

MY BAD
Genesis 3:8-15

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Many years ago, during my first semester of graduate school, I went to a service one Sunday morning at the university chapel. The scripture lesson was from an epistle that explained in no uncertain terms what the role of women was to be. Or, more precisely, what it was not to be. Women were not to speak; they were not to teach; they were not to have authority over men.

As the minister was reading, there suddenly came an interruption. A woman in the congregation exclaimed, “Oh, come on now!” I’d been to a lot of church services in my day, but the mostly German and Scandinavian Lutherans of my acquaintance weren’t especially demonstrative under any circumstances, and they most assuredly did not interrupt the reading of a scripture lesson.

Although the experience was new for me, I understood something of the motive behind the interruption. For the Bible contains some passages that are problematic, in what they say or in how they’ve been used. “Slaves obey your masters” was long on the lips of those who wanted to defend the indefensible. And we hardly need go into detail about how the Bible is still being conscripted to defend discrimination and exclusion.

Which brings us to the passage I just read in Genesis 3, one of the suggested scriptures from the lectionary for this Sunday. Here we learn that a woman has disobeyed God and lured the first man into sin. (We know this because the first man tells us.) This is a passage of

enormous theological and historical significance, used for centuries to justify the subjugation of half the human race.

So, how should we respond? One possibility is to say, “Oh, come on now!” Another is to do what we just did: Follow directions. I read the lesson and then we dutifully recited the words in the order of worship.

Yet another possible response is suggested by the example of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson admired the moral teachings of Jesus. But there were parts of the Bible that struck him as mere superstition. Jefferson saw a stark difference between the parts he liked and those he didn't. To his friend John Adams, he said it was like the difference between diamonds and a dunghill, a crudely emphatic way of making the point.

While Jefferson was in the White House he undertook an audacious project – to improve the Bible. His method was simple. He laid out copies of the Bible, got a razor blade, and proceeded to cut, separating the diamonds from the rest.

We have a sanctuary filled with Congregationalists this morning, and I rather doubt there are many who would take a *literal* razor blade and *literally* cut a Bible apart. At the same time, we have a sanctuary filled with Congregationalists, and I wouldn't be surprised if many of us would do the cutting *metaphorically*. Confronted by a problematic passage we might put it aside and tacitly agree to never speak of it again.

There is, of course, another response to problematic passages: To reconsider them. Let's try that with today's lesson.

Genesis has long been used to explain why there is evil in the world. According to many of the (mostly) men who interpreted the story over the centuries, the answer involved sex – Eve

brought trouble into the world (much as Pandora did in the Greek myth). Why is the world so messed up? Cherchez la femme. Eve defied God. Eve shared the fruit with Adam. The fall from perfection.

But was it ever really perfect? I wonder. The Bible tells us that God found creation “good,” which is not quite the same thing. We do know that the world was once new, and that things when new can often seem perfect: The fascinating new friend, the enchanting new love, the great new opportunity, the new job, the new house . . . the first man, the first woman. But it never lasts. The foibles and flaws inevitably appear, for no one and no thing is ever perfect.

After their act of disobedience, Adam and Eve realize that they’re naked. Further evidence that the story is about sex? If you wish. But to be naked is also to be revealed, unmasked, uncovered. In today’s lesson, we find Adam and Eve trying desperately to cover up.

We often say that the cover-up is worse than the crime. The attempt to conceal shows that we understand what we did. There can be no extenuating circumstances. And it compounds the original act, making matters worse. By blaming Eve, Adam tried to establish his moral superiority; to maintain the facade of his own perfection. That always goes down *really* well. The perfect is again the enemy of the good.

We hear a lot about original sin, that first act of human disobedience, but the original cover-up (the one in today’s lesson) actually strikes me as more believable, more relatable. Original sin, disobeying the prime directive of an anthropomorphic god, is something out of myth. But people pointing fingers, blaming others, and believing in their own goodness? We see that every day.

We are reminded of this in Stephen Sondheim’s marvelous musical, “Into the Woods.”

It's a mash-up of several familiar fairy tales: Jack and the Bean Stalk, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, and more. By the end of Act One the stories of all the characters are neatly tied up; they're poised for happily ever after. It's almost perfect.

And then comes Act Two. An angry giant climbs down the bean stalk and goes on a rampage. Some of the lead characters are killed. The survivors gather in the forest. And what's the first thing they do? Find a way to work together? Of course not. They start blaming each other for their problem. Why is there an angry giant in our midst? "It's because you did this, this, and this. So it's *your* fault!" "No it's not!" "Yes it is!" "No it's not! Because *he* did that, that, and that." "So it's *your* fault!" "No it's not!" "Yes it is!" "No it's not! Because *she*"

And so it goes. The scene is funny, oh so human, and straight out of Genesis.

The story in today's lesson (and in Sondheim's show) suggests that it's not just the flaws that matter, it's how we respond to them – the flaws in others and those in ourselves.

In one of her books, the psychologist Mary Pipher quotes the advice of a man with whom she worked, advice on how to live a happy life, on how to sustain good relationships: Get out of bed in the morning, look in the mirror, and say, "You're not so hot yourself."

How different Genesis 3 – and perhaps the entire Biblical story – would be if Adam had done this. If he had said, "I ate the fruit of my own free will. My bad. I'm sorry." And if Eve, too, had acknowledged her own fault instead of pointing at the serpent. It's worth noting that the punishments – the separation, the enmity, the expulsion from Eden – do not follow immediately upon the commission of the original sin, but after the original cover-up, after Adam and Eve's efforts to maintain the fiction of their perfection.

Consider how different our current political discourse would be if rigid ideologues paused

in their demonization of others to reflect that they're not so hot themselves. Or if nations that believe themselves exceptional, superior to all others, acknowledged that they have flaws, too.

And churches. In the years before the American Civil War, there arose movements to end slavery and to win rights for women. Two towering figures in these struggles were Sarah and Angelina Grimké. The Grimké sisters began by focusing on slavery. But they came to realize that what was denied to slaves – political, social, and economic rights; control over their own bodies; legal personhood – was denied to women as well. And so the Grimkés fought for both causes, freedom for slaves and equality for women. When Angelina spoke before a committee of the Massachusetts legislature she became the first woman to speak before a legislative body in America. But not everyone was impressed by such activities. A group of leading ministers in Massachusetts gathered to write a joint letter to be distributed to the churches of their denomination. These eminent men noted that God had created women to be meek, obedient, and submissive, that they were not to speak or teach. The Grimké sisters should zip it. Our reaction might be, “Oh, come on now!” But what I’ve described was the contemporaneous response of the Congregational church to the founding mothers of American feminism. Even churches that are rightly proud of their role in the cause of justice are not always as hot as they think.

The woman who cried out, “Oh, come now!” at that campus church service I attended risked creating division. The Grimkés did, too. As does just about everyone who acts on moral grounds. Meanwhile, Genesis 3 reminds us of our human propensity to create division when we avoid responsibility for our actions. It’s as if division is our destiny.

The lectionary’s gospel lesson for today, from the third chapter of Mark, notes the cost of separation. It’s a complex passage. At its core are these verses: “A kingdom divided against

itself cannot stand. A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

“A house divided.” The majority of Americans are probably more familiar with the Abraham Lincoln cover version than with the Gospel of Mark’s original. But that’s OK, for Lincoln was a brilliant interpreter of old material. No American has struggled more with a divided house.

One hundred fifty years ago this spring, Lincoln delivered his greatest speech, the Second Inaugural. The Civil War was almost over, Union victory assured.

Some ideas, some arrangements, some systems are just; others are not. Lincoln knew this, and he acted on it. “If slavery is not wrong,” he once declared, “then nothing is wrong.” In the Second Inaugural, we see this side of Lincoln, as he prays for “firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right.”

When Lincoln spoke 150 years ago, there was no doubt who had started the war. Nor was there any doubt why. Those first shots were fired by men who wanted to protect their alleged right to own other human beings. It’s hard to imagine a worse cause.

Under the circumstances, then, one might expect Lincoln to do the completely human thing and assign blame. Why did we have this terrible war? How easy to point south and say, “It’s your fault!” Most Northerners did. They were sure that their eyes had seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, that they were marching on for God’s truth.

Lincoln wasn’t so sure. He knew that for the majority of the 250 years of slavery, there had been slaves in New York and Massachusetts just as there were in Virginia and South Carolina. He knew that Northerners had prospered by shipping or selling the products of slave labor and by turning cotton into finished textiles in their factories. Thus, it was not just southern

slavery. It was *American* slavery. We should not rush to judge, Lincoln said, lest we too be judged. Though Lincoln was unyielding about the evil of slavery, he refused to claim the highest moral ground for himself. Not for him the facade of perfection. Instead of a divided house, Union. Instead of blaming others, “malice toward none” and “charity [love] for all.”

Reinhold Niebuhr, the pre-eminent American theologian of the twentieth century lauded the depth of Lincoln’s religious understanding. According to Niebuhr, Lincoln, almost alone among political leaders of any era, somehow cast doubt on righteousness of both sides. He somehow exemplified both certainty (which is necessary for action) and ambiguity (which is necessary for reconciliation). Lincoln, Niebuhr says, “was able to resist the natural temptation to do what all . . . men [we’re back to Adam] , have done through the ages” – see the right on their side, the wrong on the other. The “natural temptation” Niebuhr speaks of is the temptation to point the finger away from ourselves. Adam and Eve certainly wasted no time succumbing to it.

As Lincoln’s example shows, we must aim for “firmness in the right.” Some things are wrong. When they are, we have an obligation to say, in our own words, in our own way, “Oh, come on now!” But we must not forget to look in the mirror.

“Oh, come on now!” puts us on the path to justice. Remembering that we, too, are flawed, that we are not so hot ourselves, puts us on the path to grace.