

A sermon preached on June 10th, 2018 based upon Genesis 3:8–13 and Mark 3:20–22; 31–35 entitled “Peace with Justice and the Reconciling Congregation”.

This is Peace with Justice Sunday, which calls us to reflect upon God’s desire for peace with justice in this world. It is “peace *with* justice” because it is possible to have peace — the absence of violence – built on a foundation of oppression and injustice. So how do we move in the direction of a more peaceful and just world?

Invariably this question will lead into politics, because political leaders and the policies they implement directly impact justice. But before this question leads to politics, it leads us to first ponder human nature. And the original story that speaks to this is the one about the Garden of Eden. First off, I don’t take this story literally – that is to say that once upon a time there were just two human beings living in a peaceful garden until a talking snake showed up. I do, however believe this ancient story is inspired by the Holy Spirit and contains great wisdom and insight regarding human nature.

One easily overlooked takeaway from this story is that distinguishing between good and evil, right and wrong often isn’t easy. The day the serpent showed up Adam and Eve had no way of knowing he was a “bad guy.” He starts off by raising questions, and there’s nothing wrong with asking questions. But then he tells a lie: he tells them that their trust in God is misplaced – that God is really a bad guy who doesn’t have their best interests at heart. It was the original “fake news.” Adam and Eve should have taken some time for fact checking – go ask God to get God’s side of the story. But they didn’t. They accepted the lie. And that’s on them.

But the serpent sounded so reasonable, and what he was saying appealed to something buried deep inside them – a desire to be the “big shots” in the garden – to take over the center place that belongs to God.

In our deeply divided country and world we too are encouraged by the evil one to believe that clearly distinguishing good from evil, right from wrong in relation to particular politicians, political parties and policies is easy.

So perhaps the first lesson of this story is simply that in this regard we should have a little humility.

Adam and Eve succumb to the serpent’s temptation to eat the forbidden fruit and everything comes unhinged. That’s where we pick up the story in the 3rd chapter of the book of Genesis:

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?”¹⁰He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”¹¹He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”¹²The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.”¹³Then the Lord God said

to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." (Genesis 3:8-13)

So this power we call "sin" takes hold of the once happy couple, causing them great misery, and it is this same destructive force that all humans have grappled with to this day. There are **two things** I would call your attention to in what we just heard in regard to how sin is expressed.

The first is the failure of Adam and Eve to take responsibility for their actions. Adam blames Eve (*and indirectly God for giving him Eve in the first place!*) and Eve blames the snake. *It's not our fault!* This failure to take responsibility is coupled with a striking capacity for self-deception.

So part of what sin involves is a failure to take responsibility for our own actions and a capacity to deceive ourselves about this fact.

The **second thing** to notice in the story is that walls go up: between the humans and God, but also between the humans themselves. Adam is quick to throw Eve under the bus. *It's every man for him self!* In the story that follows this aspect of sin is taken a step further when their son Cain kills their other son Able over a little case of jealousy, and boy does he regret it! In response to the first murder, God asks Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" And Cain says, "How should I know? Am I my brother's keeper?" The implication is that Abel feels responsible only for himself.

But no, we really are each other's keepers in the sense that God knit us together – all of us human beings – and we really **do** have responsibility for the wellbeing of one another on this earth.

Notice, though that I just made two statements that could sound as though they are in conflict:

Human beings need to take responsibility for their own actions and stop blaming others.

Human beings need to take responsibility for the well-being of others, for God has knit us all together.

Sin involves a refusal to acknowledge both of these truths.

How do we hold these two truths together, particularly as we seek to move towards **a more peaceful and just world?**

Let us turn now to our Gospel lesson from the third chapter of Mark which takes place early on in Jesus' ministry.

The crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat.²¹ When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."²² And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." (Mark 3:20-22)

Something painful has happened here that echoes the story of the Garden of Eden. Jesus' mom and his brothers and sisters have bought the *fake news* promoted by the religious authorities who have claimed the ability to judge that Jesus has been taken over by evil – that he's controlled by evil demons.

As with Adam and Eve it's not hard to understand how Jesus' family could get suckered in. Their neighbors are telling them that Jesus is acting like a crazy man. The authorities are telling them he is possessed by the ruler of demons. They're "*authorities*" for God's sake – the leaders who are *supposed* to know what's going on.

Jesus' family wants to take Jesus home as an act of compassion. They will look after him so he doesn't hurt himself or others and hopefully they can find some way to get him set him free from the evil demons.

Why do the authorities come to their judgment that Jesus is evil? Well, Jesus is a threat to the power structure – to their authority. They are in charge of the process through which people obtain God's forgiveness of sins. Jesus has claimed the power to forgive sin and is thereby undercutting their authority and power.

Because of *that capacity for self-deception* that is a part of all of us they are quick to interpret a challenge to their authority as a challenge to goodness itself.

This sort of self-deception is rampant among politicians. All human beings are sinners, and that means politicians are sinners, and as such their particular temptation involves *the seductions of power*. The old saying is true: "*Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*" Politicians **may** start out with good intentions but invariably the desire to hold onto power leads them to be willing to betray their innate moral code — for instance, to say things they don't really mean — make promises they know they can't keep. In a word — *to lie*.

So all politicians are corrupt, because all people are corrupt. Some are definitely more corrupt than others.

But the Bible warns us against identifying any one politician or ideology as purely right or good or true and to turn a deaf ear to all others.

Remember those two truths that sin leads us to deny – two truths that can appear to be in tension with one another? Forgive me for making some *broad generalizations*:

1) When it comes to their politics **conservatives** tend to emphasize the importance of **personal responsibility**, although in their personal lives conservatives can often be very compassionate, attentive to caring for the needs of others.

2) In contrast, liberals tend to emphasize in their politics the importance of caring for the less fortunate, although in their personal lives they can often be quite vigilant about the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions.

When it comes to addressing the injustices of our society both of these seemingly contradictory truths have to be kept in mind. Which is why it is so unfortunate that, like the religious authorities who demonized Jesus there is such a tendency to demonize people who identify themselves as being on the opposite side of the political spectrum.

Let's continue now with the Gospel lesson:

Then (Jesus') mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³²A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." ³³And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" ³⁴And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:31–35)

Well that sounds harsh! Jesus seems to be rebuking his family. Apparently the conflict expressed here got worked out over time because his mother was there weeping for him at the cross and his brother James became one of the leaders in the early church.

What Jesus seems to be saying here is that if we are going to follow the will of God, then **loyalty to our tribe** cannot define the limits of our compassion. When I declare that my concern for others begins and ends with "my" people, however I define them – my family, people who share my religion, my country, my race — I am failing to do the will of God.

Although Jesus said things that emphasize taking personal responsibility for one's life – "*why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye and overlook the log in your own eye*" comes to mind – the strongest theme of his ministry was his sacrificial identification with people who were on the margins of society: the poor, the widows and orphans, the outcasts who were deemed unclean sinners by the self-righteous. He drove out the money changers because the political/religious power structure was oppressing the poor in the name of God. He made the hero of his famous parable of compassion somebody who *definitely wasn't* a member of his listeners' tribe: the *good Samaritan*.

As Christians — and as a country which at its best is influenced by Christian values — we are compelled to care about the consequences of war on the most vulnerable among us, and about refugees from throughout the world, about the poor and the homeless and the civil rights of all. How care gets expressed requires the cooperation of persons across the political spectrum.

Last week we heard how *Jesus healed the withered hand of man in the synagogue*. That story clearly shows his compassion towards the less fortunate, but the theme of personal responsibility is also present in that story in a less obvious way: by healing the man's hand, Jesus is making it possible for the man to

rejoin the labor force and take responsibility for supporting his family. I am reminded of the slogan of Homeless Solutions: *"A hand up; not a hand out."*

The United Methodist Church has been struggling with a justice issue that has divided our denomination for several decades, and that involves the full inclusion of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender persons into the life of the church. The official policy of the United Methodist Church refuses to acknowledge the right of a Gay person to give expression to the kind of love that is assumed to be the birthright of every heterosexual person. It compels Gay persons to hide out in the shadows like Adam and Eve. This policy sends a message of rejection to Gay people, saying in essence they are unwelcome in Church, withholding from them the good news of Jesus and the love and support of his Church. It has encouraged Gay persons to hate themselves because of the sexual orientation with which God created them. The tragedy of suicide is in the news this week. The message of the Church towards homosexual persons has contributed to the fact that Gay teenagers commit suicide at a rate far higher than that of heterosexual teenagers.

As expressed in our mission statement of twenty years our congregation has a longstanding tradition of being welcoming and affirming of persons regardless of sexual orientation. At our recent covered dish supper convened to generate ideas for our church enthusiasm was expressed for our church taking the step of officially aligning ourselves with what is called the *Reconciling Ministries Network* which works within the United Methodist Church to advocate on behalf of full inclusion of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender people in the life of the church.

Taking this step would involve at some later date holding a congregational vote regarding becoming a "reconciling congregation." This step would not significantly changed anything about how here at the Parsippany UMC we go about being the church, but it would make clear where we stand at a critical moment in the history of the United Methodist Church.

At the last General Conference – the meeting that occurs every four years where delegates from United Methodist conferences from all over the world gather to vote on the policies of the church – a commission was set up to try and find a way forward for our denomination as we navigate the issue of inclusion of G, L, B, T people that has so deeply divided our church and threatened to break us apart.

The commission came up with three possible ways to proceed, passing these options on to the Council of Bishops.

The first was to double down on the present policy which is so unwelcoming to Gay and Lesbian persons and to severely punish clergy that don't tow the line.

The second was to split the church in two, a very complex and costly move that would witness to the world that United Methodists don't know how to get along with one another when we disagree.

The third was to allow individual congregations and conferences to decide the stance they would take for themselves in regard to welcoming Gay and Lesbian persons.

Given these three options, from my perspective the Council of Bishops were wise to endorse the third option which allows every church to act in a way that doesn't betray their conscience.

At a special General Conference set up for 2019 delegates will gather to vote on the Bishop's recommendation. There is no guarantee the delegates will follow the Bishops' lead - in fact there is reason to believe they could choose instead the punitive stance.

So as a preliminary step towards deciding whether we want to become a Reconciling Congregation this morning we are taking an anonymous straw poll. It is my hope that should we choose to take this step we will be in general agreement about this. The straw ballot in your bulletin gives you an opportunity hopefully without pressure to express where you personally find yourself on this subject. It will let us know whether we are ready to proceed or whether there is a need for further information and discussion. There presently are only ten "reconciling congregations" in our conference. Our district superintendent and our bishop support the spirit of the Reconciling Ministries Network's position although they are obliged to follow the rules of the Book of Discipline.

If anyone has questions about the implications involved in taking this step, or if anyone would like to discuss my interpretation of the often quoted Bible passages in relation to this issue I would be happy to meet with you. The input of all of our members is important as we consider this step.