

First Congregational Church
Colorado Springs, CO
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ORIGINAL BLESSING

First of all, thank you for your gracious invitation. This is my church away from home, and I have been blessed many times by worshipping here with my family—albeit it very anonymously. Like you, I live and work in the midst of a place where most people understand and express their Christian faith much differently than do the people in my congregation. And here you sit, in the epicenter of the Christian Right, trying to be the church that you believe God is calling you to be in the midst of an increasingly divided and angry nation.

Like you, I am often told that I am headed for the fires of hell (all the good works of the good ship Mayflower notwithstanding). They mean to put me on notice that I am not theological sound, even though nowhere in the Sermon on the Mount does it say, “Blessed are the theologically sound.” Besides that, I don’t believe hell, and I sure hope I’m right!

What I do believe in is the Beloved Community of the Jesus People that the church, at it’s best, is called to be. What I believe in the church is called, not to save souls, but to restore them—separating us from the that shadow side in all of us that is ruled by the ego, and transforming us into people of grace and kindness and patience. People who encourage one another and give one another the benefit of the doubt.

But to do this we need a new First Premise in the church. In Greek thought, the first premise (or major premise) was what ruled deductive, syllogistic logic. You all know how this works, even if you don’t call it a syllogism: All men are mortal/Socrates is a Man/Therefore Socrates is mortal.

You don't really need to state for first premise (All men are mortal) because everyone assumes it is true. As an "assumed, and therefore unstated premise, the Greeks had a word for it (they had a word for everything). They called it an "enthymeme"--the unstated major premise in any argument.

A more modern example would be this: Rogaine grows hair/Therefore bald men love Rogaine. Nobody think to state the major premise (Bald men would prefer to have hair), because we assume it. It's an *enthymeme*. In the church, we have been assuming some rather sizable first premises for 1,500 years that determine the outcome of our theological arguments—and they may not be true.

When you think about it, most of us argue over our conclusions (whether it is religion or politics), but not many us discuss the assumptions that underlie those arguments—assumptions about the very nature of reality that make certain conclusions inevitable.

To put this in the form of the sublime and the ridiculous--all bald men may not wish to have hair, and humans may not be born bad—or born into sin, as the church puts it. That granddaddy of all enthymemes determines the outcome of all orthodox Christian arguments. But what if it's not true?

I don't know about you, but I feel as if for the first time in about 500 years, which is how often the great religious scholar Phyllis Tickle says the church holds a kind of giant rummage sale (asking, what do we keep, and what do we get rid of?), we are asking fundamental questions about the life of faith and the purpose of the church. And what that really means is that we are asking questions about our religious enthymemes, our most sacred and often our most taboo first premises.

There was a time, not so long ago, when I would have been burned at the stake for writing “Saving Jesus from the Church.” I would have been branded a heretic, but that word only means “to choose” and I do not choose to accept the church as it is, but to dream of the church as it might be. My quarrel is a lover’s quarrel.

One of the chapters in my book is entitled, “Original Blessing, not Original Sin.” Not an original phrase, of course, Matthew Fox coined it in the 80’s, but he got it from the Christian Mystics of the middle ages. I have come to believe that like so many other so-called essential doctrines in the church, Original Sin is a creation of the institution, and that like so many other supposedly essential doctrines it nowhere to be found in the Bible or the teachings of Jesus. Someone asked the great preacher Fred Craddock once what he thought of the Trinity. “I don’t think about it much,” he replied, “I more of a Bible person myself.”

Well, if you are a Bible person, you will have a hard time finding a lot of the doctrines we say are at the heart of the Christian faith. Take Original Sin, the idea that we are born into sin, that we inherit it from our first parents, Adam and Eve--that we arrive in the world as little sinners, trapped by the transgressions of those who came before us--because sin is a birthright, like red hair or left-handedness. We are sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners!

And you’ve got to hand it to the church. They provided all of humanity with a diagnosis for which on it had the cure—that would be the ultimate spiritual franchise. You see if you can keep the masses from challenging your assumed premises, you have enormous power. Like the idea of the “divine right of kings”—it enslaved humanity for centuries until someone got up one day and said, “The king is not divine; The Emperor has no clothes; the Earth is not the center of the universe.

The doctrine of original sin as we understand it in the church is nowhere to be found in the Hebrew Scriptures or in the New Testament either. Of course, we have this wonderful story in Genesis in which a mythical couple, Adam and Eve, who have everything they need, but not everything they want, *choose* to sin and get us all kicked out of the garden.

I call it a myth not because it is not true, but because it contains a truth larger than mere facts can convey. The instructions to Adam and Eve are clear enough: do as you please, God says, but don't do one thing: don't eat the fruit of one tree in the middle of the garden or you will die. Nonsense says the serpent, go for it; it will open your eyes and you will become like God, knowing good and evil. Besides, if one is told exactly what NOT to do, isn't that exactly what ones WANTS to do. So the woman partakes (of course, the story is written by a man). She partakes, then she recommends it Adam (the little temptress) and immediately they realize that they are naked, i.e., they discover shame.

But the best part of the story is the passing of the buck. When confronted with this transgression, Adam blames the woman, who blames the snake. It's the first example of the victimhood mentality, where no one is ever to blame for anything someone else is to blame. The epicenter of this sickness in our time is located in Washington D.C. Everything is someone else's fault.

In the book I explain a concept called *etiology*, which I also teach my students at the university, as a key to understanding much of the Bible. Etiology is a literary device in which a story is created retroactively to explain how things came to be as they are now—which is exactly what the story of Adam and Eve does. Looking around, the author of that story saw a desperately imperfect and broken world. How did it get to be that way? I mean, if God is really all-powerful and all loving, then how did we end up being such flawed and tragic creatures?

You can't blame an imperfect world on a perfect God, or it would appear that God's work is defective. But this much is certain. We all do things are told expressly not to do, and some realities seem particularly unfair: that women should have to give birth in great pain (and who sometimes die in childbirth), and that men must work by the sweat of their brow in dusty fields until they die? We can relate to this in Oklahoma.

The story serves to explain why, to use a Buddhist phrase, "what is, is." Once we were perfect, frolicking blissfully in paradise. God work was perfect, but because we *chose* to sin, we now suffer the consequences. We have all been kicked out of the garden. We all live, to quote Steinbeck, "East of Eden."

But the story does not say that we sin because we can't help ourselves. It says we often chose to sin and suffer the consequences. It was not until centuries later that the church created the doctrine of original sin (it was primarily Augustine's doing, who never did reconcile body and soul), and he essentially took free will away when it came to sinning. We are helpless and hopeless until we get Jesus--which as you very well know, eliminates all sinning. Well, OK, we still sin, but now we are forgiven. You've seen the bumper sticker: I'M NOT PERFECT, JUST FORGIVEN.

They call it Original Sin (which, by the way, led one stand-up comic to say—I'm all for Original Sin. I think if one is going to sin, one ought to be original about it) . . .but in fact, the doctrine of the church really makes "unoriginal" sinners out of all of us. We are just doing the same old stupid, nasty stuff all the time because we can't help ourselves. That's not very original.

I saw a sign in front of a church in Oklahoma once that announced

the sermon title: It read: IF YOU'RE DONE WITH SIN, THEN COME ON IN! But as I drew closer, I saw that someone had written another message just underneath it--in small letters, it looked like lipstick. It said, "But if you're not quite through, call 272. . ."

But what if Matthew Fox is right? What if we are born, not into Original Sin, but as an Original Blessing? And it's up to us to remember where we came from, where we are going, and to Whom we belong.

Here is what I believe. Over the centuries, the church has unwittingly been part of a grand ecclesiastical put-down of the human race. We have focused so much of our energy on teaching people to be humble that we have forgotten how to embrace the idea that we are born in image of God, captured by that beautiful Latin phrase, *imago Dei*.

I'll never forget the day, years ago, when I reported as a seventh grader to what used to be called "Home Room." It was the first day of school, and the teacher was reading the roll, which I now understand to be a very important moment--because this the first time the names of the students are read aloud, and thus their identity is established.

On that particular morning, the teacher read the name of a particular girl, and then stopped, peered over her glasses and said, "Is so-and-so your father [yes, the girl replied). . .and is so and so your brother" [yes ma=am]. You see both the father and the brother had served prison terms on drug charges. Then the teacher said (in front of the class), "Well, I sure hope you're not like them."

Now how do you think that girl felt? I personally believe the teacher should have been arrested, charged with a rhetorical crime against humanity. When we project an expectation of failure, that's what we usually get. "Sticks and stones can break my bones but words

can never hurt me.” Have you heard that? It’s cute--the only thing I can think of that a little misleading about it is that it’s false. Sticks and stone can break my bones, but words can totally destroy me.

Why do we put one another down so often--is it because we think we will get too high an opinion of ourselves, and thus become arrogant? Most arrogant people I know are that way because they *don’t* have a very high opinion of themselves. They are insecure. Or as my friend the rabbi put it: *a man who does not love himself wisely and well will make a casualty out of the neighbor sooner or later.*

In fact, we so distrust our own goodness, our real birthright, which is *imago dei*, that the word “human” has now been joined with a certain given weakness or fallibility. A baseball player strikes out, but not because the pitcher threw the perfect curve ball, but because the batter is, “only human.”

Your grandmother, who bakes cakes, those three-layer jobs that come out of the oven like a work of art and taste like sunshine in your mouth--nobody bakes them like your grandmother. But one day, something goes wrong. Nobody’s perfect. The cake “falls” as they say, flat as the soul of your shoe. And what does she say, “Well, I’m only human.”

Well, what I want to know is this: what was she when she baked the perfect cake? What was the baseball player when he hit the grand slam or made the diving catch?

We seem to want to talk about our humanness as a way of explaining failure, but not as a way of explaining success? It’s Original Sin over Original Blessing again. Listen to this: *to err is human, to forgive divine.* See how the pie is sliced? Humans also forgive, do they

not?

I can tell you from personal experience that most children do not start out afflicted with excessive and crippling humility. Kids don't come into the world all stooped over from self-loathing. They have to have it drilled into them. Take for example, a 9-year-old boy who gets an A in arithmetic . . . and is on his way home with his grade card in his hand. He is not the picture of humility as he walks home from school. . .

Now you take that same boy 30 years later, and he's a civic leader now, community-minded and he's been the head of an important project and they call him up to receive recognition for his work, and what does he do? He stares at the floor, counts his shoelaces, mumbles a few words of thanks for all the forgotten people who made it possible and his grandmother who came over in a covered wagon. Sometimes I wish people who just get up and say, "Thank you, I deserve this. In fact, this thing ought to be made of solid gold the way I worked on this thing."

A man named Edgar Lee Master from Spoon River Illinois wrote a bunch of poems once and called them the *Spoon River Anthology*. Basically, they are all framed on one idea. The people in Spoon River have all died, and now that they're dead, they're telling the truth.

One of them is named Constance Hadley, and this is what she said. "You praised my self-sacrifice, Spoon River, for rearing Irene and Mary, orphans of my older sister. And you censured Irene and Mary's contempt of me. Don't praise my self-sacrifice and don't censure their contempt of me. I cared for them; it's true enough. But I poisoned all my benefactions to them by constant reminders of their dependence on me.

Do you know what she means? It sounds like this: "As long as you girls set foot under my table. . .as long as you sleep under this roof. .

.remember what took you in when your mother died.” In other words, every kind word was accompanied by a reminder of the indebtedness of the recipient. Is it any wonder that the people we try to help so often end up hating us for it?

When I was a boy, growing up in Wichita, Kansas--a double PK (son of preacher, son of a professor), my home church, Plymouth Congregational church, had something they called the annual Christmas Project. We didn't really do much benevolence work of giving the rest of the year because the budget was always tight, but around Christmas time, we knew we had to show how much we cared.

Inspired by the Jesus who is the “reason for the season,” and on fire to help the needy and put “Christ back in Christmas,” a bunch of us from the youth group set out to spread love and joy--and we never thought for one minute that we were being condescending about it.

We made baskets for the poor, and then we dared to go into what we called “the ghetto” to distribute them. And we felt good about it. In fact, we were proud as peacocks.

First we collected money, somehow--I don't remember exactly how we got the money, probably a car wash, a rummage sale, or we embezzled from our parents, but we got the money somehow. And then we called the department of Social Services and we asked them, matter-of-factly, “Who are the poor in this community?” And they gave us a list of “needy families.”

We bought fruit and candy, apples, oranges, bananas, and we put them all in a sack. Then we put the sack in a basket, tied a bow on top and put in a little card in there with a hallmark verse about the true meaning of Christmas.

But we knew how important it was to be humble, because, after all, the whole Christmas story was humble, and the baby Jesus was humble, and the manger was nothing if not humble--so this is how we did it.

First, we'd go up on the front porch with the basket, knock on the door, and when we heard the person who lived in that little shack coming, we'd yell, Merry Christmas! and then run and jump in the car and drive on to the next house. You see, we were more interested in making the delivery than in making contact. Afterwards, we'd all go to the drugstore, thump our suspenders, get fat on milkshakes, and say, "Aren't we marvelous!"

It was my turn to make the delivery, and the neighborhood downright depressing. Some of these places did not look fit for human habitation, but that's why they could use some Christmas cheer I said to myself. So I walked up onto this one porch and knocked on the door. Nothing. No response. Nobody's home, I guess.

Just to be sure, I knocked one more time. Nothing. Nobody's home I thought, almost enjoying the thought. My friends were growing impatient, and started honking the horn. Then, suddenly, his face was at the door, staring at me through the screen.

It was a black face, and I had not seen it at first, in the shadows of the evening--but all of a sudden, there he said, "Hi." he said, "Oh, hi." I said, "What can I do for you?" And I thought to myself, *Uh oh. . what do I do now? I was just trying to leave a basket and now I'm in a conversation with a real live poor person.*

Then another face appeared, this face belonged to a woman and she said "Hi," and I said "hi" and then she said, "Won't you come in?" Come in? This wasn't working out like I planned.

Come in? Sure, why not? They offered”I’m Benjamin Johnson, this is my wife Claire. . .” I thought to myself, *How odd, they have names.*

And you’re name? Who, me? . . . I’m Robin Meyers, from Plymouth Church, part of the youth group.” “Oh, yes,” said Mrs. Johnson, that’s the big church--beautiful church.”

Then a little boy appeared from another room, and his mother introduced him. He looked to be 9 or 10 and he smiled and said, “What’s in the basket?” I had forgotten that I was even holding a basket, and I said, “Oh, ‘Merry Christmas!’” I said, and handed him the basket.

He took it from me (and get this), he started getting into the baskets, unwrapping the paper. He started opening the gift right there, instead of waiting until I left. He took out an apple as if he intended to eat it. I’m thinking to myself, this is not working out like I planned.

And then he did something really weird. He got out a second apple, and (get this), he handed it to me. He gave me some of my own fruit. I’m thinking to myself, *stupid kid, doesn’t know how charity works.* He’s giving me back my own stuff!

But what was I supposed to do, after all, I’m supposed to be humble, so I took it and took a bite out of it, and thought to myself--well, here I am, sitting in the home of real live poor people with real names, eating out of my own sack.

But I’ll never forget what I learned that day. I learned something as powerful as anything I’ve ever learned in my life. It shapes my theology, my politics, my family life, my understanding of God. And it’s very simple, until you think about it: *All of us. . .and I do mean ALL*

of us. . .eat out of the same basket.

Not mine and yours, his and hers, ours and theirs--no more “What do you people? But what do all of us want to become? Because however we like to hide it behind slogans of the self-made man, manifest destiny, and survival of the fittest, the truth is we all eat out of the same basket. We all eat together.

The world is not our project, our opportunity to take from the poor and give to the rich, and then sanctify our guilt with a little charity at Christmas time. We’re all in this together.

We’ve got to stop thinking of ourselves as if some are entitled and others are not, and recover our true First Premise of faith—“*imago dei*”—made in the image of God. Some theologians call Primal Memory, this belief that we are from God, and to God--and that life is but a parenthesis in which we are called to remember where we came from, where we are going, and to Whom we belong.

Because the real message of Genesis isn’t that we are infected with badness. But that God made the plants and trees and vegetation of every kind and then God said, “That’s good.” Then God made light, a greater to rule the day and a lesser to rule the night, and the stars, and God “saw that it was good.” Then God filled the sea of fish, and the sky with birds, and even the great sea monsters, and “God saw that it was good.” And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind, and it was so, and (get this) “God saw that it was very good.”

But then God made something else. . .slowly out of the primal ooze of nothingness God made a creature who could write poetry, paint masterpieces, and raise Lazarus from the death with medicine as well as with faith. After God made humankind in God’s own image, it is the

only time that God says, not that this is good, but that this is “very good.”

What God made was you and me. And if we put ourselves down, that’s a sin, and not a very original one. When God made you and me and Benjamin and Claire Johnson, and every other human being in the world God said, “This is the very best I can do.” As the Ephesians letter puts it, “You are God’s masterpiece.”

So the next time someone does something truly extraordinary, something good and decent, something grand and hopeful--just say, “Well, she’s human.”

Hey, great cake grandma. . . “Well, child. . . I’m human.” Nice catch Mr. third baseman. “Well, I’m human.”

Sitting next to you in this sanctuary, right now, at this moment, is the image of God. And every time you live up to your inheritance, instead of living down to your sickness, you are *recreated* in the image of God. And the next time you think you cant do something, just remember. . . “Hey, I’m human.”

“When I consider the heavens, the work of God’s fingers, the moon and the stars, I think what are persons that you are conscious of them?” Women and men and girls and boys just like us. And the answer comes back clear as a bell. “This I have made in my own image, only slightly less than myself.”

Amen.