

Divergence on the Lectionary - First Sunday in Lent, Year A

First Reading

Genesis 2:15–17, 3:1–7

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 5:12–19

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift

following many trespasses brought justification. For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.
(ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 4:1–11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written,

“Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you,’

and

“On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.”

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written,

“You shall worship the Lord your God
and him only shall you serve.”

Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

We can argue at great length about “original sin” and whether or not that really describes a part of the human condition, humans’ experience of themselves. But the truth is that we all know something is wrong. Deeply wrong. I think that most of us would agree that the notion of “sin” has been abused in the church, used to herd reluctant “sinners” into one behavior or another, but the abuse doesn’t negate the reality that there’s something very broken in human nature.

Unfortunately, the abuse of “sin” by the church over time seems to have created a reaction that is equally mistaken. It seems to me that there is a tendency in those who react against the abuse of sin to swing the pendulum too far in the opposite direction, relying on “the fundamental goodness of human nature” as though that alone is capable of healing what’s wrong in the world.

“Original Sin” was the church’s early attempt to diagnose, to give a name to what’s broken in the world, but it isn’t really any more helpful than going to the doctor and having them say, after your examination, “Yes, that’s a bad cough! Stop coughing!” It fails to go to the root of the ailment.

Our reading from Genesis this week gives us the root of the ailment. It isn’t disobedience. That is the symptom, the cough. The root of the ailment is a desire, a specific desire. Desire to “be like God.” That is the object of desire that the serpent dangles before the first humans. If they will eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they will “be like God.”

Rene Girard identified desire as the human problem many years ago now. In his studies he identified the way that we learn what to desire by imitating the desires of others, and the way this “mimetic” desire leads to conflict and violence and the creation of scapegoats on whom to vent our mimetic rage. But what so few of his students and proponents take note of is the hoped for result of having that object of desire that Girard identified. We want what another has because we believe that having it grants that other person a greater sense of “being.”

Our reading from Genesis this week names that desire for “being” as the root of our troubles. It drives our disobedience, it drives the murder of Abel by Cain. We are “contingent” beings. Our existence is dependent on God. Our desire is to “be like God,” to have being in and of ourselves. In our story here the object that promises to move us from contingency to having “being-in-itself” is the knowledge of good and evil. But it isn’t the specific object that matters here so much as it is the goal. Our smaller desires are warped by the greater desire to have a non-contingent being than we can ever have.

Rene Girard’s work casts invaluable light on all sorts of human culture and conflict. It also illuminates our readings of the Scriptures. It was for this reason that my friend Michael Hardin and I first put together a website called “Preaching Peace” that used mimetic theory as a tool for reading the Gospel lessons in the three year cycle of the lectionary. Some of you may remember that site. (Michael did the vast majority of the writing. He’s utterly brilliant. I edited and added the “so what” portions to his lessons, and did the geek stuff, putting it all into an html framework.)

During that website’s run I struggled with my sense that we were helping preachers and exegetes better diagnose the reasons for the spiral of violence in which we seem to find ourselves, just as our reading from Genesis does, but without offering any real solutions. It simply isn’t enough to say “Stop coughing!”

I finally came up with a treatment. Not just a cough suppressant, but what I hoped might be an antibiotic of sorts. It is a way to redeem desire, a way presented to us through Scripture. I haven’t thought of it in a long time, but our passage from Genesis this week brought it all back, so I’ve uploaded that paper to the Vicar’s Keep in case I haven’t already bored you to death. Here’s the link.

Worship - The Redemption of Desire

Second Reading

We needn’t get tangled up in Paul’s attempt to explain the universality of sin. His point is not the sin, but to create a parallel that illustrates the universality of justification. As “A” came through one (it doesn’t say “one man,” just “one”) so also justification has come through one. Many will quote to me other verses that seem to say otherwise, but I’m sticking to my guns here. Paul is a universalist.

There’s this funny thing about the Greek here. When Paul says “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all humans (*anthropoi*), so one act of righteousness

leads to justification and life for all humans,” the word translated as “all?” Well, it means all. Just all.

But some will say, “Yes, but Jeff, in the very next sentence Paul only speaks of “the many” being made righteous!” And I’ll answer, “Yes, that’s true, but if you read the phrase just before it, he speaks of “the many” being made sinners. It’s a parallelism. Everybody who got made a sinner got made righteous through Jesus’ act of righteousness!”

And then some who haven’t yet given up will splutter, “But.. but.. It says they have to RECEIVE the abundance of grace and the free gift!” And I will nod and sigh and say, “Yes, but it’s another parallelism. The receiving is passive. The humans who “received” death through that one didn’t *choose* to receive it. It just happened. And so the receiving of grace isn’t something we choose, either. As my wife SaraLouise is fond of saying about grace (quoting a story about Sammy Davis Jr. and some grits he didn’t order) “it just comes.”

Oh, there’s still a choice to be made. Will I choose to live as one who is wonderfully reconciled to God, or go on living as one still desperately in need?

Some will say to me (and they already have) “But then why should we do evangelism if everyone is justified, everyone saved.” And I will reply, “Have you looked at the world lately? How many around you are living in the joy of the Resurrection? How many are enjoying their status as restored Children of God?” If we come to God and have our hearts transformed by that truth, those same hearts will absolutely burn with the desire to see others live in the light of the same glorious truth. In Christ, God reconciled the world to Themself. Our task is to shine light on that truth so that others might enjoy it as we do. So yes, evangelizing is important, but not to get people into heaven. It’s to get heaven into people.

Gospel Text

Graham Cooke likes to say that God doesn’t test you to see how you’ll do. They know. (How could They not?) When God brings us into a time of testing, a wilderness time, it is so that we can discover for ourselves how we’re doing. I can speak for myself here and say that at times God has brought me into a time of testing so that I could see how far I had come from where I’d been. At other times I’ve been tested because God wants to show me the next area in which They want my relationship to Them to grow.

Graham also likes to say this. You never fail a test with God. You just get to take it again. And sometimes again. And again!

We see Lent as a season of fasting and repentance. We start Lent off by remembering Jesus' time of testing in the wilderness. That is our model. I grew up misunderstanding fasting. I grew pretty old still misunderstanding. I thought it was giving something up as a *sign* of my repentance, my "godly sorrow." It took me well into adulthood for someone to explain to me that fasting, from whatever you choose to fast, fasting is creating a hunger in yourself, a new empty place for God to fill. When I reach almost unconsciously for a handful of unsweetened chocolate to munch on as I relax in the evening, what am I trying to quiet in myself? What empty place am I trying to fill with something other than God? I probably won't find out until I do without them.

I have friends now who undertake fasts from time to time. I've never been told what it was they learned when they encountered the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the wilderness. I don't usually tell others what comes of my fasts, either. But I get it now. And I'm glad that the church year has a period in it that encourages me to do the same on a regular basis.

I'll be honest. Some of the things I use in place of my relationship to God I still have trouble giving up. I've given up the Oreos, but not the chocolate chips. Not yet. I think I'm still a little scared of what I'll find when I give those up too. The idea feels a little overwhelming. But I'm working on it. God is working on it with me. I haven't failed. I just have another chance to succeed.

In the Gospel text for the First Sunday in Lent, we have the story of Jesus' testing. I don't think He took any of those tests over. This time of testing follows immediately on His baptism. Having heard His Father name Him as Beloved Son He is led out to be tested of Satan. Another wonderful saying from Graham Cooke fits here. Satan, even when he thinks he's doing his own thing, still only manages to serve God's purposes. He's permitted to bring tests our way, but only so that our relationship to the God can be deepened. I can really see that in this passage. In the same way that I am sometimes tested so that I can see how far I've come, Jesus is tested, not to see how well He'll do. The One He calls Father surely knows. But so that Jesus, in His humanity, can see just how strong His relationship is to the One who just named Him before He begins His public ministry.

Where would God like to strengthen your relationship to Them? What testing do They offer you this Lent?