

An Apple, A Fig and Fruits of the Spirit

Genesis 2:16-17, 3:1-7; Isaiah 65:17,21; Galatians 5:22-23

July Series: Stop. Look. Savor – Lessons from Creation for the Long Haul

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And then God commanded the man, “You may freely 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 die.”

....Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” 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 middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not 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 loincloths for themselves.

Genesis 2:16-17, 3:1-7 NRSV

*For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.*

.....

*They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*

Isaiah 65:17,21

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

Galatians 5:22-23

A piece of fruit in the Bible, in the Garden of Eden. What is it? An apple. We have seen the Renaissance paintings. Our memory tells us that Eve is tempted by the snake, takes a big bite of an apple. Adam is near by watching and takes a bite. More about that later. In the narrative there is a dramatic moment - Uh oh.... They look down and notice they are naked. When God finds them in the garden with fig leaves covering them, God says, “Who told you you were naked?” By the way, that is the verse my seminary class put our on Hebrew class intensive t-shirts. Pastors do have a sense of humor in case you were wondering.

The story of the Garden of Eden is what is called an origin story and every culture has theirs. Origin stories tell us how the world came about and where we came from and maybe what foods or animals play a role in shaping who we are.

We think we might know this origin story really well and the piece of fruit that plays a central role. There is much in Christian church history and biblical interpretation that focuses on the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden. But there actually is no mention of sin, or a fall, or Satan, or temptation, and I hate to break it to you, but there wasn't even an apple involved.

Which means the cultural understanding of the story of the Garden of Eden is slightly corrupted. This is due in part to the countless paintings throughout the history of Western art which for some reason portray a tree and a snake and an extremely white Adam and Eve holding a Red Delicious. For generations folks have called the tale of Adam and Eve and the serpent and the apple forbidden fruit "The Fall from grace" or "The story of Original Sin."

That's a little strange to me. As I and many of you have read and re-read some of the biblical stories, we have had to unlearn them, so we can see them with fresh eyes and hearts.

One person who wrote a helpful new look at this story is Nadia Bolz-Weber.

God created the heavens and the Earth and animals and it was like, this awesome all-inclusive primeval club-med for Adam and Eve – they ran naked through the warm sunlight of an idyllic paradise and everything was theirs for the taking – except for that one tree that they were told to steer clear of. And this absolute paradise in the garden between God and Humanity lasted approximately 20 minutes. Until Eve had a chat with a talking snake and then disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit. And because Eve, ate some fruit she was told not to, now all of humanity is cursed and this so-called original sin of Eve's became sort of like a sexually transmitted disease. (1)

And according to this line of theology and interpretation of the story, every person born after that inherited original sin from Eve. Eve messed it up for everyone by eating some piece of fruit God told her not to. Which feels kind of unfair to her and unfair to us. But this is what we are told the story is about.

But after reflecting on this story and about people - about people's lives and identities and the struggles we all have to hear the truth of who we are, I started to wonder if the real damage to the relationship between Adam and Eve and God wasn't the rule breaking nearly as much as it was in allowing themselves to believe lies about themselves and God. See, the serpent lied to them about who they were and who God was and like all the most dangerous lies, these lies the serpent told were just close enough to the truth to be really destructive.

Which makes me wonder about one thing: When Adam and Eve listened to a voice other than God's and believed a voice other than God's – and disobeyed – when they were trying to avoid God and God calls out and says, Where are you...And they say, We are naked, and God says, "Who told you you were naked?"

I wonder this: How would this story have ended differently if they simply said, "Yeah we messed up...we were wrong – we listened to a voice other than yours and didn't trust you, please forgive us."

How differently would this story have ended? I mean, maybe their disobedience (while not insignificant) wasn't as big a deal as it's been made out to be. Because from what I know of the God revealed in Jesus, grace and forgiveness is a big deal to God. Reconciliation is a big part of God's redeeming heart for us. In progressive and Celtic theology, we are called to remember our original wholeness and blessing.

Maybe if there was something which tore at the fabric of our relationship with God maybe it wasn't eating the forbidden fruit, maybe it the was fear and shame, and untruth.

Because while Adam and Eve had done something wrong, what they felt wasn't simply guilt. Guilt didn't make them hide their nakedness...it was shame. Because guilt is about what we have done – but shame is about who we are. Shame keeps us afraid of God.

When they are filled with shame and trying to avoid God, God says, Where are you? And they say, We were naked and tried to hide from you because we were afraid.

God said to them: Who told you you were naked?

Who told you you were naked? My money is on the snake. (2)

We live in a world where alternatives to God's voice exist and those alternatives to God's voice are where shame or ego originate. It can be where ego and fear and hate and evil grow.

Listen and maybe you can hear God saying in this story -

Who told you you were naked? Who told you that you have to lie to be loved? Who told you your body is not beautiful and worthy to be loved? Who told you that you must manipulate everything in your life to get what you need? Who told you that God cannot forgive, that you or anyone else is not redeemable? Who told you that what you have done (good or bad) is actually who you are?

Who told you that? My money is on the snake. And he's a liar.

Listen for God's voice – a voice of belonging and blessing and transformation and wholeness.

I think we need to reject the old story when a woman is blamed as temptress, as the reason for evil in the world, for all kinds of social ills. No. Listen for truth. Listen for the ways we are called to stewards of creation.

And by the way Rabbi Nehemiah Hayyun supports the idea that the fruit was a fig, as it was from fig leaves that God made garments for Adam and Eve upon expelling them from the Garden.

An apple or a fig can be a symbol in a story that can have deeper meanings of truth. Fruit in the biblical narrative can also be a symbol of hope and new life. Isaiah offers that image that people will be back home and can plant trees and then harvest the fruit. They will not flee. They will not be forced to leave. Fruit takes time to plant, grow, ripen and be harvested. And then fruit comes in abundance. Many of you have told me how much fruit some of your trees are producing this year. Maybe it happens every year. Maybe some years there is less. Some there is an abundance. And then the harvest is shared. I think experience of Divine love and grace is like that. We can choose to see and experience abundance here. We can share this experience – in joys and sorrows. As we seek to serve and bear good fruit in the world. We are not called to hoard all of it. We share this abundance.

Finally, let's ask ourselves - How can I tell if God is at work in my life? How can I know that my faith, spiritual life, is making a difference in the way I live? Author Anne Lamott answers these questions beautifully in her book *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*.

“Imagining God can be so different from wishful thinking, if your spiritual experiences change your behavior over time. Have you become more generous, which is the ultimate healing? Or more patient, which is a close second? Did your world become bigger and juicier and more tender? Have you become ever so slightly kinder to yourself?”

Fruits of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. God wants us to be like good trees that bear good fruit, but God doesn't expect us to cultivate such fruits in isolation. To tend the orchard, the church, God sends the Spirit. When we notice those fruits that Paul talks about appearing in our lives – when we become more generous or patient, when we experience more joy and peace and so on – we can be sure that the Master Arborist is at work.

A group went to see “Come From Away” yesterday. The fruits of a small community in Newfoundland – Gander – on Sept. 11, 2001 when thousands of strangers landed. What would you do? What would you do? They showed the spiritual fruits of compassion, hospitality and kindness. I hope we find ways to help our fruit grow and ripen so it can be shared. Amen.