

“Original Blessing”

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Scripture reading: Genesis 3:8-13

You know, as I was reading and thinking and praying about blessings a few weeks ago in preparation for last Sunday, I realized that this whole concept, blessings, goodness, is rich enough to warrant coming back to. It's rich enough, important enough, because you may have noticed, it's really easy to find many ways where people are criticized, judged, shamed, berated, told “you're not good enough” in explicit and implicit ways. We might even do this to ourselves; saying things in our internal monologue we would be horrified to hear spoken aloud to someone else. So focusing on our core goodness, the blessedness in which our world, and each one of us, is created in, can be radical and subversive. It can be radical and subversive in our contemporary culture which profits on creating not good enough, and in much of Christian history—which has done sort of the same thing.

Many of us, if you grew up in a Christian church of some sort, may be familiar with the doctrine of Original Sin. That idea that Adam and Eve, in disobeying God and eating the fruit, pass that sin on to every successive generation. Now, this is not a remotely biblical concept—that language is never used in the Hebrew Bible or Christian Scriptures. But it got a lot of traction after Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, solidified the notion that we do not do the good we wish to do because of an inherent aspect of our personhood that is flawed. He saw this in the story we heard in Genesis, where it's like “don't do the one thing” and Adam and Eve do the thing, and lose out on blissful ignorance for the rest of their lives. And, the lives of humans forever after.

So there's this sort of transactional model the church for centuries, set up under Augustine—that we are “fallen” by birth, that we are cursed with sin that pains and kills us, and that only through the sacrifice of Jesus (that the church mediates) are we saved from this wretched state.

When I was in seminary at Duke, we hit this concept hard and long in Christian History. And I was appalled. I grew up in the UCC, and had never heard this taken so seriously before. I really seemed like, “Augustine, you're really just projecting your own sexual issues onto

everyone in history ever. I wish you would stop making theology out of your own personal struggles”. His own hedonistic lifestyle compelled him to see human sexuality, the body itself, as a battleground for the soul.

Sometimes this is how people make sense of their imperfect lives—they create stories and concepts and universal truths that fit how they experience the world into some way of making sense. And when these people have power, their experience often becomes universalized. It’s extrapolated.

And perhaps the Hebrew authors of Genesis made similar moves, looking at the selfishness and cruelty that humans can continue to be capable of. The 9th century BCE author of Genesis confronted the same question that Augustine struggled with: how could a perfectly good God create such an imperfect humanity? Genesis begins with how good God found creation to be, but then goes on to tell a story that suggests that when given a choice, those created humans will not be counted on to make the right one, even after being told explicitly what not to do. So it was like retconning—a kind of geek term for retroactive continuity—where, looking at what the current state of things seems to be, you go back to tell a story to make that consistent. This story helped the storytellers of that time to make sense of the experience of being alive. But what Augustine did was take this story as literal fact. He took a myth as history, and turned it into doctrine.

Robin Myers writes in his book *Saving Jesus from the Church* that “ironically, what never happened became the basis for the formulation of a doctrine about what always happens. Working from the consequences of fictional events involving fictional people, Augustine confused symbolic truth with historical truth to justify mythology as dogma” (102)

So, like any story, there are multiple ways to interpret it. While we are not perfect, seeing this story as a reflection of “original sin” is just one way of reading this story.

Catholic Theologian Matthew Fox sees Original Blessing in the Genesis narrative. That rather than inherited sin, the goodness in which God called all creation is our identity. We see ourselves as part of the story of earth, with all its goodness and imperfections.

And when we feel that these imperfect actions and mistakes are all we are, that they define us as human beings, that’s when we lose sight of our goodness. Not by some inherited nature, but by triggered shame that suggests “this mistake is who you are.”

We may make mistakes, but we are not a mistake. This is the difference between guilt and shame—we might feel regret about something we did, but it does not color the quality of our character, or mar our inherent goodness. But perhaps the obsessive focus on being perfect can lead us to lose sight of this. I say this as a perfectionist—it does turn me inwards onto myself. This isn't where I'm meant to be. And, I find the greatest release from that in the company of others, who release me from myself and all the ways I imagine I fall short. When I can accept the goodness even amidst my imperfection, I can better love and bless others.

And that blessing can be transferrable. The felt sense of goodness and wholeness that is transmitted through blessing propagates itself, like kindness or even a simple smile can.

Recalling our Original Blessing recalls us beyond the limitations and struggles we feel to the source of our goodness. Our deepest truth is our goodness, even in our imperfection and our mistakes.

Last week, we heard a passage from *Gilead* by Marilyn Robinson: “There is a reality in blessing. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges that, and there is a power in that.” Pronouncing blessings on things, on people, acknowledges that goodness and sacredness in which we all began. This grounding in our God-given goodness is powerful; it can give us strength and courage to risk and to be creative, when we are not concerned that our mistakes define us.

I signed up for a shift at the UCC booth at the Portland Pride Fest yesterday. Church, let me tell you, Pridefests are sacred space. They are brimming with blessings, full of people not just able to be themselves, but affirmed, blessed, celebrated, for being themselves.

And were plenty of people, young and old alike, who were touched, seemed delightfully hopeful, that a church like the UCC can affirm how people were born to be. I met several people who had grown up in a church and loved praying with others, loved singing familiar hymns, but felt like they were treated as though they were sinful. That their core being was bad. And these people were really, remarkably excited to find out that there is a church that can call them good, just as they are. Where they can bless and be blessed for, and from, their inherent worth.

The easiest way to bless others is to discover the original blessing that dwells within you. So unfurl yourself into the light of your own goodness. And offer some radical, subversive blessings for those who don't hear it enough. Amen.