

SERMON TEXT FOR PROPER 5B
PREACHED JUNE 10, 2018 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA
TEXTS: Genesis 3.8-15, Mark 3.20-35

Excerpted from a public Facebook post this week:

"I am sorry that I can't do anything right. I am sorry that I cause so much pain. I am sorry and I wish things didn't happen the way they did. I messed up badly and I don't think I can fix this. I am a piece of sh** and I am trying to make everyone happy, but all that's doing is hurting me. I never wanted to hurt anyone or make people upset with me or anyone else. I know that I need to work on things and I am disappointed in myself and I am sorry."

Acknowledging one's sins and missteps is never easy, especially in a public forum. The person who wrote this post did not identify who it was they had hurt or what they had done to cause the hurt. But what struck me was how they referred to themselves in the post – essentially calling themselves worthless and not worth caring about. (And since I know this person, I know that could not be further from the truth, for them or for anyone, really.)

Acknowledging our sin and accepting the blame and the consequences of our actions is front and center in today's Old Testament lesson, the very familiar story of what we Lutherans often refer to (rightly or wrongly) as "original sin." As you no doubt recall, Adam and Eve are placed in the Garden of Eden and told to tend and care for it. They can eat of anything in the garden EXCEPT the fruit from the Tree of Good and Evil; that is forbidden. So what do they want, and what do they ultimately succumb to? Of course, an apple from that very tree.

Knowing that they did wrong, Adam and Eve cover their nakedness and try to hide from God. Of course, we know that that is impossible! Eventually they 'fess up – sort of. Neither Adam nor Eve actually accept responsibility for their actions. Rather, Adam indirectly blames God, implying that if God had not given the woman to him as a companion, he would not have eaten of the fruit that she gave him. The woman in turn blames the serpent for having deceived her into eating the fruit. God curses the serpent (the only animal to be so judged) to crawl upon its belly and eat dust all of its days.

The woman's decision to listen to the serpent has dire consequences for the couple. Yet, contrary to later interpretations, the woman is not responsible for the origin of sin in the world or the "fall" of humankind.

In fact, neither the words "sin" nor "fall" appear in the narrative. Nevertheless, God's question, "*Who told you that you were naked?*" is a cautionary reminder to take heed to who's voice we choose to listen to.

This story is difficult to hear without centuries of built-up prejudices about who, truly, was at fault. So I would urge you to set aside any notion that this story tells us that the woman is inferior and the snake is despicable.

1) The story does not say the woman is a vixen for suggesting that the fruit should be eaten, nor is she inferior to the man. Nor should we automatically assume

that when Adam is given Eve as a "helper" we naturally assume that this some subordinate creature. She is not.

2) Try shedding the notion that the "fall" story is about sin - especially sexual sin - and the shame of the naked body. Instead, try on the notion that gaining the knowledge given by the forbidden tree allows the humans to differentiate themselves from the rest of nature. This self-image is necessary for stewardship and the care of creation. It also opens the opportunity to know God's goodness in clothing them. If we read on in Genesis, a few verses after this story, we see that God provides more permanent clothing – animal skins – for the humans in place of their fig leaves.

What is clear in this story is that as soon as Adam and Eve realized that they had sinned before God, they started making excuses. They tried to justify their actions. Excuses have no place in the Christian life. As Christians, we don't have to make excuses. The truth is, there's nothing we can say before God to justify our sinful behavior. That is God's job. As the apostle Paul so deftly reminds us, we are all *"justified by grace through faith."* Or put another way: We are free to recognize that we are not perfect people. We can do that because we rely on the perfect love of God. So the Christian alternatives to excuses are confession and forgiveness. God may have a big drawer full of our excuse note, but it's nowhere near as big as God's capacity for forgiveness.

God gives us choices between good and evil, between faith and anxiety, between righteousness and our selfish whims. But God keeps at us, renewing us every day, especially in Christ, through the waters of baptism.

So here is our challenge for the week. Every time we find ourselves making an excuse for our actions, stop and ask God for forgiveness. Confess our sins to God, and God will forgive us.

Then, go a step further and begin to practice forgiveness with one another. Think about what it would be like if we regularly offered one another assurances and signs of forgiveness, if we were in faith communities that regularly, consistently offered forgiveness to one another. Would we need excuses anymore? That is, after all, the kind of life that we are called to live. We are regularly to forgive one another in the name of the God who continually, consistently forgives us all. And if we do that hard work of forgiveness, there is no longer a need for excuses.

We expect that the world will be full of excuses, excuses, excuses. And sometimes it will be that way with us, as well. After all, such habits are hard to break. But what if we really believed in the forgiveness of God and could rely on the forgiveness of one another? What if, instead of excuses, excuses, excuses, we heard forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness?