

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

In the Book of Genesis, the first man and the first woman are offered paradise with one condition: that they not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. And yet they are tempted to do so by the serpent. God cautioned that the man and woman would die if they ate from the tree, but the serpent explained that this was not true. Instead, they would become like God.

That fateful choice to eat from the forbidden tree is the first example of sin. That one sin is considered the basis for the notion of Original Sin. The beginning of this doctrine comes not through the Hebrew Scriptures, but later through the writings of Paul. He wrote in his letter to the Romans: “[J]ust as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned - sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law.”

Paul is saying that sin was born by the choice of Adam and therefore death was made possible (note that Eve is not blamed here by Paul). And death spread to all for “all have sinned,” which declaration strangely goes unexplained. This last point is not the same as the idea that the sin of Adam is the sin of all his children.

How did that far more expansive idea come to be? Original Sin was developed through arguments within the early Christian Church. The notion of preexisting sin was considered, with each newborn tainted by corruption from long ago. The church father Athanasius claimed that Adam had forsaken a gift from God. That gift, or grace, was a human being’s conformity to the image of God. This image was indelibly marred by sin.

Were human beings intended to be superior to the rest of creation? Were they afforded free will, by choice or by design, and therefore could they choose to be like God? This last point becomes a thorny problem if we take the story of Adam and Eve at face value. Without knowledge of good and evil, what is the meaning of free will? But if free will is how human beings took on the image of God, then were Adam and Eve destined to fall? What kind of gift required them to sin?

Our second reading this morning is also well known, the temptation of Jesus by none other than the devil. Jesus had entered a time of fasting, forty days and forty nights. Not surprisingly, Jesus had become hungry. So, the tempter came and suggested that Jesus turn stones to bread. Though famished, he replied: *One does not live by bread alone...*

The devil was not done. *"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you...'"* Jesus readily cast that suggestion aside. And even when offered the position of ruler of the world, provided he just worship the devil, Jesus avoided this temptation: *"Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"*

Although the temptations seem to increase in value and consequence through this reading, in fact the reverse seems true. Jesus was hungry, so turning stones into bread was probably of immediate interest. But casting himself down from a height was just a parlor trick, one that might have been mildly tempting for an average human being, but what would have indicated to the devil that this would have been tempting to Jesus? And the promised rulership of the world was most likely even less enticing. Why would Jesus Christ, he who was anointed by God, consider that option?

The temptation of Jesus was paired with the temptation of Adam and Eve to underscore the comparison of sinlessness to sinfulness. Yet the offerings to Jesus were, to put it bluntly, either fleeting or meaningless. Compare this with the knowledge of good and evil. That was truly tempting and may, as is suggested, have made human beings even more like the image of God. These were not the same predicaments and not the same people subject to temptation.

Consider the notion of grace. Grace may be defined as the supernatural assistance of God bestowed upon a rational being with a view toward that being's sanctification. Put another way, grace is a gift of holiness to someone who can make choices. But it is still a gift, not a bargain, not an exchange, not a transaction. God gives and human beings receive.

The question of grace is fundamental to the idea of salvation. In Genesis, Adam and Eve sinned and therefore death became possible. God said *"See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever..."* By this act, Adam and Eve were to be denied the chance for everlasting life and were cast out into the world.

And yet, though the sacrifice of Jesus, Christians hold that this enduring sense of sin was relieved. Paul wrote, *"[I]f the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many."*

One sin infected many, one gift saved many. And Paul, most interestingly, also wrote: *"Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all."*

Justification and life for *all*...

From these crucial themes, various threads of Christianity have taken shape. And those threads arguably lead in distinctly different directions. A pivotal point in considering God's grace is the idea of Original Sin and the choice of direction changes everything.

Augustine for example tried to distinguish free will from the grace of God. He tried to maintain a role for free will, but God's grace was the primary if not the exclusive mode of salvation. In other words, only God can make it happen. That line of reasoning was followed by the Western Christian Church seated in Rome, and it still is to this day with some modification.

The Eastern Church, based in Byzantium, did not agree with Augustine's understanding of grace and did not even wholly agree with his related concept of Original Sin. The Orthodox tradition instead considered there to be a fundamental balance of divine grace and free will. Put another way, God must save and then human beings must *choose* to be saved.

During the Reformation, Protestants moved away from free will as a factor in human salvation. Human beings were afflicted with Original Sin and were therefore totally depraved, meaning sinful to their very core. It was only through God that human beings might be saved and that gift of salvation was irresistible and predestined. *Irresistible*, meaning you have no say in the matter, whether climbing toward heaven or sinking toward hell. *Predestined*, meaning that whether one is saved was decided long ago before time began. Notably, neither the Catholic nor Orthodox traditions accept those qualifications to the availability or the timing of God's grace.

One particularly fertile place for religious fervor and creativity has been the United States. American religious life has been a laboratory of change, spawning world spanning traditions like Mormonism, and helping to formulate and to refine highly influential religious ideas, like Pentecostalism, which is believed to have started in Topeka, Kansas at the beginning of the 20th century.

And there were still more new ideas, some quite important for those in this particular house of God. Unitarians and Universalists, our kissing religious cousins, came into existence in large part in response to perceived inadequacies in the Protestant understanding of God's grace. Neither tradition was founded in the U.S., but both came into their most familiar and popularized forms in America.

Responding to centuries of Calvinism in the United States and Great Britain, Unitarians rejected predestination and the completely sinful nature of human beings. Rather than focus on the sacrifice of Jesus as the death of sin,

Unitarians shifted to the moral teachings of Jesus as a positive example for cultivating a righteous life. The exclusivity of grace is displaced by complete free will, essentially tipping the scales of salvation in the opposite direction. From God's gift to God's invitation, again one that we must choose.

Universalists were traditional Calvinists in many respects. But what they lacked in novelty, they made up for in significance. Recall what Paul said about the meaning of Jesus' sacrifice: *"Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all."*

For the Universalists, human beings were subject to Original Sin. And then they were *not*. As a result of Jesus' death and resurrection, all were saved, universally and eternally. Salvation for all. They kept the Calvinist ideas of total depravity, irresistible grace, and predestination. However, they changed the ending of the story. Sin was completely destroyed and all were saved, whether one likes it or not. There were debates over when one might enter into paradise, and whether there was an intervening time for the purging of earthly sins, but in the end all would be saved.

This notion of universal salvation was highly attractive compared with the drearier prospects of Calvinism. However, some objected to the idea that *everyone* would be saved. And this is how a new idea was born, the notion that you can turn your face toward God and be saved. How? By accepting Jesus Christ as your personal savior. This was not a new idea, but it was explored and fostered by Pentecostalism.

This idea differs from Calvinism because there is at least one small act that needs to be taken, that moment of acceptance, that entry of the spirit into your heart that opens the gates to heaven. Do that and you are saved. This is a vast simplification of American Evangelical theology, but it illustrates the crucial step that takes the wind out of the sails of both Calvinism and Universalism.

Calvinism was the largest group of Christians in New England. Universalists were one of the largest denominations in the U.S. in the 19th century. But in the early 20th century, American Pentecostals, arising out of the Methodist movement, began to grow in numbers. And over time, their minor yet crucial alteration to the formula for salvation, that one step of choosing Jesus, becomes the dominant model, both in the United States and in many parts of the world.

Notice how the idea of grace, of what God is giving to us, has changed over time. And, more importantly, notice how that evolution was generally in response to some perceived inadequacy in old answers. In Genesis, Adam and Eve were banished from Eden and from access to the Tree of Life. And therefore, early Judaism did not concern itself with any question of salvation, because there was no afterlife.

In the first century, that answer had become unsatisfying, as perhaps compared with other traditions in Greece, Persia, and Egypt in which there is talk of an afterlife. In the time of Jesus, some priests in Jerusalem still taught that there was no afterlife and these men were called the Sadducees. Others believed in and taught about an afterlife, and these were called the Pharisees.

The Pharisees sought to teach what they considered to be the pathway to salvation through strict adherence to religious law. And these moral and ethical expectations became higher and higher, stricter and stricter. And then came Jesus. He also taught about eternal life but moved away from the Pharisees' interpretations of the law. Remember what Paul said: *"[S]in was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law."* Through the law, there were many sins, but beyond the law there was the possibility of salvation.

One of the seemingly inevitable tendencies of religion is that, over time, simplicity is replaced by complexity. Jesus simplified everything but then the church made everything complex again. Paul told us to focus on what truly mattered, and theologians spent hundreds of years explaining Paul until he became unrecognizable. The Reformation and its adherents once again sought to cast all that churchly complexity aside, but then they reused leftover pieces from the old church to build a new one, often just as complicated and restrictive. Pentecostals

have tried this tidying exercise once again, but they have at times readopted pieces of Calvinism, Lutheranism, and other “isms,” perhaps to bolster their theological heft.

Unitarians and Universalists joined in that line of American theological evolution to varying degrees. And together, Unitarian Universalists as a merged group tried to step away from doctrinal theology entirely, having no required creed. But such rejection is not always satisfactory either, for what does it mean to have infinite choice free from all tradition and free from all notions of consequence (i.e. a doctrine of sin). The pendulum has swung back toward being spiritual if not religious, with questions arising about having no creeds while developing a covenant. I would opine that matters are in a state of flux right now in many traditions.

American Protestantism suggests that you have to choose Jesus, to accept him into your life. And when you do, you are all set. There is then the worry about saving others, about helping them find Jesus, but that is a secondary worry after the primary one of saving oneself. Put your oxygen mask on first before helping others. Accept Jesus. Full stop.

But is that all there is to Jesus’ teachings? If so, the Beatitudes were a waste of time. The passages about helping the poor and tending to those in need, just hit snooze through those. The implication of this singular proposition about accepting Jesus is that the majority of what Jesus had to say was and is useless.

And that would also mean that Jesus was *wrong*. That Jesus was wasting his precious time in the world on something that did not matter. Which leads me to conclude that someone *else* must be wrong. To accept Jesus as our personal savior must, must, *must* also require accepting him as your personal teacher and guide.

Theology is an exercise in building. You need simple ideas in place before you can get to complex ones. Is there a God? If no, that effectively clears the table of many of these issues. If yes, however, what is the relationship between human beings and God? Now we need to know what to do, if anything. When? How? Why? And what if we mess it up?

What again was that definition of *grace*? The supernatural assistance of God bestowed upon a rational being with a view toward that being’s sanctification. God helping us become more holy, more righteous, or simply *better* than we are now. If you do not believe in an afterlife, like the early Jews and many later Unitarians, sanctification might have to do with living a good and decent life in the world without concern for the next. If you do believe in an afterlife, however, then an explanation of the role of free will versus grace in salvation becomes important.

Grace is often compared with mercy. Mercy means compassion toward those who have no claim to such kindness – mercy is not justice, for justice is deserved while mercy is undeserved. In the Beatitudes we are told that blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy. Note how this is balanced, like the balance within the Lord’s Prayer of forgiveness for our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. The New Testament is filled with expectations of charity, kindness, and mercy to be shown by us toward one another.

Why all this talk of mercy? Because we will mess up. We will make mistakes. We will sin. For all our efforts, we are flailing around in the dark some days. So hopefully someone is willing to forgive us our trespasses, here and above.

Let us consider this question differently. What does the blind eye see? What does the deaf ear hear? Is a blind or deaf person responsible for seeing or hearing what he or she obviously cannot? In the same way, are we responsible for what we cannot *know*? I specifically say “cannot” know because willful ignorance is not the same as *actual* ignorance. We do not get to ignore the requirements set out before us, taught to us by a certain teacher long ago, any more than we can try to unsee or to unhear something.

By my reckoning, our choices do matter, our free will is important. Some traditionalists might argue against that. But if choice in our lives has no meaning, then why would the *knowledge of good and evil* lead to humans

being chased out of paradise? Whether the story is factual or allegorical, it was the basis for these ideas of grace and Original Sin, so it does matter. And if we are to be forgiven as measured by how we forgive others, as set out in the most basic childhood prayer, why would none of that basic language translate into adult theologies?

And if temptations are an afterthought in religious life, or more accurately the religious afterlife, then why would the temptation of Jesus matter at all? If we take many of these theological conclusions to be true, much of the Bible would be rendered irrelevant. Feeding the poor, caring for the sick – these are nice ideas but nothing more. And yet, according to Jesus, those lessons mean everything. They are the *only* thing. And I am betting on Jesus being correct.

Each of us was given a gift: the gift of life. Did we deserve it? Could we have said “no” to it? Regardless of our answers, here we are. And like the gift of life, so too is the hope and promise of life beyond this life. A gift given and a gift promised. The gift of life is ours to use, right now. We can embrace it and cherish those we come across in life. Or we can reject that gift, misuse that gift, waste that gift. We can be a curse rather than a blessing to those we come across in this life. All our choices.

The idea of grace implies that these gifts were given without anything expected in return. But having something is not the same as *using* it. How might we try to live our lives if we were asked to build the road back to heaven each and every day? What would we do if the foundations of hell were ours to create in our own lives: hell for ourselves and hell for each other? What sorts of heavens and hells are we building for ourselves and in this world?

How are we to live these precious lives of ours among so many others living out their precious lives? Perhaps by accepting Jesus Christ as our personal savior, as well as our personal teacher and guide. By listening to what he had to say and considering how he chose to live. Amen.