AFTER THE FALL

Sermon delivered by Elder Barbara G. Wheeler
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
September 2, 2018

Scripture text: Genesis 3: 1-21

I have been coming here, usually on Labor Day weekend, for nearly a quarter of a century, so I have pretty good idea who attends this church. I know that many of you, if asked to identify yourselves, would not use the word Presbyterian. You show up here on Sunday mornings because there is a varied menu of challenging speakers, many of them not Presbyterian. Or maybe you just like the music, which is really good. Even some who formally join the church do so less because they covet the denominational label, more because this is such an important institution in the Rensselaerville community.

It's not surprising that so few want to claim the name Presbyterian. The Reformed tradition, of which the denomination is a part, does not have a lot of immediate appeal. It is known for plainness and severity—stern theological ideas rather than deep religious feelings, no decorations (look around you!), and for many centuries, no musical instruments in church. Garrison Keillor, who, whatever his personal flaws, had a keen eye for religion, said that Presbyterians are people who think that having a good time in warm, beautiful place makes you stupid. My non-Presbyterian husband, Sam, who knows something about religion himself, said as we traveled around Scotland, the birthplace of American Presbyterianism, "How does it feel to be in a country where all the great religious art we would be looking at has been destroyed by your denomination?"

Americans in particular have found the Reformed tradition unpalatable. Its dour outlook flies in the face of our national optimism. Even more, we have unbounded confidence in our ability to make something of ourselves, something good if not great. Reformed tradition, by contrast, is reflected in John Calvin's morose prayer of confession that I read a little while ago: We are "born in iniquity, prone to do evil, incapable of any good."

There are times, however, when Presbyterian tradition is what we need, and this may be one of them. Something awful, some kind of cataclysm seems to have happened. It wasn't that long ago that our leaders urged us to ask not what we could get but rather what we could give, to become points of compassionate light to each other, to welcome the tired and poor to our shores, and to take the values of freedom and human rights abroad. Admittedly, back then, lots of things were still terribly wrong in our society and in the world beyond it, but the leaders who gained public support at least gave voice to our aspirations to integrity, kindness, equality, justice, and peace.

Now self-interest rules the day. Lies, insults, and threats of violence are everywhere on broadcast and social media. Racism and xenophobia are voiced openly and proudly, and desperate people are treated with unmitigated cruelty. *The New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, who was decrying the separation of immigrant children from their parents well before

the rest of us noticed, has an explanation for this. Kristof says that our leaders treat immigrants and other vulnerable groups cruelly just "because they can."

So much has gone so wrong. Maybe it's time to consult the Reformed tradition and its dim view of human nature for insights into how we have fallen so far, so fast. In particular, it may be time to look again at the scripture in which Presbyterian ideas about sin and evil are rooted, the section of Genesis that tells the story of what is usually called The Fall.

Presbyterians didn't invent the standard interpretation of this story, but they made it a linchpin of their theology. The key to their familiar reading is the title: The Fall. The first human beings were created in a "preternatural" state: entirely innocent, in complete harmony with God, each other, and the rest of creation. Then the serpent, Satan in disguise, tempted the woman to eat fruit from the one tree that the Creator put off limits. She did, and she fed the forbidden fruit to Adam, and immediately they knew good and evil and were ashamed to be naked. They fell—into a permanently sinful state, one that changed them genetically, so that all their descendants would be born in iniquity, prone to do evil, incapable of doing any good under their own power—infected with what's called original sin. "In Adam's fall," read the first textbook used in the American colonies, "we sinnéd all." The first couple was banished from the garden, in which all their needs had been met and they could chat with God and snakes, and additional penalties were inflicted on them: intense pain in childbirth, inequality between men and women, tedium and difficulty in work, a contentious relationship between people and the natural world. All the plants in the garden had produced edible fruit. Now human beings were to live in a world full of weeds, with venomous snakes lurking in between. Discord has been the human lot ever since.

For some time now, of course, Presbyterians like us have known that Genesis is an allegory. But even though it is not factual history, most Presbyterians and many other people of faith believe the core message of the story read in this way: Human beings are born in a fallen state. Though created in God's image, they—we—are for some reason innately disposed to wrongdoing. As Nicholas Kristof says, people do selfish, heartless, violent things *simply because they can.*

Truth in preaching compels me to tell you that in recent years this classic interpretation of Genesis 3 has come under a lot of fire. Bible scholars point out that the text says that creation was good, but nowhere does it say that the world—or the man and the woman—was perfect. Nor does it say the serpent was evil, or the devil—only that he was clever. Adam and the woman are definitely not better off after they eat the forbidden fruit, but they don't die either, as God had threatened. In fact, when they are banished from the garden, God goes out with them and makes them shirts, because their home-sewn fig leaves are wearing thin.

On the strength of this closer reading of the text, some theologians maintain that what happens in the garden is not a fall from innocence to corruption, but simply a process of growing up. Adam and the woman had been given a job to do: rule and care for the earth. Like adolescents who have to rebel against their parents to gain the knowledge and independence required for adult life, Adam and the woman needed to defy their creator and to learn a lot more, about good, evil and everything in between, in order to carry out their assignment. If there is a fall, says one commentator who sees things this way, it's not a fall down. It's a fall up, into the ambiguities and contradictions and difficulties of adulthood.

I don't think either reading is faithful to what is written in Genesis. If the traditionalists stretch the story to support their belief that people are inherently evil, the modern group distorts it in the opposite direction to affirm human being as basically good, bravely—with God's approval—stepping out on their own to make things better. But that's not what Genesis says. God does not appear as parent proud that his creatures ventured out on their own. God Yahweh is mad at them, really mad at them, and the punishments are severe.

And if we look around us, and inside ourselves, neither theory that the interpreters try to impose on this story—we are all rotten to the core, or we are all responsible adults—fits the empirical evidence. But Genesis 3 does tell us, or rather shows us, one thing that is undeniably true about human beings, something that might help us to rise above hate, cruelty and violence we see all around us. This is the true thing: When God confronts Adam and the woman about what they have done, they reflexively blame someone else. The woman blames the serpent; the man first blames God ("you gave me the woman") and then the woman. Those first two are doing what all of us do, all the time: We lay the blame for the evils that plague the world on others. We refuse to take responsibility for our part in them.

How might this insight into human nature help us in our current dismal circumstances? I'm going to draw on another brilliant column in *The New York Times,* this one called "How to Talk to a Racist," by Margaret Renkl. Her focus—it's important to be clear about this—is not white supremacist demagogues and other virulently racist leaders. Ignore them, she says. Our "outrage just feeds their hunger for validation." But what about others, others such as my neighbors in upstate Washington County? These are people whose lives are a lot harder than most of ours and who need to do something transgressive to signal their distress. So they put Confederate flags in the back window of their pickup trucks. They loudly announce that they won't watch NFL football games because black players kneel during the national anthem.

How should I respond? I can blame them for all the deep evils of racism. I can display my contempt for their views, and for them for holding those views. I can comfort myself with my sense of moral superiority. And that, Renkl says, "will not make a single thing better for anyone suffering the actual effects of racism."

What might make a difference? How might we rise above our toxic polarization over questions of race? Renkl suggests—and here, in my view, she is preaching the Gospel, loud and clear—that we need to stop the finger pointing and name calling and look for common ground with some of those who disagree with us. The most direct way to do that, according to Renkl and according to John Calvin as well, is to remember and confess our own sins, the ways that we might be implicated in the evils we deplore.

I'm advising this, so I'll go first. I live most of the time in New York City. My son's apartment in Harlem is just five blocks from my own, so I often walk home alone at night, but one of those blocks is long and unpopulated after hours—park on one side, school on the other. More than once, when the only other person on the block was a black teenage boy, I've crossed the street to avoid him. The chances are probably less than one in a thousand, or one in ten thousand or one hundred thousand, that he means me any harm. It's almost certain, however, that my reflexive fear of him, because of the color of his skin, will compound his conviction that nothing he can do will make him appear harmless to people like me. But I do it anyway. Am I really morally superior to my neighbor in Granville who tells me he won't visit New York City because "those Negro people," as he says, are dangerous? I would like to change his view; I'd

like to change the way he votes. The first step toward that, says Renkl, the first step toward the rising, the revival of justice and compassion in this society, is to "think of the plank in [our] own eye." "To begin a real conversation about racism," she says, "start there."

It's not easy, friends, but we don't have to do it alone. God, or whatever power you came here to commune with on this beautiful Sunday morning, is outside the idyllic garden, here with us in the real fallen world, clothing us with respect and compassion for each other. I'll close with one more clip from *The New York Times.* (Reinhold Niebuhr said to preach with the *Times* in one hand and the Bible in the other. I have tried to comply.) Robert Graetz, a Lutheran pastor, was the only white minister in Montgomery to join Rosa Parks, his neighbor, in her civil rights protests. His house was bombed twice by the Klan. Now 90 years old, he told the *Times* last month that conditions today are dire, "everything totally transformed and totally out of control." And yet he has not given up hope. "Solutions," he says, "will have to come in very small pieces," small groups building bridges, creating something stable, "getting together," and—he hopes ultimately—"smiling." Let's go out from here, with God's help, and find some who are different. Get together, listen intently, tell the truth, and perhaps even smile. Then, by the grace of God, may we slowly, but surely, rise.

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Nicholas Kristof column: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/opinion/family-separation-border-immigration.html

Margaret Renkl column: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/30/opinion/how-to-talk-to-a-racist.html

Robert Graetz interview: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/17/us/rosa-parks-kkk-montgomery.html