Second Sunday after Pentecost

June 6, 2021

Genesis 3:8-15

One day when I was working as a substitute teacher, I sent a kid to the office for repeatedly ignoring my instructions and warnings. He protested, “But he made me do it!”

Before I could even open my mouth, one of the other kids—who’d heard me say it often enough—said exactly what I was going to say. “No, he didn’t. He did something and you chose to respond the way you did. He didn’t make you do anything.”

By disobeying me, though I doubt that the student would have understood it this way, he had tried to grasp control over the classroom from me, by behaving in a way that had been specifically prohibited. When I called him out on it, he tried again to assert control, this time trying to get someone else in trouble.

We like to have some feeling of control over our lives, over our the world around us. But it’s hard to ever feel like you have enough control. And when our desire for control lands us in trouble — as it did for that student — we like to blame others, rather than accept responsibility for our own choices. And that desire to blame others can make it hard for us to trust each other.

We have the classic example of this in our Genesis text for today. The man and woman disobey God and seek to lay blame anywhere but with themselves. The man blames the woman. The woman blames the serpent.

Rather than trust in God, trust the instructions that God had given them, they placed their trust in themselves and the serpent.

And that choice led them to disobedience — eating the forbidden fruit.

We tend to label their disobedience as sin. But the word ‘sin’ doesn’t appear in Genesis till the next chapter, when Cain kills Abel.

Perhaps what this story tells us is what’s at the *root* of what we generally call sin.

When the serpent, the man, and the woman are together in the garden, the serpent asks the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

The woman says, no. God told them they could eat from any tree, except the one in the middle of the garden. If they ate of that tree, or even touched it, she says, they would surely die.

Which isn’t, by the way, what God had told them. God never said they couldn’t touch the tree. The man remains silent, not correcting her.

The serpent says, “You won’t die. God knows that when you eat of [that tree] your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When the man and woman eat the fruit, their eyes are indeed opened and, like God, they know about good and evil. Because it is in that moment when they eat of the fruit that the man and woman are introduced to vulnerability and shame and distrust of each other.

The consequences of not trusting God open the door to feelings that allow the people to worry that God will be angry with them, see them as unworthy, punish them, even abandon them. And those very feelings make it harder for them to place their trust in God again. Because feeling unworthy, feeling shame, allows us to feel unlovable. And that allows us to seek value and self-worth in places other than in God. It leads us to place our trust in things other than God.

Feeling like we don’t have control over things can make us scared. And we’ve seen in the past year what happens when people are scared. Grocery stores ran out of staple items. People allowed their fear to manifest in hate-filled speech.

And we find it hard to trust people, especially those we don’t know.

All of these things leave us feeling vulnerable. And they make it even harder for us to trust in God’s promises to provide for our needs.

The man and woman in the garden were told they could be like God, knowing good and evil. They chose to focus on the first part, but it’s the knowing good and evil part that became their problem.

Instead of having power, instead of having more control, distrust and pain became a part of their lives.

And they’ve been a part of our lives ever since.

At its heart, sin is not trusting in God. Not placing our trust in God leads to all the things we do that we generally call sinful. It leads us to disobedience as we try to grasp control over our world, over others, rather than give ourselves over to God and trust that God will provide for our needs.

It leads us to try to find value and self-worth in places and things other than God’s love for us, God’s declaration that we are beloved children.

Rachel Held Evans once said that the struggle to believe we are beloved children of God, and that *that* is enough for us, is the great struggle of the Christian life.

The problem in the garden was that, in that moment, it was hard for the people to trust that God’s love for them was *enough*. It opened the door to the idea that there was something *more important* they could have than God’s love for them. And that led them to disobedience, which led to shame and vulnerability and distrust of each other.

The good news is that, in that moment of vulnerability, God did not abandon them. Indeed, it is when we are vulnerable that we can most clearly see how God provides for our needs, that we can most clearly experience the forgiveness and mercy God offers us.

God continued to provide for the man and woman, even as they were sent out of the garden. And when one of their sons killed the other out of jealousy, God did not abandon him, either.

And when we seek control, when we struggle to trust that we are beloved and that God will provide for our needs, God does not abandon us, either.

Let us pray: Almighty and eternal God, to turn away from you is to fall, to turn toward you is to rise, and to stand before you is to abide forever. Grant us your help in all that we do, your guidance in our uncertainties, your protection in danger, and your peace in all our sorrows. Amen.