



The Most Fascinating People: Eve

TEXT
Genesis 3:1–21

May 31, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Christian faith is never abstract. Genuine faith is not an idea; it is lived in flesh. Our experiences of God often come to us through other people. So this summer, we will be preaching a series titled “The Most Fascinating People.” In this series, we will consider some very familiar people like Mary and Samson. But we will also take note of some lesser known folks like Onesimus and Hilkiah.

We will pay attention to people of whom we know only one moment — like Barrabas or a eunuch from Ethiopia. This is not just to freshen up on your Bible trivia; but rather, we will learn something of ourselves and something of God through these biblical characters. It will also train our eyes to see the same in one another.

In the last verse of her story, we are told her name: Eve. She is Eve, the mother of all living. She took an apple (the Bible never says it’s an apple, but that’s the tradition) from a tree and everything fell apart. This is the moment theologians have called “the fall.” I’m not so sure that this is really a story about “the fall,” but it is a story about sin.

Do you remember the Beatles song *Imagine*?
*Imagine there’s no heaven
It’s easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky ...
Imagine there’s no countries
It isn’t hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Livin’ life in peace
Yoo hoo
You may say I’m a dreamer
But I’m not the only one
I hope someday you’ll join us
And the world will be as one.*

I like that song, but I don’t think it speaks truth.

John Lennon sounds like a lot of folks these days, believing that if we could just get rid of the clutter of religion — heaven, hell and all the religious stuff — then peace would reign. The world would be one.

Really? In his book *Unapologetic*, the English author Frances Spufford notes that peace is not the default state of being for people. Peace in the self or between people is an achievement.¹ *Imagine* assumes that at our core, we are good. At our core, we are righteous. At our core, we are peaceful.

There is some truth to that, but only some. Eve would question that optimism.

I don’t know if this story is best called “the fall,” but I do believe it is a story about sin. David Brooks says, “Today, the word ‘sin’ has lost its power and awesome intensity. It’s used most frequently in the context of fattening desserts.”²

Eve would warn us that sin is deadly.

Adam and Eve were given instructions. They were told how the world works and how to live in God’s garden: “You may freely eat of any tree in the garden, except you cannot eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil ... eat of that tree and you will die.”³

This word of God is easy to understand; it is clear. That’s not always the case. The truth is, when people speak of clearly knowing God’s will or word, it makes me a little nervous.

In the book *Rise to Greatness*, David Von Drehle chronicles Lincoln’s struggle with the question of emancipation of slaves. Lincoln often heard from religious leaders regarding the issue of slavery, and he noted that these religious leaders, while they didn’t agree with one another, were all certain about “the Divine will.” Lincoln wondered, why didn’t God take the forthright approach and reveal

his intentions “directly to me, for, ... it is my earnest desire to know the will of Providence in this matter.”⁴

I understand that struggle. Knowing God’s will with certainty is never easy. At the same time, I wonder if deep down, Lincoln had his own conviction about what God expected of him.

I know this about myself. It’s not the aspects of life where I am uncertain of what God expects of me that trouble me the most. It’s the places where I am clear about what God expects that I grow uneasy.

In the story, the word of God is clear: Eat this; don’t eat that. All is going well until the crafty serpent and Eve join in a conversation. After their little talk, both Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, and there is no going back. Human beings are now sinful. We have fallen.

That’s what I was taught. Maybe you were too. But I’m not sure calling this “the fall” is the best way to understand this story.

To call it “the fall” makes it sound like this is a particular moment in history that happened once upon a time. It’s a moment when the first human beings made a bad dietary choice that has condemned the rest of us to a life of sin forever.

That doesn’t make any sense. If I understand the text, this story doesn’t describe something that happened once a long time ago; it describes something that happens all the time. This is not a story about the sinfulness of the first people; it is a story about the sinfulness of all people.

This is a story about the reality of our sin. It seeks to speak to an important theological question: Why do good people do bad things?

The story begins with a word that informs how you live in God’s garden: “Eat anything but this. Don’t eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

When our kids were small, we had that time in parenting when we had to teach them that they couldn’t play in the street. That was the rule. You can play in the yard, but you can’t play in the street — for if you play in the street, you will die. (I didn’t tell them that part, but the truth is, that’s what I was worried about). The street was a dangerous place. The rule wasn’t arbitrary; the rule named the reality of the world. This is how you live in the family garden!

But rules can be broken and for one of my children — and I’m not going to tell you which one because I wouldn’t want to embarrass my son — but one of my children seemed to delight in breaking this rule.

On the face of it, it seems like Eve and Adam break God’s rule. But it’s more than that. It’s not just a rule. This rule names the reality of the world. It names the way things are. The street is dangerous. You can break the rule, but you can’t make the street a safe place to play. The world doesn’t work that way.

God’s word names what is real. God’s word can be ignored; it can be broken; it can be rejected. But we lack the ability to make a world that is different

from how God declares the world to be.

This world is filled with evil. Sin is real. There’s ISIS, and there are Muhammad cartoon drawing conventions. There is Dennis Hastert and Robert Finn, who both know something of covering up evils. But if I understand this text, it does not declare that the world is not filled with good people and bad people. I wish it were that simple. Eve is not the mother of bad people. She is the mother of all living — so that is all of us. The more troubling reality is that the world is filled with good people who do bad things. Why is that?

It’s noteworthy that the forbidden tree is identified as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why would knowing the difference between good and evil be a bad thing? Genesis gives the impression that not knowing good and evil is the definition of paradise. The law books state that not knowing the difference between good and evil is the definition of criminally insane. We work hard to teach our children the difference between good and evil. What is it about this tree?

We need to remember this: Eve already knows the way of this world. She tells the serpent of God’s word. She knows how to live in God’s garden. “The day we eat of that tree we will die,” she says. She is not lacking in the knowledge of good and evil.

“You will not die,” the serpent says. “Quite the contrary; the day you eat of that tree you will be like God.”

And this is where it gets interesting. *She saw that it was good for food, that it was a delight to the eyes, that it would make one wise.*

Do you hear what she is doing? She is redefining what's good and what's evil. God may say this is evil, but she knows better than God. She is saying, *You say children can't play in the street, but I say the ball bounces better here than in the yard. You say I can't play in the street, but I say there are no cars coming at this moment, and I am wise enough to get out of the way if danger comes. You say I can't play in the street and live, but I say it's fine to play in the street.*

We do this all the time: We decide we know better than God what is good. I say we do this all the time, but I would understand if you thought to yourself, "I don't do that."

The truth is, I seldom do things I think are evil. What I do is explain why what I do isn't evil. It's good — or at least understandable.

I was in Starbucks, and the line was long, and I had worked my way near the front of the line when a woman stepped up and said: "I'm sorry, but could I step in front of you? I'm on my way to a funeral, and I just have to have some coffee. I think it is so rude to be late to a funeral." With that, she stepped in front of me.

I said, "Of course." But what I thought was, "Really?" I wanted to say, "I'll see you at the funeral; I'll be the one up front."

I was thinking those thoughts because I also consider myself to be a person who isn't rude like

that. I'm not a rude person. Oh, I have a bad day sometimes. I am under stress sometimes. I am in a hurry sometimes. I've not been my best self sometimes, but I'm not rude.

You hear it? I don't do evil. Other people are rude, but have special circumstances.

Why do we do this? Read the Bible from cover to cover, and you come face to face with the reality that we are self-centered. That is the biggest struggle for human beings. In a speech given in 2005, David Foster Wallace said, "Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe. ... We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness because it's so socially repulsive. But it's pretty much the same for all of us. ... Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV, or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real."⁵

Jesus says, *Let me tell you how to live in God's garden, in God's world: Love your neighbor because your neighbor matters as much as you do.* (This is the same as saying, "Eat this, but don't eat that." Do you understand? This is how we live in God's world.) I can lean into that a little bit, but when push comes to shove, I am more important than my neighbor.

Now I don't want to say that out loud, so I construct my reasons. I am more important because I am not a rude person. I am more responsible. I am more fortunate. I am better educated. I am an American. I am a Presbyterian. Perhaps the most pernicious reason, I am blessed. (Of course that can be an expression of gratitude, but it can also be an expression of arrogance — the Almighty favors me more than you!) What I am saying is that fruit is good for food, a delight to the eyes and will make me wise.

I will create my own rules for good and evil. And they will always benefit me.

The spiritual battle then is a battle for humility — to remind myself that I am a child of God, but I am not God. I can pretend that I am more important than others, but I can't make it so. It's not so.

And deep down, I know it. No matter how much I try to tell myself otherwise, deep down — way down where God's word whispers with honesty in my soul — I know my neighbor matters as much as I do.

Well, I am only halfway through this passage, but I have run out of time. If we had time, we would reflect on what happens when we not only think these things, but act on them. Adam and Eve ate the fruit. Things changed then. There are always consequences when we act on our flawed view of right and wrong.

It's a story about sin, but also a story about grace. God makes them clothes. The clothes do two things: They declare their guilt

and their grace, all at the same time.

It's like the cross will be later: a declaration of guilt and grace all at the same time. That's the only way the children of Adam and Eve are able to live: by grace.

God places us in God's garden and says, "Love God with all that you are, and love your neighbor as yourself." That's the way we live in God's garden. We know that is the truth, even while we so often construct other ways of being in the garden. The ways we construct will never be the truth. We will sin. And when we do, there will be grace.

That is the way of things in God's garden.

¹Frances Spufford, *Unapologetic* (2012), pp. 12–13

²David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (2015), p. 53

³Genesis 2:16

⁴David Von Drehle, *Rise to Greatness* (2012), p. 282

⁵David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (2015), p. 10

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.