

A Sermon for Robbinsdale United Church of Christ
February 10, 2008 – 1st Sunday in Lent
Rev. T. Michael Rock

Scripture Readings – Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 and Romans 5:12-19

Sermon Title: “Understanding Sin and Grace”

(open with prayer)

Introduction:

It is true, we usually don't spend a lot of time thinking of this story. Somewhere in our past it was probably referred to as “the fall” or “the beginning of sin”. It is the mythological story of the first time that God was disobeyed. The origin of this story is ancient and is dated to around the same time as the Assyrian myth about the beginning of humanity. In that other ancient culture, people came from the sea. Water was the source of all life. God lived in the water and at the end of life bodies were given back to the sea. The fall of humanity happened when a woman disobeyed god and decided that she would rather walk than swim. She followed the advice of a sea serpent and she left the ocean and sucked in the clean air. She ate berries and leaves from the land and made her home on the earth. Anat, the Assyrian god, got so angry at the others who also wanted to live on the land that were banished from the sea and were no longer able to breathe under the water and be at one with God. The Assyrian people are literally “people from the water”. The story of their cultural beginning is about a woman who disobeyed god. The Judeo-Christian story is very similar. Our woman, Eve, also listened to the serpent, and also disobeyed God. Both cultures pointed to these stories as the beginning of the separation between human beings and God, but also a separation between immortality and suffering.

I believe our entire existence and attitude come from the root of these stories. For centuries, women have been blamed, abused and oppressed for their role in the separation between God and humanity. No matter how many wars that men create and perpetuate throughout time, it is the women who have carried the burden of this separation. This overt and covert sexism is played out in every level of society and in almost every culture on this planet, and it is based in these two mythical stories. These two stories have lit and stoked the flames of suffering for women and girls in every era and even today the insidious ways that they creep into our lives is a huge cause for reflection and concern in all of our living.

It is necessary from this point forward in our lives to proclaim loudly that women are not the originators of sin. You are not the cause of our suffering now and never have been. These stories are merely reflections of

the reality of separation. I hate to break it to you, but you are not god, and neither am I. In fact, we are not even close to being god. We all live lives separate from God. We all live in a state of sin, and that is not all bad. Sin is not a dirty word. I can smile and say, I am a happy sinner. I love to sin. Sometimes, sin soothes my hurt and makes me warm and safe. Every time I shut my door at night, turn out the lights and snuggle into my warm bed, knowing that there are people sleeping outside on these cold nights, I am living in sin. I am living separately. It is not a bad thing, no matter what some nun made you believe when you were a child. We live in a state of sinfulness. I love the Billy Joel lyrics, "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints. The sinners are much more fun, only the good die young." I think we need to get rid of the power that sinning has over us. We need to get rid of our guilt, for it has no place in our story. Sinning is just a part of being who we are. Humanity is separate from God. Our story is one of mortality, not immortality. Living and dying are part of our existence. It is normal, we know that humans have been living and dying since we first crawled out from the ooze and jumped around like apes. It is who we are.

The story of what Eve did in that garden is the story of the greatest gift that has ever been bestowed upon us. The story of Eve is the beginning of living freely and discerning between good and evil. Eve is the representation of true freedom, not freedom from God, but freedom to be with God. This is the desire of faithful people from Abraham and Sarah, to Moses and Miriam; the faithful people want to be with God. This desire to be one with God is at the center of our faith. I have said before, that the purpose of church is to save lives. We are here to be community in a lonely world. We are here to show people who grieve and feel separate and alone that God wants us to want to be whole, complete, and together. It is not about being sinful, because we are that, it is about our desire to be together with God.

The currency that is exchanged in that relationship is the currency of grace. Grace trumps sin. Jesus provides a living sacrifice so that we would understand that living and dying are not the limits of our humanity. Jesus dies so that we could understand that grace trumps sin. Grace is the symbol of hope, togetherness, healing, and connection. To understand grace is to understand that God forgives and forgives and forgives. Nothing can separate us from that love and forgiveness. Living in a state of grace means that we, too, are learning how to forgive others, and ourselves. Grace is all about freedom and choice. It is described by the Apostle Paul as that free gift of grace and all we have to do is reach out and take. We are free, thanks to our mythological mother in Eve, to discern between good and evil and accept grace. We are free to look in the mirror and see, not the flawed, sinful person that someone may have taught us to see, but we are free now to look in the mirror and see in our

reflection the beauty, love, and grace that God gives. This is what freedom is about, and it changes how we see others as well. When we live in a “state of grace” we look at others, not as flawed, but as beautiful. When we truly understand grace we can begin to be free to see the beggar as a person with freedom and rights, sometimes stripped away. Is it any wonder why the social justice movements throughout history have been centered in the church? It is because people started seeing grace rather than sin. People started to see the freedom or grace rather than the weight of sin. In short, people learned to love and forgive rather than judge and condemn. They followed the Gospel and understood what it meant to be both open and affirming.

When I was volunteering as a prison chaplain, I used to refer to the pile of forgiveness in the corner of the room. It is piled up high, it never runs out, we are always welcome to jump in it and wear it around and we can also offer it others. No matter how much grace we take, there will always be more. In the ancient culture of Assyria, folks would go to the water and take some home, because it was a symbol of their oneness with God, even though they lived separately. Isn't that what we do as well? Aren't we welcome to come to the deep well of grace and draw some out knowing that even though we sin, we don't have to live separately from God? As this Lenten journey begins, you are invited to come to the well over and over again. You are invited to see beyond the brokenness to beauty. You are invited to be healed and made whole by a people and God who want you to be free.

AMEN.