

PENTECOST III, 2018
Genesis 3.8-15

Our first reading today is from the story of Adam and Eve. Most people, even if they are not Christian, know something about the Adam and Eve story. The outline is fairly simple: God made Adam. He decided it was not good for Adam to be alone. So, God made Adam a companion, a person like him but not the same as him: a woman, Eve. God gave Adam and Eve a place to live and told them to take care of it. God gave them a rule to live by, a boundary for their freedom. But, Adam and Eve sinned against God. They were punished, banished from the garden God had made for them, and forced to work for a living. Adam and Eve had children: two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain was jealous of his brother, to the point of finally killing him.

So, in the Adam and Eve story you have the first sin, which leads to the first murder. The human race has been following the same script ever since and in ever-bloodier ways.

The British author of a hundred years ago, G.K. Chesterton, was asked by a London newspaper to join other writers to address the question, "What's wrong with the world?" He wrote in reply:

Dear Sirs:
What is wrong with the world?
I am.
Sincerely yours,
G.K. Chesterton

There is something wrong with us. Jimmy Buffet, in one of his songs, says we are flawed people, because the cosmic baker took us out of the oven a little too early. A few decades ago a popular comedian said our problem is that we all have brain damage. It shows up in our kids: You tell them not to do something, yet they do it. You ask them why they did it, and they answer, "I don't know." That's brain damage. And the pattern started with Adam and Eve.

It is an old story, but a very contemporary message. It reveals a lot about us. I want to focus on two points from the story, which I think you will find very insightful into what is going on in our culture today.

The first insight to be gained is to recognize how sin and evil begins: with a lie. The devil, scripture says, is the "father of lies." The first and foremost characteristic of evil is deceit, and oh what webs we do weave, when we practice to deceive: first ourselves, then others. This was the serpent's tactic: deceit. The lie.

We have heard much in recent years about "fake news," "alternate facts," and different versions of the truth." We did not invent these fictions and deceptions. They are right back there in Eden. They were the tempter's tools.

Alternative facts? "What did God really say?" asked the tempter. Fake news and different versions of the truth? The tempter said of eating the forbidden fruit: "You will not die. You will be like God, knowing good and evil."

And, so, our giving into temptation and falling into sin and evil begin with failing to do the hard work of discerning and living in the truth.

Second, we see in this story the consequences of sin: guilt, shame, and the failure to accept responsibility for one's actions. After their disobedience, Adam and Eve can no longer live in an honest relationship with each other and God. Instead, they go into hiding. When God confronts Adam about his sin, Adam blames God and his wife: "The woman, whom you gave me, she made me do it." Psychologists call this "projection": when we cannot deal with the conflicts and stress in us, we project them on to other people. In Family Systems Theory, this is called triangulating: we deal with our anxiety with others by bringing in a third party, either to blame or enlisting the support of others.

Another name for it is scapegoating. The behavior of blaming others is universal. Families do it, as we see in the case of Adam and Eve, or maybe families you know.

When congregations are anxious, frustrated, and fear for their future, people look for scapegoats. How many people in a congregation have the maturity to reflect and ask, "How does my behavior

affect the life and health of my church?" Not many. It is much easier to look for someone to blame.

Jesus alluded to this problem when he asked, "Why do you see the speck in someone else's eye, but not the log in your own?" It is always easier to confess someone else's sin than our own.

What was the crucifixion of Jesus, but people venting their frustration on Jesus for not living up to their expectations and solving their problems?

After the Civil War people in the South invented the "Myth of the Lost Cause," explaining away their defeat by blaming it on others and revising history to justify their goodness and cause.

Countries do it. The Nazis blamed the Jews for Germany's loss in World War I; it resulted in the murder of six million people. Or in our country: every successive group of immigrants has been made a scapegoat by the group that came here before it. The English resented the Germans. When the Irish came here in the mid-1800s, people resented them. In turn the Irish despised the Italian immigrants. And, so, on it goes, even to our time.

Scapegoating is a favorite tactic of politicians, who learn very early on to use events and feelings of resentment as wedge issues to divide people, exploit situations and avoid taking responsibility for their actions or situations they are called to deal with. Again, it is a failure to do the hard work of discerning and living in the truth.

This is an old story, but a very contemporary story. You can find in the history of Adam and Eve and their children all the events and news of our time. Human behavior has not changed; all that has happened is we have just become more sophisticated in how we practice evading the truth.

If our fall into sin and evil begins with failing to do the hard work of discerning and living in truth, then the way to healing and wholeness – that is, salvation – begins with seeking the truth. So, Psalm 119 confesses, "Through Your commandments I gain understanding; therefore I hate every lying way." The daily office of Compline at the end of the day prays, "It is good to herald God's love in the

morning; His truth at the end of the day." The road leads us to Christ, who is "the way, the truth, and the life," who said that if we continue in His teaching, we will know the truth that will make us free."

"We are not imperfect people in need of self-improvement," said Cardinal John Henry Newman 200 years ago, "but rebels in need of surrender." That surrender occurs in confessing our sins and receiving God's forgiveness. As our services used to begin with confession, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But: if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (I John 1.8-9)." Christian faith is a religion of hope. We are not condemned to live endlessly with the mistakes and errors of our past. It is the possibility of forgiveness.

Go back to the Chesterton quote with which I began this sermon. "What's wrong with the world?" Chesterton was asked. Answer: "I am," he said. Or rather, confessed. That is, there is something wrong with me, and it is my responsibility to deal with it. When we stop blaming others and accept responsibility for our part in things that have happened, we gain the ability to chart a different course in the future. This leads the way to freedom, because it opens for us the possibility that God in Christ gives us: forgiveness and a new start.

Confessing the truth about ourselves leads to living in truth in daily life. So, I will close with three quotes about this for you to reflect on in your life. The first is from George Washington: "There is but one straight course, and that is to seek truth and pursue it steadily."

Second, from the Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "You can resolve to live your life with integrity. Let your credo be this: Let the lie come into the world, let it even triumph. But not through me."

And the British author George Orwell: "In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act." Amen.