

Garden Life
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Bob Stillerman
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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Some years ago, longer than any of us can figure, God made a garden. But not just any garden. It was a garden filled with good soil, and fed by fertile streams, and inhabited by luscious trees and plants. And in this good place, this good thing God made, God used God's hands, stuck 'em in the dirt, just like you and me do in our own gardens, and God molded the first earth creature, and breathed life into this being.

God gave the very first of our kind a sense of belonging: a home in which to rest, and to be nourished, and to find purpose. "Till this garden, work this garden, make this place flourish," God said. There was a mutual dependence: the dirt from which humanity was created needed to be worked to fulfil its purpose, and humanity needed the fruit of the dirt's purpose to realize its own prosperity and future. Not unlike today, when for us, the earth's wellbeing is both our responsibility and our lifeline.

The earth creature's new vocation came with but one restriction: don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for in the day that you eat of it, you shall die.

Then, we skip a large portion of the text. I think that's too bad, because in those verses, are good words, empowering words, but words that have been twisted, and misinterpreted throughout history. Let me offer a brief synopsis that doesn't conform to patriarchal tradition. God wanted to give this new earth creature a soul mate, some being it could partner with, and with whom it could cultivate a sense of community. So God made a fitting helper, someone who could co-lead in making the garden, and the ones charged with stewarding it, live into its purpose. God made a helper, an equal, a confidant, a partner, a Ride or Die. Patriarchal tradition reduced these partners to man and woman, subordinated one to the other, and mired us in a culture that still devalues one half of the world's population. But make no mistake, no matter how much tradition wants to tell you

otherwise, the earth creatures in today's text were not yet beholden to systematic patriarchy, nor does the text advocate for such a system.

So anyway...two equals, partners, stewards, soul mates, manage a garden. One day, a serpent decides it'll be fun to ask a trick question, maybe even provoke someone into breaking from conventional order. So He (because of course he's a he!) approaches Earth creature #2, and says, "Did God really tell you that you can't eat from one of the trees in the garden?"

If you want some proof of the second earth creature's high status, just check out her response to the serpent's question: she reminds him of the depth of breadth of what God allows (eating from 99.99% or all but one of the trees), but she also states – "Look, dude, we aren't even supposed to touch that forbidden tree." And she reminds him of the consequences for ignoring such a prohibition. This woman has details. She's in the know. She's applied her knowledge even further than the first earth creature – she's not just an order-taker. She's powerful in her own right. She's not acting like a subordinate here.

So the two engage in a spirited theological conversation about the nature of God. "Come on," the serpent says, "You really think you'll die if you eat that fruit. That tree's got power, knowledge of good and evil, and if you eat of it, God knows that will change your relationship, change the power dynamic."

Earth Creature #2 considers the question. And she is thoughtful. The tree has fruit that would be good food. The fruit is pleasing to her senses. The tree will give her wisdom. What would one bite hurt?

Earth Creature #1 is not thoughtful, and is apparently not a talker. He takes a bite, because it's suggested.

Immediately, upon eating the fruit, both earth creatures become aware of their humanness in relation to the other creatures within the garden. They notice their nakedness, and their vulnerability. But perhaps more than anything, they realize they have chosen to pursue independence over interdependence. They have chosen to pursue something that's not their purpose. And in so doing they feel a sense of shame. And so they make clothes, yes, clothes to cover their nakedness, but perhaps also clothes to dampen their sense of alienation.

And then the lection ends.

But maybe that's not a bad thing.

For here we are, in the season of Lent, a time to discern our commitment to being God's people, a time to shine light on those places that prevent us from realizing our potential. And perhaps, more than anything, a time to consider the nature and character of the God we serve.

Here's the thing: this isn't a story about poaching pears from forbidden orchards. This is a story about boundaries. We have been created, and indeed we belong to, a benevolent God. This God of ours has created a world of interdependence, one where we are to be stewards of the creatures and creation God has made. And, as a people of faith, living in God's faithfully-created creation, we are bound in covenant with God – that is, each of us are made to live into our God-given purpose. That means, there may be forbidden trees in the middle of our gardens that prevent us from living as we are meant to live.

We are called to till the soil of God's community: to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with and love our God; to love neighbor as we love self.

We cannot till such soil if we are lured by trees bearing the very fruit that corrodes it. Yes, we must learn to decipher what is good and what is evil, but only so that we can obey God, not replace or become God. God calls us to be righteous. That doesn't mean lording our righteousness over others, it means being obedient to God's call. And what other trees do we pursue? Wealth, power, prestige, the list goes on – we tell ourselves that one bite can't hurt; there's no real death in these things that distract us from our purpose. And do we not construct our own fig leaves, justifications to hide the contradictions of the covenant we seek to keep?

God gave the first earth creatures purpose. God gives us purpose, too. Sometimes, not all the time, but sometimes, we fail to live into that purpose. I take comfort in the fact that one of the very first earth creatures dared to ask the question, "What'll happen when we take a bite, when we don't live up to our standards?" I take comfort, because I think that's a real response to God's call. It's

also a brave one, and a thoughtful one, and a human one. And I'd say a Lenten one, too.

To be fair, Earth Creature #2 probably didn't get the answer she wanted, and neither did we: It doesn't feel good stray from our purpose, to be something we aren't intended to be. And sometimes our straying has adverse effects – we don't like what we see in the mirror.

But Earth Creature #2 wasn't punished with death. And humanity wasn't corroded by sin. You can read the rest of the text for yourself. Yes, God did expel her and Earth Creature #1 from the garden, but not from God's presence. She was introduced to grace. God made clothes for her. And God kept her in community with Earth Creature #1. And she became a mother, to all of us, and she worked the land, land that to this day provides for each of us.

And in a tragic way, she bore the brunt of being the first to question, the first to ponder, the first to be humanly-decisive – patriarchal systems have discarded her value, maligned her strength, and villainized her genuine nature. They've also elevated Earth Creature #1 to a dominant role, rewarding his apathy, despite the fact that his purpose was not, and will not ever be to hold dominion over Earth Creature #2.

Tradition, albeit dangerous and distorted, likes to hold that the life of Christ atones for the behavior of the earth creatures, of course many of them can't even give Earth Creature #2 full credit for our degradation!!!

But as I think about the nature and character of God, and of the One who came in God's name, I don't believe that Christ came to redeem Earth Creature #2. I believe, instead, that Christ chose to walk in her very shoes, to mimic her experience, to learn what it meant to be discarded, marginalized, villainized, and abandoned, and yet still cling to God's presence, and yet still work with an eye toward tilling the soil of God's future.

I guess what I'm getting at is this: I don't think Lent is about discovering the tree in the middle of the garden we need to avoid. I think Lent is about faithing the life that happens beyond the walls of the garden. Earth Creature #2 should be celebrated for helping us discover that life does indeed exist in the space beyond

the garden. Jesus reminds us that such a life is abundant. And that such new life is available to all.

God's boundaries are not death sentences, nor are they prohibitions against living. God's boundaries are a loving creator's hope for a good people. And lucky for us, God's line in the sand, God's objectives and hopes, are not the final word. God the creator is the final word. And God has got us, that is God's gonna keep on loving us like Mama Eve, whether we're in the garden of God's making, or the in weeds of our own making.

Thanks be to God!