death entered the human experience. Clearly, this story is not meant to be read as science.

But on a theological level the story is so consequential that the events it describes have come to have their own name: the fall of humanity.

It's the one story in scripture that tells of that moment when original sin entered the human race and tainted every single descendent of Adam and Eve, including you and me. It's a tragic tale, about how that one disobedient bite of forbidden fruit caused us all to fall, as one writer put it, "hopelessly and irreversibly into the power and habits of sin."

Or at least that's how some people read and understand Genesis 3. Certainly this has been the prevailing view held by the Christian church ever since the Reformation, and even before the Reformation. But this was not always the case. And some people have never read or understood the story in this way.

For example, and most notably, the idea of original sin is completely foreign to our Jewish sisters and brothers. For one thing, sin is not mentioned in this story. And for another, the Old Testament does not feature any further teaching or commentary about the so-called "fall of humanity." This is simply not a core idea in the Hebrew scriptures.

Yes, we know from the prophetic tradition that the people of Israel are occasionally called out for their stubbornness and their idolatry. But these wayward tendencies are understood to be temporary conditions, not a deep seated, permanent part of the people's character.

So, just be clear, in the tradition that gave us the story of Genesis, sinfulness is not understood to be an inherent and permanent part of the human condition.

Which is perhaps also why Jesus himself did not focus the main body of his teaching or practice on addressing our fallen nature.

The idea that we are inherently sinful and the corresponding plan to redeem us from our sin is simply not part of Jesus major teachings. He makes no mention of this in the first sermon he preaches in his hometown synagogue, or in the sermon on the mount.

And it is not a primary theme of his parables. That honor goes to the Kingdom of God, which Jesus insists is inside of us. Sort of the opposite of having a fallen nature.

So if this idea that humanity has been infected with original sin is not a core idea in the Old Testament, and if Jesus himself was not preoccupied with it, where did the idea come from?

The answer, in short, is that it comes to us from the Apostle Paul, with a subsequent assist from St. Augustine and, another one, later still, from Martin Luther.

In Romans 5, Paul argues that sin came into the world through one man, the first Adam, and that only through one man, the second Adam, can its effects on the human heart be nullified by his sacrificial death on the cross.

It is a stunningly original idea. Remember that sin is not mentioned in this particular story about the first Adam. What is lost in the Garden of Eden is our innocence, but it is not replaced with an inherently sinful nature.

This is Paul's own interpretive move. And as we all know, it profoundly influenced the theology and practice of the church

But not right away. In the fifth century, Augustine picked up Paul's idea and gave what happened in the Garden of Eden a name: Original Sin.

And with it came the idea that humanity was locked in "total depravity", that is, that all of our faculties – our minds, our emotions our senses—all of them are tainted with the corrupting power of sin.

Some eleven hundred years later Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin picked up Augustine's idea and amplified it. *We are a pile of manure*, Luther once claimed, *and Christ is the snow that covers the manure*. For Calvin, apart from God's grace we are nothing but miserable sinners, little better than worms.

Harsh stuff, for sure. And also the centerpiece of Christian theology for the last five hundred years. Perhaps because this view is so harsh, it is now finally being challenged.

Matthew Fox, in particular, has made a career out of turning the idea of original sin on its head. His bestselling book, *Original Blessing*, first published in 1983, he focuses squarely at the Genesis account.

He notes that again and again God looks at the created order and calls it good. And then God creates human beings in God's own image, and calls humanity good. And then God saw everything that God had made and called it very good.

In Genesis, we were made in a world blessed by God, and created in turn to be a blessing. It is our birthright and inheritance. And to suggest otherwise is a distortion of the Bible's first and most important teaching. Or so Matthew Fox argues.

Yes, it's a deeply appealing idea. Yes, it reflects the fact that the created world is a beautiful and wondrous place. And, yes, it is also true that most people, most of the time, want to be good, are good. And that the world is filled with acts of blinding mercy and brilliant goodness.

People rescue perfect strangers from burning buildings and sinking ships. Philanthropists give millions of dollars of their own money to cure AIDS. Hospitals are filled with doctors and nurses who train for years to dispense acts of mercy and healing upon people they've never met.

Parents sacrifice endlessly to insure the welfare of their children. You find a wallet loaded with cash lying on the floor of Target and you immediately take it to lost and found, cash untouched.

So, one has to admit the idea of original blessing is deeply appealing, and there is substantial empirical evidence to support it.

But if Matthew Fox's account is categorically true – that humans are inherently good and born for blessing – it does leave us with one giant question: how do we account for Orlando and Sandy Hook?

How do we account for the fact that politicians sell their souls and their country out to giant lobby groups?

How do we account for the fact that in subservience to the bottom line, and absent regulatory constraint, corporations will happily pollute and foul the earth until our air is unbreathable and our rivers glow with toxins?

If we lose the vocabulary of sin and evil, then what language is left to us to describe what happens when innocent girls are kidnapped in Nigeria and Detroit and sold into the sex trade?

Or when a deranged fundamentalist blows up a government building in Oklahoma City, or guns down 50 innocent people in a nightclub because of their sexual orientation. Or just for the fun of it. If it's not sin, what is it? A mistake?

So it's both/and isn't it? We are made just a little lower than the angels, as the Psalmist says, and we are also fallen creatures, made of mud and prone to acts that occasionally hurt others and harm the world around us.

The truth is somewhere in the middle between original sin and original blessing, between a theology that understands us to be walking piles of dung, on the one hand, and, on the other, one that sees human beings as nothing but fountains of light and love.

If this is indeed the case, what might the church have to say about that?

I think our General Assembly may have given us at least a partial answer to this question. General Assembly, as most of you know, is the ultimate governing body of the Presbyterian Church (USA). It meets every two years, and this year our own Rodney Lytle was a delegate representing the Presbytery of WNC.

It so happens that GA met just this past week in Portland Oregon. And one of the votes that came before the assembly was whether or not to approve and adopt a new creed—a new statement of faith for regular use in our churches.

I know that at least a few of us have a somewhat skeptical view of our historical creeds. To be perfectly candid, this group sometimes includes me. I think it's fair to say that traditional creeds can seem outdated, their language anachronistic, their theological perhaps a little naïve.

But to dismiss them so quickly and easily is a mistake. And the Belhar Confession points to why this is so.

Every single creed that has stood the test of time, every historic statement of faith that remains in widespread use today, was written in a particular historical context.

And its purpose was at least in part to help God's people understand how their faith applied to a given set of historical circumstances. To say *We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ*, as the Nicene Creed declares, is to say *We do not believe that Caesar is Lord*.

This same principle is true in this case. The Belhar Confession – named after the suburb of Cape Town, where it was drafted – was written in the crucible of the struggle against apartheid.

Even the most optimistic persons among us would surely agree that apartheid is a chilling, undeniably horrifying example of what human sinfulness, the human shadow, looks like when it is directed at and projected on our fellow human beings.

During those awful years faith leaders like Desmond Tutu and Alan Boesak put their lives on the line to speak up and out against the evils of this system in which one group of people systematically oppressed another on the basis of their skin color.

And all during that time the wheels were turning in the minds of South African theologians and faith leaders, pondering the question of how their faith applied to their historical circumstances, of how to give formal expression to their opposition to apartheid, to the sinfulness of it, and to the urgent theological necessity of finding another way to relate to one another as human beings.

The document that resulted is the Confession of Belhar. It is the first creed from the global South to be adopted by a North American denomination. And we are going to say a portion of it together in a few moments as our affirmation of faith.

For it is literally a statement of faith. It looks unflinchingly at the world as it is – a world marked by violent oppression and it declares this is not the way God intended it to be, not the way it should be, not the way it will always be.

To borrow from the words of Alan Boesak, it says that, yes, you may be a racist but if you want to be part of the community of God's people, you cannot stay that way. You must become a new creature in Christ, and be transformed by the grace of God—from a little better than a worm to a little lower than an angel.

That is the theory behind the Confession of Belhar. And it's doubtless why the General Assembly approved its formal adoption by a vote of 540-33, and why people from Portland to Pretoria clapped and cheered and sang when it was approved.

Because all of that is good, and necessary and important. We need to affirm the truth of these creeds again and again because over time they shape us. But in the end it word alone will not save us. And sometimes the artists and the poets have better answers to the question of what will save us than do the theologians and the preachers.

"It's love the saves us," writes Tennessee Williams. "The world is violent and mercurial", he says, "it will have its way with you. We are saved only by love—love for each other and the love that we pour into the art we feel compelled to share: being a parent; being a writer; being a painter; being a friend. We live in a perpetually burning building, and what we must save from it, all the time, is love."

Genesis is a love story, between God and human beings. And it tells of how we are called to follow suit with one another because we are created for love and because it is love that will save us.

It's love that will, finally save us from gun violence. Love and courage and will and determination. It is love that will finally bring healing to the family members of the victims lost in Orlando and Sandy Hook and Aurora and on and on.

It's love the motivated Bishop Tutu and Alan Boesak to speak up and speak out against the evils of apartheid and love that brought that evil regime down.

It's love that inspires and motivates us to work for a better, more inclusive church, a better, more inclusive country. And it's love that lies at the very heart of the Realm of God – a love that lies at the very heart of us all.