

“Why Not Eat the Apple?”

Text: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

**The Reverend Joanna M. Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church**

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*“...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 die.” Genesis 2:17*

If there is one thing we human creatures are familiar with, it is temptation. (1) We live with it on a daily basis. I don't think I've ever been to Murphy's down the street that the waiter or waitress has not asked, as he or she cleared my plate, “Can I tempt you with a dessert?” Oftentimes, she can. When someone makes us mad, we are tempted to give him a piece of our mind. When a difficult challenge comes our way, we're tempted to give up.

Temptations come in many different forms and sizes. The consequences of yielding to them range from nothing more serious than having to move the button over on our waistband to the destruction of a person's very soul. Were temptation not a perennial problem, there would be no reason to pray on a regular basis, as we do, *Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*. We pray that prayer out of a desire for self-preservation and because we want to live a whole, faithful life before God. We ask to be delivered from evil and led not into temptation, because we know that on our own, we will walk right into a mess. We will give in to our appetites and desires when they threaten to overwhelm us. We know we need intervention from a Higher Power.

Lent has begun, the season of the Christian year set aside for prayer and penitence in preparation for Holy Week and then, for Easter Sunday's celebration of the Resurrection of the Lord. This first Sunday in Lent, the two Scripture readings take us right into the heart of the struggle to be human the way God intended. Both the Old and New Testament lessons have to do with the one big temptation that lies beneath every other temptation: what I would describe as that primal desire to be as God, ourselves. (2) “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) This commandment is the most important of all the commandments. It is also the one most easily forgotten. The consequences of forgetting that God is God and we are not, are profound indeed.

And so we have two stories this morning, one of which takes place in the wilderness after Jesus' baptism. Jesus does not eat for 40 days and 40 nights. When he is famished and at the point of utter vulnerability, Satan comes to tempt Jesus to act on his own terms rather than on God's terms. The temptations Satan places before Jesus vary in content, but they have one common thread: *You don't have to worry about what God wants; you don't have to pay attention to your identity, as given to you by God. I'll make you Lord of all.*

In the garden, it's another story. In the wilderness, Jesus manages to resist temptation three times, but Adam and Eve succumb the very first time they are tempted, as they choose to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. By eating the fruit, they make a crucial decision: they reject life on God's terms and decide to live their lives on their own terms, thereby creating for themselves a future that will be fraught with shame and anxiety.

There is, perhaps, no more misunderstood story in all the Old Testament than the story of Adam and Eve and the fruit they ate.(3) Michelangelo, by the way, depicted the scene on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, as a fig tree, rather than an apple tree. The Bible calls it a fruit tree.

I want to say a few things about this story. It is not within my capability to deflate every myth and correct every misunderstanding, but perhaps I can, with God's help, shed a ray of light on this murky episode. The first thing I would say is that the story was not written to explain or to answer the big question: Where does evil come from? Neither was it written to explain the definitive story of the fall of the human race. As Walter Brueggemann wisely reminds us, the Old Testament is not interested in these kinds of abstract ideas about human nature. (4) To be sure, the text has been vigorously used over the centuries to answer those big questions. Where did sin come from? Where did evil come from? Paul's Letter to the Romans is a case in point. This morning, let's not look at the Old Testament reading through the lens of the New. Let's look at the story as it comes to us in Genesis. What the writers of the story were interested in was how God the Creator would deal with the unruly human creatures, who were "both the glory and the central problem of creation." (5) Let the story stand on its own and take from it what wisdom and warning you feel led to take from it today. I invite you to think, not about all the things you have heard about Adam and Eve and the tree of knowledge over the years, but what the text actually says.

"The Lord God took the man [whom God had created] and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and to keep it." A simple statement. God the Creator creates the human creature and the garden too. Because God is the Creator of both, God can do with either whatever God sees fit. God made the human creature in such a way that everything the human creature needs will be in the garden. God also knows that what the garden needs, which is for the human to care for the garden. Stewardship of creation: That was our original vocation and yet, time and again, that first and primary responsibility has been forgotten.

After giving Adam his first assignment, the Lord gives Adam his first permission slip: you may eat freely of every tree in the garden. Take whatever you need for sustenance and enjoyment. First comes permission, and then will come the prohibition. (6) “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 will die.” (I am reminded of a story from my seminary days, though the story is not from the archives of Columbia lore. In the dining hall, there always sat a bowl of bright, shiny apples at the beginning of the cafeteria line near the knives and forks and plates. On the wall behind the bowl of apples was a big sign that said sternly, “Take only one; the Lord God is watching.” At the end of the cafeteria line were the cookies. One day, someone scribbled a sign and taped it on the wall over the cookie tray saying, “Take all you want; God is watching the apples.”)

Clearly, the fruits of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil were off-limits for the human. Why? I don’t know. God knows. We are never told why God put the prohibition there, except that perhaps that God, who knew the human creature inside, outside, and upside down, knew that human beings cannot be human if they are trying to know all that God knows. There is no way a human, with a finite mind, can have the infinite knowledge. To be God is to be all knowing; to be human is not to know everything.

Now, I am all for testing the limits. One of the greatest things about being human is to push oneself to the limit, to try to reach higher and higher, to be a more excellent human being, more excellent in our loving, more excellent in our achievement. I am all for human growth and development, but that is quite different from dishonoring the limits that God has put in place. We cross those boundaries to our peril. Al and I have always loved to go to North Georgia- to Amicolo Falls and Minniehaha Falls and climb the trails up there. Beside every waterfall in North Georgia, there are big, stern signs that say something to this effect: “Go no further. The rocks are slippery.” Around every single sign, there are well-worn paths of people who have climbed the slippery rocks. Every once in awhile, you will read the sad story in the paper of a young man who has fallen off the cliff and broken his neck. The limits God has put in place are there for reasons God knows. What we know about God is that God wishes us well. It would be to our benefit to listen to the God who wishes us well.

We do not know why the snake, who is a part of God’s good creation in this narrative, gets the notion to bring everything good crashing down. Walter Brueggemann puts it strongly, “What counts in this story is the authority of the One who makes the rules.”

Doesn’t that give you the willies? Aren’t we adults? Why should we live under God’s authority? I would like to do what I want to do and have as much as I would like to have. You have heard me tell before about the time, when I was a girl and went into the little kitchen off the side of the sanctuary of our church,

where I discovered all the communion elements that Friday afternoon ready for Sunday's service – the little pure white bread cubes stacked up in a beautiful mountain, the little grape juice cups. It wouldn't hurt to take just one piece of bread, would it? It tasted so good that I helped myself to another, and before I knew it, handfuls! Eating a lot of white bread will make you a little thirsty. I emptied an entire tray of cups. That's the part of us that does not know our limits.

This whole matter of the prosperity gospel that is so popular today and so widely preached in Atlanta and all around the nation, seems to be saying that Christ came and died for us so that we can have everything we want and do everything we want to do. That happens to be the exact opposite of Biblical faith, so far away from the Savior who says, "those of you who want to be my disciples will have to deny yourselves, and take up your cross and follow me." He asks, "What does it profit a person to gain everything and lose his own soul?"

There are a lot worse things than not getting what you want. The worst thing is forgetting what God wants of you. The worst thing is to try to push God off the throne of your own life so that you sit on the throne, and you are answerable to no one other than yourself. You serve no purpose greater than yourself. You have no meaning beyond yourself.

What happens next in the garden is that a partner for the man is created. "The man and the woman were both naked," the story tells us, "and were not ashamed." They were doing just fine, until the snake asked the woman, "Did God say that you shouldn't eat from any of these trees?" It is so interesting that the first voice heard in Genesis, other than God's, is the voice of the snake. Now, God, who up to this point, been the source of everything, the subject of everything, is now the object of conversation. Even the snake feels free to discuss the Almighty.

Eve responds to the serpent by saying, "We may eat of all the trees but one. God said if we ate of the one in the middle, or even if we touch it, we're going to die." Actually, God said nothing about touching the tree. And where was Eve when God mentioned the tree in the first place? She didn't even exist! She hadn't yet been created, so her source of information could only have been Adam. Obviously Adam has sort of elaborated on the story, fluffed the prohibition up a little bit.

The serpent contradicts what Eve has heard from Adam, "You're not going to die. In fact, your eyes will be opened and you'll be like God, knowing good and evil."

In the wilderness, the tempter gives Jesus three good reasons why he should do what Satan says. Turning to the tradition that had formed him and the identity that God had given him, Jesus resisted. In her mind, Eve had three good reasons for doing just the opposite: the tree was good for food, a delight to the eyes, and she might be able to be like God. She gives in and takes of the fruit and gives

some to her husband, and he eats. Over the centuries, Eve has been the designated deceiver, but it's clear that Adam is just as deceived as Eve. He was right there with her, and he was the one who got the commandment not to eat the fruit in the first place. *Eve, please pass me the apples.* In the Sistine Chapel depiction of this scene that I mentioned earlier, Adam is himself reaching eagerly into the tree, across Eve, as Eve reaches back to the serpent, who is placing a piece of fruit in her hand.

Who is to blame for all of this? Later, the Lord will confront Adam, and Adam will say, "Well, the woman whom you gave me, she gave me the fruit and I ate it."

Then the Lord will say to the woman, "What is this that you have done?"

Eve will answer, "Well, the serpent, *whom you made*, tricked me, and I ate." Obviously, the excuse that the dog ate our homework originated a long time ago.

And yet, God created us with the capacity for moral agency, male and female. God created us with the ability to live freely within the bounds of God's providence. Our hands are not tied. We are free to choose the bad as well as the good, free to step beyond the boundaries. But freedom that disregards the inherent limits of human life leads to loss of soul. Here is a great irony: Faith at its best, seeks understanding of God, to use Anselm's classic definition of theology, but wise faith knows that the reality of God will always be larger than the limits of our minds. The mysteries of God we cannot know fully, this side of the glass. What we can know is that God alone is worthy of our worship, our wonder, and our obedience. What we do know is that we get into real trouble when we try to take God's place in the grand scheme of things.

Wasn't the serpent right? Adam and Eve did not die when they ate the fruit, did they? But in the end, God was right, and the serpent was wrong. What died that day was innocence. What died was connectedness with one another that is free of shame and blame. What died was communion with God, marked by joyful companionship and co-creation. Innocence died, and history began. Eden is over.

There is no need for a cross in Eden. The cross would make no sense there. (7) The cross derives its meaning only in a world that has substituted its own options and ideas for God's ideas and plans. When that which is fully human and that which is truly divine meet in a fallen creation, God in the form of the Son dies. (8) We, the rebellious human creatures, are born again. We become the new creation. We are offered another chance, offered a new path to freedom. In the end, Christ wins. He conquers all, including the outsized pride that would have us assume that we have the power to save ourselves from ourselves.

I do not know what brought you to church this morning. I do not know what temptations you are dealing with. I want you to know that Christ, who knew what

it was like to go toe-to-toe with every kind of temptation, will stand with you, will stand beside you. His community, the church, will stand with you too. Thanks be to God for the promise of a new life. Thanks be to God for the power to be whole again. Amen.

- (1) Thomas Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, CSS Publishing Company, 1995, p.18.
- (2) William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 36, No.1, Year A.
- (3) Walter Bruggemann, *Genesis*, John Knox Press, 1982, p.41.
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) Ibid., p.40.
- (6) Ibid., p. 46.
- (7) William Muehl, “O Felix Culpa,” *The Living Pulpit*, 1999, p. 16.