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Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“The Mystery of Iniquity”

Scripture Text: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Dear people of God, today I would like to talk to you about our greatest problem. It may not be the first thing that comes into your mind. What might pop into your head first is something like, “What can I do about my illness or disease?” or “Do I have enough money to last my retirement?” Those are certainly valid concerns. But those are not your biggest problems. Our biggest problem is sin. That’s not something that we hear too often anymore. But let’s not be deceived. Sin is a problem. And the reason it’s a problem is because it’s so mysterious.

God created the world in which we live. And there’s nothing structurally wrong with this world. It’s sufficient for the needs of all of its creatures, including humans. God created each one of us in the divine image so that we would live in relationship with God and with one another. As with any relationship, there are certain rules which must be followed. These rules are not arbitrary. These rules are not put into place to rain on our parade. These rules are for our own good. God wants

what's best for each of us, and so, when God placed Adam in the garden of Eden, God told him that he could freely eat from every single tree in the garden, except for one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And God told him not only that he should not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but also, what the consequences would be if Adam were to eat from it: death.

What's going on here at this point in the story? Is God, the loving father of Adam and Eve, putting them on trial before they had done anything bad, just to test them? We often read this story as if that's exactly what's going on. But let me ask you who are parents, "Is this the way that you show your love to your children, putting them on probation or trial just to test them to see if they will obey you?" I don't think so. And I don't think that's what God is doing here either. What's going on here is much more ominous than that. God is trying to warn his beloved son and daughter that they must stay away from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because that tree will cause them great harm. It's as if God is telling them not to put their hand into a fire, because if they do, they will be severely burned, which will cause them great pain and perhaps even the loss of the use of that hand. There's no trial going on here. God is not a judge sitting on the bench issuing a

command and then just passively sitting back to wait and see if Adam and Eve will obey.

In fact, in the original Hebrew of verses 8 and 9 of Genesis 2, it reads something to the effect of “And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was also there.” Nowhere does it explicitly say that God planted the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It just suddenly appears there in the garden. Supporting this interpretation is the fact that when Eve is being tempted by the serpent, she places the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the center of the garden. But that’s not the tree that God placed there. God placed the tree of life in the center of the garden. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil has so preoccupied Eve at this point that she sees it as residing in the middle of the garden, even though that’s not where it is.

Furthermore we should also pause to ask, “What’s so bad about knowing good and evil?” After all, how can we live a meaningful life if we can’t tell the difference between good and evil? In fact King Solomon was rewarded by God because of all the things that he could have asked for,

he asked for wisdom to discern good and evil, that is, to have an understanding mind that would be able to govern God's people. God was very pleased with this petition by Solomon, and grants him not just wisdom, but riches and honor as well. You see, blessings beget more blessings. And evil begets more evil.

And so, it's not that God intends to keep us ignorant of the distinction between good and evil. We wouldn't be very faithful servants of God if we couldn't tell the difference between the two. But Adam and Eve were to learn the difference between the two precisely by not eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If they had stayed away from the tree, they would have learned the difference in their obedience to God. Another way of saying this is that if they had simply listened to God, they would have been given an understanding mind that would have judged clearly between the two, as Solomon was given. But Adam and Eve want to find out for themselves the difference between good and evil. They want to put their hand in the fire for themselves to see if they will get burned. Or, what's even worse, they want to determine for themselves good and evil.

And you know what? That's what each and every one of us do when we sin. Sin is really the most irrational thing in the world. Every time we

do something that we know is wrong, we're saying to God that we know better than God how to live. No one needs to tell us what's good and what's evil, because we're smart enough to determine those things by ourselves . . . so we think. What's so irrational about this is that we know deep down inside that what God says is the right thing to do, but we still don't do it.

Temptation is real, isn't it? The serpent is always with us, whispering into our ear that we should just go ahead and do what we want. We're free human beings after all. No one can stop us.

Especially in this country, we pride ourselves on our freedom. We have more freedom in this country than perhaps anywhere else in the world. I'm not just talking about political freedom, but also economic, artistic, scientific, social, academic, journalistic, conversational, and religious freedom. Maybe Sweden or Denmark have more artistic freedom, maybe the Netherlands has more academic freedom, maybe Canada has more political freedom, but in terms of all of the freedoms together, I don't think that any country has more freedoms than we have or in such great amounts as we have. But how do we use our freedom? Do we use it for immoral purposes? Is that really freedom? Being free to do evil is really a contradiction. We are not free to do evil. In fact, sin and

evil take away from our freedom. We have the ability to do evil, but it's not theologically correct to say that we have the freedom to do evil or the freedom to sin. In the Bible, those who choose a sinful life are often described as living in bondage, not freedom. Freedom is not the ability to do anything we please. There are always consequences to our actions. When we do evil, we may think that we can get away with it, but ultimately we never can. You see, we can never get away from the consequences, if only a bad conscience.

The main way we Americans tend to describe ourselves is that we are a "freedom-loving nation." Do you think how much freedom a country has is directly related to the country's general happiness? If that's the case, then why did America come in 17th in the world on the "Happy List" of nations? By the way, if you think that bleak winters correlate to misery, you're mistaken. The country that came in number one as the happiest nation on earth was Denmark, which experiences winters like we just had every year, in fact, very often much more severe. Denmark has the highest percentage of bicyclists in the world. Maybe that's why they're so happy. Why is it if we in this nation boast of our freedom, and see ourselves as the world's defender of freedom, that freedom doesn't seem to make us more happy than 16 other countries in the world?

Maybe, it's because we have the wrong idea of freedom. Perhaps what we've been brainwashed into thinking is freedom is not freedom at all.

If we analyze what really happens when we sin, it's truly a mystery. It's the mystery of iniquity. And I think that's why this story in Genesis 2 and 3 is written the way it is. If we look at this story at face value, it really is absurd, isn't it?

We already talked about how the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is there in the garden. What is it doing there in a place that supposedly is perfect, a paradise? Why does God allow it to be there? And then when God issues the command to Adam, threatening death to him if he eats from the tree, does Adam know what death is? How could he if he has never witnessed it? Adam and Eve don't know what death is until after they eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Before that, they are innocent. And what about the serpent? What is it doing there in paradise? The serpent is introduced as a creature of God. In other words, it somehow belongs there. And a serpent talking? Come on now! And Eve confuses God's prohibition. She has the wrong tree in mind, saying that they were not supposed to eat from the tree in the center of the garden, and also saying that if they even touched it, they would die, things that God never said.

And then after Adam and Eve eat from the forbidden tree, and their eyes are opened, and they realize that they were naked, they try to hide what they do by sewing fig leaves together to cover themselves. Do they think that God doesn't know what they did? Yes, God comes to them and asks, "What is this that you have done?" But God knows. Just like you know when your child has done something wrong and you ask her, "What is this that you have done?" You want to hear your child admit it. Well, Adam, probably in a very straight face, replies that "the woman that you, God, gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit and I ate." That's right, Adam, blame the woman. And so God asks Eve, "What is this you have done?" And Eve replies that the serpent deceived her, and she ate. That's right Eve, pass the buck. Are we to believe that a serpent made you eat the fruit? If it weren't so tragic, this would make a great comedy, wouldn't it?

Sin is a mystery. And every time we sin, it's mysterious. We know that it's wrong, but yet, we continue to do it. We're not made better persons for sinning. Sinning does not make us more self-sufficient. I don't even think that we're made better persons for overcoming temptation. I'll tell you why. Temptation is very risky business. Jesus knew that. That's why he taught his disciples to pray, "Lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.” God knows how weak we are, and that we usually give in to the serpent, almost innocently at times.

All sin is irrational. It is all, for lack of a better word, stupid. We have heard that in the Genesis story this morning. We try to look for reasons why we want to act in a certain way that we know is wrong in the desperate hope that somehow it might turn out right after all. But there’s no rational basis for thinking that. Sin is more often than not a rationalization, an excuse. There’s never a justification for it. Sin inevitably begets more sin. There’s never a place for it. And yet we continue to do it. This is the mystery of iniquity.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, “And if your friend does evil to you, say to him, ‘I forgive you for what you did to me, but how can I forgive you for what you did to yourself?’” Nietzsche did not believe in God, but we do. We have a God who can forgive us for what we do to ourselves, who overcomes the mystery of iniquity. Amen.