

## 2-22-26 Sermon “God’s Boundaries” – Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-6

This morning’s Old Testament reading is one that we’ve surely heard before – Adam, Eve, and the Fall of Humankind.

Actually, this Biblical story runs the risk of being *too* familiar. We’ve heard it so many times that we read things into – it themes, theology, insinuations and implications that actually aren’t there. For example, there is no apple in Genesis 3, nor is there any implication that the snake is the devil – those both come from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. And in fact, the story we read this morning never uses the word “fall” – or even the word “sin.”

And so, as best we can, I want to try this morning to strip away some of the baggage that comes with this text so that we can hear the story as it’s written, not the story as we’ve developed it in the theology of the church. Because what I think we actually have here is a story about what happens when we humans disregard God’s boundaries.

There is a hymn by the late church musician Thomas Troeger that treats the story this way – as a story about boundaries. It was in our old blue Presbyterian hymnal, but it did not make the cut for the new purple hymnal. And that’s probably just as well because I don’t think anybody actually knows this song, and I’ve never known a Presbyterian congregation to sing it.

The hymn is called “God Marked a Line and Told the Sea.” (Show of hands, anyone’s favorite? Well, there you go...) But it’s a fascinating little hymn, and it begins in Genesis 1, when God separates the sea and dry land. It goes like this:

*God marked a line and told the sea  
Its surging tides and waves were free  
To travel up the sloping strand  
But not to overtake the land.*

Having laid out that first example of God setting a boundary in the natural order, Troeger ventures into this morning’s text – Genesis 2 – as he begins to explore the limits that God has placed on human autonomy...

*God set one limit in the glade  
Where tempting, fruited branches swayed,  
And that first limit stands behind  
The limits that the law defined.*

Boundaries are an important ingredient that make life together in human community possible.

There is a line that many of y’all have heard me say, over and over, when people act badly in the church (People act badly in the church?! Shocking, I know). And that line is this: “We accept all people. We do not accept all behaviors.” There are certain limits we agree to when we come into this space, shared assumptions about what our life together looks like.

For example, God created us all as beautiful, diverse human bodies, and as we just heard from Genesis, God created us to be naked and unashamed. But when we come to church, we put clothes on those beautiful, diverse bodies of ours, and I think we all generally agree that that’s a very good thing!

There are other boundaries we put in place to organize our common life. We run background checks on everyone that works with our children. If someone is behaving inappropriately at a church gathering – yelling at people, insulting people – we take them aside and ask them to stop, or to leave. And we do intuitively; we don't say, "Hmmm, someone's acting out, let's go consult the anti-harassment policy," (which we do finally have, believe it or not! – We are now finally in compliance again with the Book of Order!).

No, it's more like we just have this innate, God-given sense of what behaviors nurture community life, and what limits we need to set to protect against behaviors that degrade, demean, dehumanize, and detract from our life together.

We don't set these boundaries to be punitive, or to distinguish between who is righteous and who is sinful – we're all both. I think we set these boundaries because we are a people shaped by the narrative in Genesis 2 and 3, because we understand that life together is healthier and happier when we are willing to accept certain limits on our freedom for the sake of the common good.

*The line, the limit, and the law  
Are patterns meant to help us draw  
A bound between what life requires  
And all the things our heart desires.*

The same is true in the secular world – there are limits that exist on our human freedom, power, and agency. We don't always agree on what those limits should be, but most of us do seem to understand that there are lines shouldn't be crossed, lest we harm to the larger community of God's Creation. Limits like how much money we can amass for ourselves before we have to start paying it back through taxes. Or how much carbon we can safely use before our lifestyle becomes a danger to the well-being of the planet we all call home.

When the serpent comes to tempt Eve, his argument is very compelling; he says, "When you eat this fruit, *you will be like God*, knowing good and evil. But you know, I'm not so sure it's about *knowing* good and evil – surely Eve has some inkling of the difference between good and evil, or she wouldn't be having an internal debate about whether or not to eat the forbidden fruit. No, I think the God-like power that the snake offers us may be more about *deciding* what is good and what is evil for ourselves. Perhaps the temptation is not to greater knowledge, but to giving ourselves permission to set our own moral compasses and live our lives as if we were not fully dependent upon God and one another.

Eve and Adam eat the fruit because they want to be like God. The sad irony, of course, is that they are *already* like God. Remember, in Genesis 1, God creates humankind in God's image, and then God sets us in the garden, to till the earth and keep it.

We're already co-creators, co-conspirators with God in the work of Creation. Just because there are limits on our vocation does not mean it is not holy. God creates us in God's own image and in the same breath gives us finitude. We are aware at the same time of our significance and our insignificance in this world, of our agency and our limitations.

*But, discontent with finite powers,  
We reach to take what is not ours  
And then defend our claim by force*

*And swerve from life's intended course.*

Traditional theology ends this text with a curse and a fall. Adam and Eve are expelled from Paradise and estranged from their intimate relationship with God. That is all a very bleak outlook – friends, is there any *good news* that we can take away from this story?

I wonder if the good news comes with accepting our human limitations. Perhaps the good news is an invitation – when we come to the limits of our own strength, intelligence, will, and agency – not to despair, but to joyfully and lovingly embrace our finitude. For when we come to the end of ourselves, we see clearly that God is God, and we are not – and *that's ok*.

Friends, I wonder what would happen – when we encounter those places of our own limitations – if we began to understand them not as personal failures, but as holy ground. We have come to the place where we step back and God takes over. The divine-human partnership for which we were created.

*We are not free when we're confined  
To every wish that sweeps the mind,  
But free when freely we accept  
The sacred bounds that must be kept.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.