

The More I Eat, The More I Want -- Lent 1C

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. So far, so good. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Houston, we have a problem. Why would God not want us to know the difference between good and evil? What sense is there in that? And btw we're already going to die, so why blame that natural condition on anything? What we have here is the explanation of the human condition: Every day we live can bring greater knowledge of good and evil, but it's knowledge we are less and less capable of using because we are all moving closer to death. The closer we are to dying, the more we have to live for.

And herein lieth the reason: In creating a world that led to the development of human beings, with our consciousness of these things, love and death, God determined that the only hope for our spiritual survival was to make us mortal. Our mortality is not a punishment, but our salvation. The more we have to lose, the more we have to love. If we were all immortal, not only would the earth have been overrun and used up already, but why bother with emotion or self-sacrifice? What would there be to lose? As it is, so many of us are behaving as if we are living only for ourselves and forever anyway. Just witness the greed with which precious resources are gobbled up for personal use by the wealthy and powerful, the stunning disdain for the peace, pleasure and even survival of the many we witness every day in the machinations of the few.

God knows – God knew – that our only hope lay in cultivating another kind of wealth, treasures stored in heaven, not on earth. This is Jesus in the words of Francis of Assisi: “It is in self-forgetting that we find; it is in comforting that we are comforted; it is dying that we are awakened to eternal life.”

If we step away from our persistent habit of thinking of God as having been made in the image and likeness of us, we can see better what God hath wrought in us. Our natural condition: more life meaning more to lose, is not an external curse, inflicted upon us by some cruelly ironic outside force that sets visions of sugarplums a-dancin’ in our heads, only to snatch them away when we reach to grab them. The Cosmos does not punish us for being human beings. God told us the consequences of knowing at the get-go. We ate the fruit because that is what we do: eat fruit. That is our condition: fruit eating. But also knowing things, realizing truths, however slowly, dying all the time yet loving to the last.

Saint Paul’s help can seem less than helpful. “Just as sin came into the world through one man,” he says, “and death came through sin, so death spread to all because all have sinned.” In other words, everybody dies because everybody sins. He’s close anyway. Close in the sense that heads is close to tails. The truth is just the opposite. We don’t die because we sin, everybody sins because everybody dies and we know it and that unbalances us. It’s tough to be perfect when you are aware of the above-mentioned irony (more love equals more to lose). We need more motivation to accommodate the discomfort this knowledge brings.

Our instinct is to try to reverse the process, to beat the system. No matter what we blame for our condition, we need a more powerful counter-story to Life equals Death. Paul goes on: “Just as one man’s trespass (it was the woman’s fault, don’t forget) led to condemnation for all (so far, not so good), so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.” Aha! here’s where Paul can help us get it: Just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. And that is a new story, that is a true gospel: “Life may equal death, but now we know that death merely leads to greater life.” This is the story that blows apart the Garden of Eden myth; it offers a radical therapy for our natural debilitating fearfulness; it illuminates the human condition fully and changes our relationship to sin forever.

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, (there’s that number again) and afterwards he was famished (as who wouldn’t be?). The Tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread. If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down and the angels will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. All the kingdoms of the world and their splendor I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.”

So if you develop these qualities: No Showing Off, No Pushing Your Luck With God, No Abusive Powermongering,

then you have a shot at righteousness (and straightway angels will come and hang out at your spot and be your personal staff). We could point out that Jesus did committ these acts at various other times: he turned a little bread into a whole lot of bread in the great feedings, he escaped from certain death from angry mobs and certain drowning, and by bringing back Lazarus and that little girl (talitha cum!), but always for specific reasons, not just to show off or avoid work.

And in the ultimate test, when the Devil offers all the kingdoms of the World if only Jesus will fall down and worship him, we consider Jesus to be very virtuous indeed in passing up the offer because it would be greedy and we should not be greedy. But really, it's a no-brainer for him. First of all, Jesus is already in the top spot, worldly kingdomwise. His kingdom surpasses all the kingdoms of this world, and he knows it -- has known it since around the age of 12. So the Devil's offer is transparently phony. Second of all, Jesus knows who the Devil is. Sheol is none too appealing to anyone familiar with the literature, as Jesus most certainly was, so, no thanks.

And that's all there is to the temptation oral exam. He's done; he passed; *summa cum laude*. But a case could be made that the test was rigged. Don't forget, Jesus had just come out of the water and heard the Voice of the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased," before witnesses! So he is well armed for encounters with formidable spiritual foes. This Satan fellow, with his transparently empty, shystery offers is perhaps not very threatening to Jesus' virtue.

For you and me, the enterprise of avoiding our natural propensity to fear-based wrong-choosing, while a much more dicey business, calls on the same, or at least remarkably similar strength. If we would look at ourselves more clearly, with a desire to pursue virtue more closely, while keeping in mind that we came from dust and are headed back towards it, we must also take care to remind ourselves and each other that we too are all just coming up out of the waters of baptism all the time. We must sense the spirit of God steadily flowing towards us with these words on its air: "You are my children, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." If we can bear this in our minds and hearts, we too will turn down the transparently phony shortcut offers of ease and status life is continually throwing our way. We too can have a good shot at passing by the fruit that will only make us hungrier.