

Gary L. Bagley  
Hilton Presbyterian Church  
Newport News, Virginia  
February 1, 2009

*East of Eden*  
Deuteronomy 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Once upon a time, an Eskimo hunter went to see the local missionary who had been preaching in the village.

“I want to ask you something,” the hunter said.

“What’s that?” the missionary asked.

“If I did not know about God and sin,” the hunter said, “would I go to hell?”

“No,” the missionary said, “not if you did not know.”

“Then why,” asked the hunter, “did you tell me?”<sup>1</sup>

This story was told by Barbara Taylor in her lecture on “Sin and Repentance” at the 2007 “January Adventure” conference. It stands as a riddle about the mystery of sin, God, and the consequences of our actions.

We live with constant reminders of an imperfect world. Some of these imperfections are personal. Some imperfections live within our society. And, some imperfections in our world system just seem to exist— like a Hurricane Katrina—claiming lives and hurting people.

What time we aren’t trying to explain these phenomena through the language of religion or philosophy, we find ourselves blaming others, washing our hands of them, or admirably trying to fix them.

Long before there were preachers, churches, or organized religions, there were essential experiences of community and alienation, of connection and disconnection to others and the Divine.

Before there was any such thing as a Christian doctrine of original sin, there was the Jewish story of a man and a woman that symbolized and explained the origins of human guilt. They lived in the land of paradise where all was perfect. This Garden of Eden contained everything their hearts desired, including the comforting presence of God. The only restriction in this paradise was one tree

---

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor from her “2007 January Adventure” lecture on “Sin and Repentance.”

whose fruit was not to be eaten. It was the tree of knowledge of good and evil. So, of course, from that moment on it was the only thing they wanted. The fruit from that one tree probably tasted better than all the other fruit combined, plus it must contain magical qualities that cause you to understand everything, which is what made God God. At least, that is what the snake said. Adam and Eve ate the fruit and they didn't die. But, they were forever banished from the land of paradise and forced to live "East of Eden." Their punishment was to labor and toil for survival and to experience pain, as in childbirth.

Modern day Jews, just like Christians, struggle with how to interpret story—whether to take it literally or metaphorically. Either way, you come out with much to ponder about human nature. The story was never intended to be taken literally, yet it is a wonderful story. It is wonderful not because there are no problems in it, but because it tells the truth about the way things really are. We really are free to make disastrous decisions. Our choices really do have consequences. And, there really are some flaws in the whole creation process, whether they come in the form hurricanes or our urge to choose things that are ruinous for us, burning holes in the ozone layer.

Nowhere in the story is the word "sin" mentioned, much less the phrase "original sin." That term made its way into history in the fourth century C.E. by Augustine of Hippo, who used the story as an explanation for the human tendency to choose evil instead of good. We can credit St. Augustine for Eden becoming the archetypal story of sin for Christianity. Jews do not believe in original sin, even though it is their story adopted by us. And, it is this understanding that leads many of us to think of sin primarily as individual disobedience.

Throughout much of history, the story has been told and retold in many forms. John Steinbeck's version of the retelling was cast in an early 20<sup>th</sup> century American setting and is blatantly titled *East of Eden*. Yet, almost every story is built on its primal issues.

The question throughout all of history has been, "How do we handle our mistakes, the mistakes of society, and the other events that harm life?" Again, the stories and practices of the Old Testament illuminate the issues. The Noah and the flood story is an explanation of how God tried to rid the world of evil.

Destroying everything by a wide spread flood except one family and a pair of all the animals in order to start creation over failed when one of Noah's son's saw him passed out from too much wine...and naked.

The calling of Abraham to become a "chosen people" through whom the whole world would be blessed was another effort to purify the human race.

The commandments were given to Moses on Mt. Sinai and passed on to the Israelites in the hopes of abolishing the human tendency toward selfishness and sin. That approach has had its limitations as well.

The prophetic movement within our faith was yet another step in God calling people to live in a trustworthy manner. But, while helpful and extremely important, prophets were sometimes eliminated.

The liturgy of Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement—emerged as a help for the community of the Hebrews to deal with their sins and selfishness in a symbolic manner. How *do* we deal with evil and our tendency toward alienation with the One who made us?

This is why both the Deuteronomy and First Corinthian passages are important. The Hebrews, still in the desert, were concerned with what they would do if Moses died. "Who will guide us in the right way if something happens to you?" they began asking.

"Who is right and who is wrong," was the question in the church at Corinth as eating meat offered to idols was beginning to tear at the church's fellowship. "It doesn't matter," Paul was saying. "Relationships are more important than theological issues. If eating the meat offered to idols is offensive to some of the members, don't eat it.

How do we deal with the brokenness of life—relationships and events? This is the real hook for all who have found William Young's book, *The Shack*, so compelling. You can blame things on others, on God, or just chalk it up as another disadvantage of being alive. *Or*, you can start taking responsibility to bring about creative change...to midwife good in the middle of the bad...to make lemonade out of lemons.

You can live in your remorse and guilt, hoping by magic that it will all go away. *Or*, you can take ownership in the problems and try to bring correction to the situation. Our theological word for this is "repentance." It is the way of

health—whether it has to do with us personally or us as a society...whether it has to do with feeding our minds, nurturing our emotions, changing our attitudes, or taking better care of our bodies.

Who else than Jesus is our example and our guide? He loved relentlessly. He never gave up or in. And, he allowed the power and wisdom of God to live through him.

Repentance begins with the decision to return to relationship—to accept our God-given place in community, and to choose a way of living that increases life for all members of that community. Needless to say, this often involves painful changes, which is why most of us prefer remorse to repentance. We would rather say, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I feel really, really awful about what I’ve done” than actually start doing things differently. A wise counselor once pointed out that our chronic guilt is the price we are willing to pay in order to avoid change. We believe that if we feel badly enough about what we are doing, then we may continue doing it. Plus the guilt itself is so exhausting that it drives us right back into the arms of our sins.<sup>2</sup>

So, as Taylor noted, sin may not be the enemy we often make it out to be. At least not when we recognize it and name it as such. When our response to the epiphany of our sin and selfishness involves us in more doing than saying, more reformation than remorse, then there is hope. “Sin is our only hope, the fire alarm that wakes us up to the possibility of true repentance.”

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., *Speaking of Sin* (Boston, Cowley Publications: 2000), 66.

### **Deuteronomy 18:15-20**

15The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. 16This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." 17Then the LORD replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. 18I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. 19Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. 20But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak-that prophet shall die."

### **1 Corinthians 8:1-13**

1Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 2Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; 3but anyone who loves God is known by him.

4Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." 5Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth-as in fact there are many gods and many lords-6yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

7It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 8"Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. 9But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 10For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? 11So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. 12But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.