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Genesis 1:26-31

## ORIGINAL BLESSING

The religious scholar Phyllis Tickle, in her book, *The Great Emergence*, said recently that the enormous change through which the church is passing occurs about every 500 years, when we hold a kind of giant rummage sale — cleaning out our attic of all that is no longer relevant or even honest, and we re-form ourselves. We are living in such a time. The old is passing away, and the new is taking shape, as it often does, in the most unlikely places.

Who would guess, for example, that when a minister from Scotland comes to America in search of a progressive pulpit, he would find it in the middle of Oklahoma?

My hope is that as the church moves into a post-orthodox age, where countless people no longer think that going to church should mean believing things you know are not true in order to get rewards you doubt are even available, we can actually unite across old creedal and doctrinal divisions by the simple act of following Jesus, of imitating his vision of what it means to be faithful. I do not believe that he wanted fans, but followers. The object of our worship is God, not the metaphysics of Jesus.

One of the chapters in my last book, “Saving Jesus from the Church” is entitled, Original Blessings, not Original Sin. I have come to believe that the doctrine of original sin is not only a disaster, but is not even biblical like a lot of other disastrous doctrines: the blood atonement, a literal hell, the rapture. In other words, what defines much of Christianity today would be unrecognizable to Jesus.

The basic premise of orthodoxy is that we are born into sin, that we inherit it from our first parents, Adam and Eve. We arrive in the world as little sinners, trapped by the transgressions of those who came before us. Sin is a birthright, like red hair or left-handedness and it has us trapped, according to the church, which also claims to have the only power which can free us. You’ve got to hand it to the church. It created the ultimate spiritual franchise, diagnosing what only it could cure.

The strange thing is that original sin is not biblical. There is no such doctrine in the Hebrew

Scriptures or in the New Testament either. Of course, we have this wonderful story in Genesis in which a mythical couple, Adam and Eve, who have everything they need, but not everything they want, *choose* to sin and get us all kicked out of the garden.

The instructions are clear enough: do as you please, God says, but don't do one thing, don't eat the fruit of one tree in the middle of the garden or you will die. Nonsense says the serpent, it will open your eyes and you will become like God, knowing good and evil. Besides, if one is told exactly what NOT to do, that is exactly what ones WANTS to do. So she partakes, then she recommends it Adam, and immediately they realize that they are naked, i.e., they discover shame.

But the best part of the story is the passing of the buck. When confronted with this transgression, Adam blames the woman, who blames the snake. It's the first example of the victimhood mentality, where no one is ever to blame for anything, someone else is to blame. The epicenter of this sickness in our time is located in Washington D.C.

In the book I explain the concept of *etiology*, which I also teach my students at the university, as a way to understand much of the Bible. Etiology is a literary device in which a story is created retroactively to explain how things came to be as they are now—which is exactly what the myth of Adam and Eve does. You can't blame such an imperfect world on a perfect God, or it would appear that God's work is defective. And why do we do exactly what we are told not to do, and why do women give birth in great pain and men work by the sweat of their brow until they die?

Because, the story goes, we *chose* to sin, and now we suffer the consequences. But it was not until centuries later that the church created the doctrine of original sin (it was primarily Augustine's doing), and it essentially took free will away when it came to sinning. We are now taught that we sin because we can't help ourselves. We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. We are helpless and hopeless until we find Jesus, after which we continue to sin, of course, but only now we are forgiven.

They call it Original Sin (which, by the way, led one stand-up comic to say, "I'm all for Original Sin. I think if one is going to sin, one ought to be original about it"). . .but in fact, the doctrine of the church really makes unoriginal sinners out of all of us. We're just doing the same old stupid, nasty stuff all the time because we can't help ourselves. That's not very original.

I saw a sign in front of a church in Oklahoma once that announced the sermon title: It read: IF YOU'RE DONE WITH SIN, THEN COME ON IN! But as I drew closer, I saw that someone had written another message just underneath it in small letters, it looked like lipstick. It said, "But if you're not quite through, call 272. . ."

But what if Roman Catholic dissident theologian Matthew Fox is right, who dared to say in his ground-breaking book by the same title, that we are not born into Original Sin, but that our birth itself is an *Original Blessing*.

That is, while there is clearly evil in the world, and plenty of sinning, perhaps it's not because we can't help ourselves – but because we manage, all by ourselves, to become fundamentally separated from our true nature, which is goodness, not evil.

Matthew Fox asked the obvious question: Are we born bad and stay that way? Or are we born good and forget where we came from, where we are going, and to Whom we belong? Original Blessing, puts the responsibility of remembering and embracing our goodness upon us. But the alternative keeps us both helpless and childish which is exactly what religion does for lots of people.

Here is what I believe. Over the centuries, the church has unwittingly been part of a grand ecclesiastical put-down of the human race. We have focused so much of our energy on teaching people to be humble that we have forgotten how to embrace the idea that we are born in the image of God, captured by that beautiful Latin phrase, *imago Dei*.

I'll never forget the day, years ago, when I reported as a seventh grader to what used to be called "Home Room." It was the first day of school, and the teacher was reading the roll, which I now understand to be a very important moment, because this is the first time the names of the students are read aloud, and thus their identity is established.

On that particular morning, the teacher read the name of a particular girl, and then stopped, peered over her glasses and said, "Is so-and-so your father" ("yes," the girl replied). . ."and is so and so your brother" ("yes ma'am"). You see both the father and the brother had served prison terms on drug charges. Then the teacher said, "Well, I sure hope you're not like them."

How do you think that girl felt? I personally believe the teacher should have been arrested and charged with a rhetorical crime against humanity. When we project an expectation of failure, that's what we usually get. "Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me." Have you heard that? It's cute, the only thing I can think of that is misleading about it is that it's false. Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can totally destroy me.

Why do we put one another down so often, is it because we think we will get too high an opinion of ourselves, and thus become arrogant? Most arrogant people I know are that way because they *don't* have a very high opinion of themselves. They are insecure. Or as my friend the Rabbi put it: *a man who does not love himself wisely and well will make a casualty out of the neighbor sooner or later.*

In fact, we so distrust our own goodness, our real birthright, which is *imago dei*, that the word "human" has now been joined with a certain given weakness or fallibility. A baseball player strikes out, but not because the pitcher threw the perfect curve ball, but because the batter is, "only human."

Your grandmother, who bakes cakes, those three-layer jobs that come out of the oven like a work of art and taste like sunshine in your mouth, but one day, something goes wrong. It "falls" as they say, flat as the sole of your shoe. And what does she say, "Well, I'm only human."

Well, what I want to know is this: what was she when she baked the perfect cake? What was the baseball player when he hit the grand slam or made the diving catch?

We seem to want to talk about our humanness as a way of explaining failure, but not as a way of explaining success. It's Original Sin over Original Blessing again. Listen to this: *to err is human, to forgive divine*. See how the pie is sliced? Humans also forgive, do they not?

I can tell you from personal experience that it is not this way with most children. Kids don't come into the world all stooped over from the weight of false humility. They have to have it drilled into them. Take for example, a 9 year old boy who gets an A in arithmetic. . .he is not the picture of humility as he walks home from school. . .

Now you take that same boy 30 years later, and he's a civic leader now, community-minded and he's been the head of an important project and they call him up to receive recognition for his work, and what does he do? He stares at the floor, counts his shoelaces, mumbles a few words of thanks for all the forgotten people who made it possible and his grandmother who came over in a covered wagon. Sometimes I wish people who just get up and say, "Thank you, I deserve this. In fact, this thing ought to be made of solid gold the way I worked on this thing."

A man named Edgar Lee Masters from Spoon River, Illinois wrote a bunch of poems once and called them the *Spoon River Anthology*. Basically, they are all framed on one idea. The people in Spoon River have all died, and now that they're dead, they're telling the truth.

One of them is named Constance Hadley, and this is what she said. "You praised my self-sacrifice, Spoon River, for rearing Irene and Mary, orphans of my older sister. And you censured Irene and Mary's contempt of me. Don't praise my self-sacrifice and don't censure their contempt of me. I cared for them; it's true enough. But I poisoned all my benefactions to them by constant reminders of their dependence on me."

Do you know what she means? It sounds like this: "As long as you girls set foot under my table. . .as long as you sleep under this roof. . .remember who took you in when your mother died." In other words, every kind word was accompanied by a reminder of the indebtedness of the recipient. Is it any wonder that the people we try to help so often end up hating us for it.

When I was a boy, growing up in Wichita, Kansas, a double PK (son of preacher, son of a professor), my home church, Plymouth Congregational Church, had something they called the annual Christmas Project.

Inspired by the Jesus who is the "reason for the season," and on fire to help the needy and put "Christ back in Christmas," a bunch of us from the youth group set out to spread love and joy, and we never thought for one minute that we were being condescending about it.

We made baskets for the poor, and then we dared to go into what we called "the ghetto" to distribute them. And we felt good about it. In fact, we were proud as peacocks.

First we collected money, somehow, I don't remember exactly how we got the money, probably a car wash, a rummage sale, or we embezzled from our parents, but we got the money somehow. And then we called the Department of Social Services and we asked them, matter-of-factly, "Who are the poor in this community?" And they gave us a list of "needy families."

We bought fruit and candy, apples, oranges, bananas, and we put them all in a sack. Then we put the sack in a basket, tied a bow on top and put in a little card in there with a hallmark verse about the true meaning of Christmas.

But we knew how important it was to be humble, because, after all, the whole Christmas story was humble, and the baby Jesus was humble, and the manger was nothing if not humble, so this is how we did it.

First, we'd go up on the front porch with the basket, knock on the door, and when we heard the person who lived in that little shack coming, we'd yell, Merry Christmas! and then run and jump in the car and drive on to the next house. You see, we were more interested in making the delivery than in making contact. Afterwards, we'd all go to the drugstore, thump our suspenders, get fat on milkshakes, and say, "Aren't we marvelous!"

It was my turn to make the delivery, and the neighborhood was downright depressing. Some of these places did not look fit for human habitation, but that's why they could use some Christmas cheer I said to myself. So I walked up onto this one porch and knocked on the door. Nothing. No response. Nobody's home, I guess.

Just to be sure, I knocked one more time. Nothing. Nobody's home I thought, almost enjoying the thought. My friends were growing impatient, and started honking the horn. Then, suddenly, his face was at the door, staring at me through the screen.

It was a black face, and I had not seen it at first, in the shadows of the evening, but all of a sudden, there he said, "Hi." I said, "Oh, Hi." He said, "What can I do for you?" And I thought to myself, *Uh oh. . . what do I do now? I'm in a conversation with a real live poor person.*

Then another face appeared, this face belonged to a woman and she said "Hi," and I said "Hi" and then she said, "Won't you come in?" This wasn't working out like I planned.

Come in? Sure, why not? They offered me a chair and so I sat down. Then they introduced themselves: "I'm Benjamin Johnson, this is my wife Claire. . ." I thought to myself, "How odd, they have names."

"And your name?" "Who, me? . . . I'm Robin Meyers, from Plymouth Church, part of the youth group." "Oh, yes," said Mrs. Johnson, "that's the big beautiful church."

Then a little boy appeared from another room, and his mother introduced him. He looked to be 9 or 10 and he smiled and said, "What's in the basket?" I had forgotten that I was even

holding a basket, and I said, “Oh, Merry Christmas!” and handed him the basket.

He took it from me and get this, he started unwrapping the paper. He started opening the gift. He took out an apple as if he intended to eat it. I’m thinking to myself, this is not working out like I planned, I was into the delivery, not into communion with total strangers.

And then he did something really weird. He got out another apple, and (get this), he handed it to me. He gave me some of my own fruit. I’m thinking to myself, stupid kid, doesn’t know how charity works. He’s giving me back my own stuff!

But what was I supposed to do, after all, I was supposed to be humble, so I took it and took a bite out of it, and thought to myself, well, here I am, sitting in the home of real live poor people with real names, and I’m eating out of my own sack.

But I’ll never forget what I learned that day. I learned something as powerful as anything I’ve ever learned in my life. It shapes my theology, my politics, my family life, my understanding of God. And it’s very simple, until you think about it: *All of us. . .and I do mean ALL of us. . .eat out of the same basket.*

Not mine and yours, his and hers, ours and theirs – no more “What do ‘you people’ want,” but what do all of us want to become? Because however we like to hide behind slogans of the self-made man, manifest destiny, and survival of the fittest, the truth is we all eat out of the same basket. We all eat together.

The world is not our project, our opportunity to take from the poor and give to the rich, and then sanctify our guilt with a little charity at Christmas time. We’re all in this together.

We’ve got to stop thinking of ourselves as if some are entitled and others are not, and recover our true First Premise of faith — “imago dei”— made in the image of God. Some theologians call it Primal Memory, this belief that we are from God, and to God, and that life is but a parenthesis in which we are called to remember where we came from, where we are going, and to Whom we belong.

Because God made the animals and the fish and the birds of the air, and then God said, “That’s good.” But then God made something else. . .slowly out of the primal ooze of nothingness into a creature who could write poetry, paint masterpieces, and raise Lazarus from the dead with medicine as well as with faith.

What God made was you and me. And if we put ourselves down, that’s a sin, and not a very original one. When God made you and me and Benjamin and Claire Johnson, and every other human being in the world God said, “This is the very best I can do.” As the Ephesians letter puts it, “You are God’s masterpiece.”

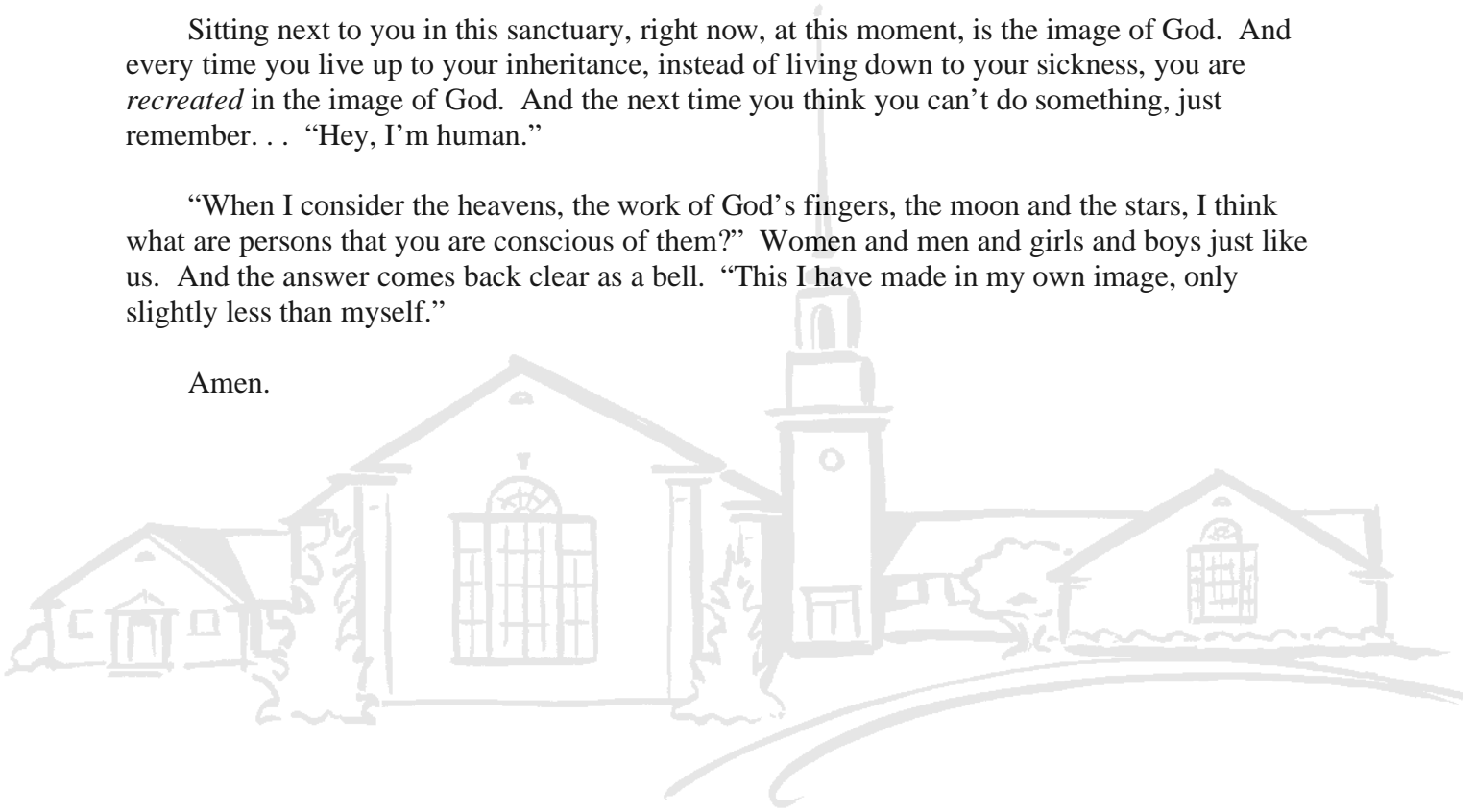
So the next time someone does something truly extraordinary, something good and decent, something grand and hopeful, just say, “Well, she’s human.”

“Hey, great cake grandma. . .” “Well, child. . .I’m human.” “Nice catch Mr. third baseman.” “Well, I’m human.”

Sitting next to you in this sanctuary, right now, at this moment, is the image of God. And every time you live up to your inheritance, instead of living down to your sickness, you are *recreated* in the image of God. And the next time you think you can’t do something, just remember. . . “Hey, I’m human.”

“When I consider the heavens, the work of God’s fingers, the moon and the stars, I think what are persons that you are conscious of them?” Women and men and girls and boys just like us. And the answer comes back clear as a bell. “This I have made in my own image, only slightly less than myself.”

Amen.



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