

Pear Preserves, Forbidden Fruit, and God's Amazing Love

One of my favorite family stories is about my husband, Scott, when he was three. My mother-in-law made pear preserves and, while Scott's older brother, Mark, hated them with a passion, Scott loved them. Gloria stored her pear preserves on the bottom shelf of her cabinets, just to the left of her 1960s-yellow electric stove. Now, for you Millennials in the pews, childproof latches were not a thing in the 60s.

Don't get ahead of me.

The story goes that, one afternoon, Gloria noticed the house was very quiet. Rising to investigate, she searched the house. She finally found him sitting on the kitchen floor, just to the left of the yellow stove, looking an awfully lot like Winnie-the-Pooh with his hand inside a jar – not of honey but pear preserves. His face was covered in syrup. Scott looked up at his Mama with bright eyes and a sticky grin, and all she could do was laugh.

Speaking of forbidden fruit ...

Today we read the story of “the Fall,” the origin of sin. Most people, even non-Christians, have a basic understanding of what went wrong – a sin summary, if you will. Here's mine: God made Adam, put him in a

garden, told him not to eat from that one tree, made animals and Eve, and everything was perfect. Then a snake showed up, tempted Eve, and she ruined everything. She ate, she made Adam eat, she caused sin to enter the world. When these two people ate that fruit, the whole creation – including every human (except Jesus) – became imperfect. Augustine called this “Original Sin.” He didn’t know about genetics, but I grew up in a culture which did, so I’ve always thought of “Original Sin” through that lens. Somehow when Eve and Adam ate the forbidden fruit, human DNA became infested with a dominant sin gene rendering it impossible for us not to sin. Maybe your sin summary doesn’t include genetics, but I bet our summaries are otherwise similar. Most of us have been taught that Adam and Eve, in their pride and longing to be like God, willfully violated God’s law and thereby wrecked God’s creation. Right?

In my first weeks in seminary, I noticed a poster on a professor’s door announcing: “Eve was framed.” I didn’t know what to make of that and wasn’t ready for my sin summary to be shattered, so I sped past. Later, my evangelism professor tried to poke holes in my summary, by teaching Irenaeus and Julian of Norwich. I stuck with my sin summary. This first

week of Lent, though, as I reread this passage from Genesis, I found myself ready to hear the story differently. I wonder if you might be as well. Three things struck me differently this week.

First, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden.” In Hebrew, it says God put “the *adam*” in the garden” – the “earth creature.” Perhaps because our translation say God put the man in the garden, I’ve always thought about the *adam* as an adult. But just a few verses before, God scooped up some dirt, breathed into it, and created this *adam*. Irenaeus says the *adam* (and the woman) were not yet adults – they were immature – like children. No wonder they were tricked by the serpent who was “more crafty than any other animal – ” but I’m getting ahead of myself.

Second, “And the Lord God **commanded** the *adam*, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden.’” Whoa, hang on. The first commandment in Scripture is to enjoy: “**freely** eat – of **every** tree.” Isn’t that astonishing? I hear echoes of Jesus saying: “I came that they might have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Freely eat of every tree. My sin summary breezed right over that.

And, third – here it comes, right? “But”, God continues, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it, you shall surely die.” The Hebrew reads “dying you shall die” – this repetition adds emphasis. I’ve always read the phrase with the emphasis on “you shall not eat” (spoken with a threatening tone and a wagging finger). In reality, God emphasizes the risk of death. Hearing God’s words this way – as a warning about the risk of death – in connection with Irenaeus’ understanding of Adam and Eve as brand-new (immature) humans in the light of God’s commandment to freely eat of every tree, suddenly my sin summary didn’t seem so strong.

So, I reengaged with Julian of Norwich. She was a 14th century anchoress who experienced 16 visions of God. Through the first 15, she “saw to her astonishment that ... God looks at human sinfulness ... ‘with pity and not with blame.’”¹ Julian would’ve understood my unwillingness to reexamine my sin summary; seeing that God looks at our sinfulness “with pity and not blame” was radically different from what she’d learned from

¹ The following summary of Julian’s writings (*Showings*), visions and theological conclusions, together with the longer quote here, comes from Chapter 2 of Elaine Heath’s, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism*. The phrase “with pity and not with blame” is from Julian herself and is quoted in Heath’s book.

the church's tradition. She begged God to help her resolve the tension between her visions and her Augustinian understanding of sin. In response, God sent one final vision, known as the "Servant Parable."

In this vision, she saw a lord and his servant. The servant loved the lord and wanted solely to please him, so when the lord asked the servant to complete a special task (to till the earth, grow a special food, and bring it to the lord), the servant was eager to comply. He rushed away, but in his hurry, fell into a ravine where he suffered 7 wounds. (Seven, a number of completion, indicate he was harmed in every possible way). Julian noticed the most painful wound was the servant's perceived alienation from his lord, who he believed couldn't see him. In fact, the lord did see and knew he'd fallen "from a childlike eagerness to serve the lord. Rejoicing over his servant's love, the lord planned a reward for his servant that surpassed what [he would've] received had the fall never occurred."²

Julian came to understand that the lord represents God and the servant represents both the *adam* (that is, all of humanity) and Christ. The servant's fall, she came to understand, had two meanings. It represents

² Heath again.

humanity's fall, though not from "willful or proud rebellion, but as a consequence of childlike exuberance leading to a mistake."³ For Julian, our fall is about wounds (alienation, blindness, and fear – to name a few). At the same time, the fall represents Christ's falling into the Mary's womb and later into death and hell. Julian was amazed that God viewed Adam and Christ as one – and came to see Jesus' salvation as him taking into himself all of our woundedness and brokenness. She came to understand that God's love is more powerful than sin, heals all wounds, and binds us forever to Christ. Bishop Curry is known for saying, "If it's not about love, it's not about God." I think he's been reading Julian. And because she comes to see love as God's essence – God's sole purpose – Julian comes to hope for the salvation of all people. She stops subscribing to a doctrine of "Original Sin" and begins to think in terms of "Original Wounds."

Scott shared the pear preserve story with me as we installed child-proof locks on the cabinets under *our* sink. Trevor, at 2, was newly-mobile. As I laughed at Scott's tale, I couldn't help but think how differently it would've ended had Gloria walked in to find Scott stuffing his face with

³ Heath again.

dish soap, rat poison, or any of the other things we were barricading in our cabinetry. “Oh, honey, no! Don’t eat that: it’s poisonous!”, she would’ve exclaimed.

This week, as I’ve reflected on this Genesis text, God has sounded more like Gloria – or any mother – whose child is about to get into something that will hurt them: “Oh, kids, no! Don’t eat that: it’s poisonous. You could die!” This week, the fall has looked different to me. Adam and Eve haven’t struck me as prideful, intentional sinners, but as wounded earthlings who made a mistake. This week, Jesus has felt more to me like a balm in Gilead than someone who took a punishment in my place. This week, as I’ve followed Fr. Casey’s Ash Wednesday encouragement to conduct a sin inventory, I’ve reflected on the things I do that poison me, others, relationship, and the earth. I’ve pondered the things I leave undone that wound God’s beloved creation and its creatures. This week, the good news for me has been God’s love – love more powerful than sin, love that heals all wounds, love that binds us forever to abundant life in Christ.

Thanks be to God!