

Playing God

As I said last week, I've embarked upon a course of preaching from an outline provided by Brian McLaren in his book from five years ago, We Make the Road by Walking. There are a few reasons that I'm quite excited about this new preaching schedule. It's a blend of familiar passages and passages that I find I've never preached on in my fifteen years of weekly preaching. Today's pericopes are an example, much to my surprise. The Genesis passage is an alternate reading for one Sunday in the Revised Common Lectionary and the Jesus tale appears not at all, despite being in all three Synoptic Gospels. There is also a good bit of novelty in the way McLaren matches passages from the Old and New Testaments. I would never have thought to connect these two stories, but I'm glad he did. I don't expect to exhaustively follow McLaren's suggested points about the Scripture passages he selects. Some weeks, my own thinking may take me very far afield. But some of the conclusions that McLaren draws from these two passages were quite inspiring to me. And, as I also mentioned last week, on the whole I find his work to represent a high standard of hope based on the love God has for God's creation and on the life-changing work of Jesus and the continued fellowship of the Holy Spirit. I'm excited about this new adventure in the Scriptures and I'm very glad that you all are willing to come with me.

The first thing to notice about these two stories is their uniqueness, or should I say, their lack of uniqueness. As I just mentioned, the story about Jesus healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath is told in all three Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – with slight variations. The fact that it is repeated three times in our received New Testament as well as the multiplicity of tales about Jesus healing makes the story seem commonplace. The variations from Gospel to Gospel, however, make each telling unique and worth some scrutiny to determine what is different and to wonder about why that may be. The passage from Genesis poses a different problem. Following immediately after last week's reading, Genesis 1:1 – 2:4, it's pretty evident that these verses are also a version of the Creation story but a completely different version of the Creation story.

Why did the editors of Genesis find it important to preserve two quite different Creation stories next to each other? Why are there four Gospels, books that ostensibly tell the story of the same life, but which vary so much from each other, even among the three that scholars dubbed the Synoptics, "seeing the same." Many theories have been offered including the political considerations of making sure that the differing traditions among the Tribes of Israel or the widespread congregations of the Early Church be respected. Certainly, each version of the Creation and each Gospel offer interesting details not found in the others. But why not harmonize the different versions, as has been attempted by many writers and which we often do all by ourselves in an attempt to "keep the stories straight?" One answer which appeals to me is that the editors of both Testaments recognized the God-given beauty of diversity. Just as God has created the world and its creatures in a stunning array of variety, so we must recognize the diversity of spiritual truth needed by a diverse humanity. The story that triggers a deepening of the love of God and humankind in me may not work for you. In fact, the story that works for me today may not work for me ten years from now. We need these variants to help us learn about God. We need these variants to help us remember to love those who are different from us.

But let's take a look at some of the variants in the two Genesis stories. What specifically can we learn from the difference in these stories? I find it interesting that the order of creation is so

Playing God

different between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. In the first story, humankind come to the scene last. Many have pointed to this and said that therefore humanity is the pinnacle of creation. On the other hand, in Genesis 2, God creates the man before anything has begun to grow on the earth and even before there has been rain. The creation of man and the advent of other life on the earth are inextricably linked – the man is made to care for the things of the earth. Note that in Genesis 1, humankind is given “dominion” over the earth but in Genesis 2, the man is told to till and keep the garden. The man is for the garden every bit as much as the garden is for the man. It’s a lesson that our civilization badly needs to hear today as “dominionist” theology has led to increased extinction of species, environmental degradation, and the life-threatening phenomenon of global warming. We have become very bad stewards of the garden entrusted to us.

I’m also fascinated by the differences in the stories of how humankind is created as male and female. In this instance, I think each Creation story informs and corrects the other. I celebrate the fact that, in Genesis 1, both men and women are specifically made in the image of God. That’s a powerful corrective to patriarchy and misogyny. But I’m also intrigued by the idea that, before God performed surgery on the man in Genesis 2, both genders were encompassed in one being. There are some interesting Jewish fables that play on that element of the story. And who has found a life-partner that has not resonated with the idea that for each human being, there is one special “helpmeet,” that person who completes us and allows us to live a life full of blessings?

Four Gospels, two Creation stories in Genesis, and, in Genesis 2, two trees. You’ll have to bear with me a little bit for this part of the discussion, as I’m going to jump back and forth between Genesis 2, which I read to you a few minutes ago, and Genesis 3, which we did not read together. If you’re one who likes to read what the preacher is referring to, go ahead now and get Genesis 2 & 3 in front of you. They’re mostly on one page in the pew Bibles. The two trees are first mentioned in Genesis 2:9: “Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” The second tree is mentioned again in 2:16 & 17: “And the Lord 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.’” The implication is that the tree of life is available to the man. As we learn in the denouement of this story, in chapter 3, verse 22, this means that prior to the sin of chapter 3, both the man and the woman have the ability to live forever.

But all that changes when the man and the woman disobey and eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now, I must confess, this part of the story has never made much sense to me. Shouldn’t God *want* the mud creatures, as my friend Fr. John Forman calls them, to know the difference between good and evil? Wouldn’t that have prevented the problem of chapter three? I’ve had some hunches in the past but never spent the time to think them through until I read last week what Brian McLaren had to say. McLaren, who attributes his ideas to the contemporary Catholic theologian James Alison and to the French anthropologist and philosopher René Girard, points to the greedy nature of the sin of the first humans. They eat from the tree, as advised by the serpent, because they want to be like God.

Playing God

Think through this with me. God has created the humans in God's own image. God has given them what they need to live forever. God has also given them what they need to have knowledge of good and evil but told them not to eat from it with the warning that it will cause them to die. We know from the next chapters of Genesis that eating the fruit does not cause their immediate physical deaths, but it does cause the disruption of their relationships with God. It is this disruption of relationship, then, that God refers to as death. But why would God put the tree of knowledge in the garden if the only result is death? I've never been happy with the idea of it being there as a "test of obedience." Can we, instead, assume that God has another plan for the fruit of that tree that the man and woman disrupt? Does it make sense that the fruit is there for the humans to consume when they are ready for the knowledge?

Here's where the thoughts of Girard, Alison, and McLaren intersect with my own. Driven by their desire to "play God," McLaren writes, the humans eat the fruit in order to judge creation for themselves. And in their eyes, what God has already called "very good" becomes, in part, evil. The humans substitute their own judgement for the judgement of God with disastrous results. They see themselves not as the beloved ones of God but as naked and sinful, driven by fear to hide from God who loves them. The woman's sexuality and the blessing of new birth become for her submission to the man and pain. The blessed work of tilling the garden becomes for the man toil and sweat. Instead of receiving their knowledge of good and evil as a gift from God, given in due time, they have resorted to grasping and, in their grasping, they have twisted the truth.

Brian McLaren writes: "If we humans start playing God and judging good and evil, how long will it take before we say this person or tribe is good and deserves to live, but that person or tribe is evil and deserves to die, or become our slaves? How long will it take before we judge this species of animal is good and deserves to survive, but that one is worthless and can be driven to extinction? How long until we judge this land is good and deserves to be preserved, but that river is without value and can be plundered, polluted, or poisoned? If we eat from the second tree, we will soon become violent, hateful, and destructive... In other words, the more we judge and accuse, the less we will reflect God...and the less we will fulfill our potential as image bearers of God."

This is a good place to turn our attention to the Markan passage. With the suggestions I've outlined in mind, the sin of the Pharisees becomes an obvious example of the misjudgment of good and evil to which humankind is prone, as explained by the parable of Genesis 2 and 3. Just before the episode with the man with the withered hand, the Pharisees have chastised Jesus for his hungry disciples plucking and eating grain on the Sabbath. They do not recognize the good of food provided by God for hungry people. Instead, they see only the violation of Sabbath rules, which come not from God but from the oral tradition that they themselves espouse. Likewise, they look at the man with the paralyzed arm and see someone who must have brought it on himself, a sinner! In their understanding of good and evil, as twisted as that poor man's arm, Jesus' action of healing is aiding a sinful man. He must be a sinful man himself! And so, to "protect" the Children of Israel from this sinful pseudo-prophet, they plot his death, completely forgetting that God gave Moses the commandment, thou shalt not kill.

Playing God

In his on-line supplement to We Make the Road by Walking, Brian McLaren writes: “The image of a hand reaching out to grasp the forbidden fruit in Genesis 2 is echoed in the story of the man’s withered hand being healed in Mark 3. Just as we live in the tension between two trees, the tree of aliveness and the tree of judging, we also live in the tension between the open hand and the clenched fist, the hand extended to accuse, steal, or wound and the hand outstretched to comfort, give, and serve. As I finished this chapter, I couldn’t stop thinking of Jesus’ nail-scarred hand and the man’s “withered hand” being restored in contrast to the grasping hand of greed, the clenched fist of hostility, the hand grasping a stone to hurl at another in judgment.”

The images suggested by McLaren are powerful. All of us have caught ourselves with outstretched hands that grasp, with clenched fists, with hands stretched out in accusation. But now, my sisters and my brothers, hear the good news. Despite the way in which our twisted understandings of good and evil are shown forth in our own twisted hands, the nail-scarred hands of Jesus reach out for us in love and forgiveness. We are summoned, not back to the garden, but forward into the future where God’s Beloved Community is made real and whole, where each of us encounters the aliveness that was meant for humankind in the first place. Jesus invites us to live a life like his, patient, loving, merciful, not to the wrath that so many mistakenly expect from our Loving Creator. Softly and tenderly, Jesus calls us to come home to life and love. Thanks be to God. Amen.