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Lectionary 10B, June 9, 2024
Genesis 3:8-15
What Is So Wrong With Confession?

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let's look at our First Lesson — at the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Especially let's consider that terrible moment when Adam throws his wife under the bus. The scene goes this way. The LORD God asks Adam a question:

Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" ¹²The man said, "The *woman* whom thou gavest to be with me, *she* gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." (Genesis 3:11-12, RSV)

And so we see that when we sin against God, soon we sin against our neighbor too — perhaps even our closest neighbor.

There was a better way available to Adam. It was the way of repentance and amendment of life. But Adam does not take that path. That is a human possibility — to refuse to repent — but it is not a good way to live. You and I can do better. We really can.

We have just sung a hymn about forgiveness: "I Lay My Sins on Jesus" (LBW 305). I chose this hymn because you and I know something that Adam and Eve did not know: We know Jesus. We know about the possibility of forgiveness. And therefore we do not need to scurry around pretending that we are oh, so very innocent, and insulting our Maker in the process.

What is so wrong with confession? What is so wrong with admitting that we fell short, that at least for a while, we lived in an unworthy way, that we departed from the ways of life Jesus wants for us?

Let us consider the story of Adam and Eve's guilt before God by thinking about three points. First, let us consider the panic we often feel when we have been found out. Second, let us beware of the temptation to avoid admitting that we have done wrong, even if we hurt others in the

process. And finally, happily, let us consider the possibility of confession and amendment of life.

So, first: the panic when we have been found out. We begin with Adam and Eve. In them, we see a kind of desperation to believe that things are still okay, that though they disobeyed God, they are still righteous. It is a sad story to think about. Much has been lost. In the first verse of our Bible passage, we read that the LORD God came walking in the garden in the cool of the day. It is easy to imagine that this was a regular thing. Perhaps it had been going on for centuries. Perhaps it was part of the rhythm of the day that the LORD God came down to the garden and walked with his friends, Adam and Eve, in the cool of the day. In those days of innocence, Adam and Eve might have been brilliant people, with minds uncorrupted by sin. As they walked with God, they could have discussed, say, intricacies of the calculus. The LORD God could have told them about physics and astronomy, about the regularities by which he rules his creation, about the ebb and flow of forces by which he keeps yon galaxies twirling and not collapsing. He might have creatures with consciences on other planets and could have told Adam and Eve all about them. He could have introduced them to music and they might have composed music like Bach. He could have taught them about art and sculpture, and they might have done work equal to that of Michelangelo. If we could get back into that garden, we might find some of their great work to this very day... only we cannot get back into that garden owing to the cherubim with the flaming sword blocking the way (Genesis 3:24). In any case, times were good, back when Adam and Eve were innocent. But now, in today's story, times are not so good.

Now, the LORD God comes walking in the garden in the cool of the day and calls for his friends. But this time they do not hasten to his side. Instead, they try to hide themselves. His voice! The voice of the LORD God, which had been pleasant and welcome to them in the past, that voice now frightens them. God has not changed. His voice has not changed. It is Adam and Eve who have changed. So, when God calls out "Where are you?" Adam answers by speaking of hearing the presence of God:

⁹But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" ¹⁰And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid..."

Adam had heard the sound of the LORD God in the past, without being afraid. He even heard the words about the forbidden tree, without foreboding. The sound of God's voice had been a peaceful thing for Adam and Eve till now. But things have changed. Adam and Eve have disobeyed God, and now they take no delight in his voice.

Adam casts around for an explanation of why he was afraid when he heard God in the garden. He says, "... because I was naked." But God made Adam and Eve that way. He made them naked. It would have been as odd and unnatural for Adam and Eve to wear clothes as it would be for a lion to wear a suit and a tie. So, the LORD God asks his question: "Who told you that were naked?" That is, who changed your attitude toward the way I made you? Who suggested to you that there is something wrong with being naked? But already, the Lord suspects the truth. He suspects what has gone wrong:

¹¹He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (Genesis 3:11, RSV)

Adam's betrayal of Eve, so that he blames her for his sin, is a sad thing. But so is this. In this story we are seeing the disruption of a divine friendship between God and Adam and Eve. The LORD does not kill them or turn away from them, but things have changed. God goes on loving them, but now he loves rebels. Now he loves a human race that too often turns away from him.

To return to the story, Adam has been asked a question. Adam has been challenged:

Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (Genesis 3:11, RSV)

Adam seems to know that the LORD knows the truth. There is no point in lying to God. So, Adam does not lie, but rather he blames. He blames his wife. Even worse than that, he blames God himself:

¹²The man said, "The woman whom *thou* gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."
(Genesis 3:11-12, RSV)

Do you see Adam's desperate casting around? He would rather blame the whole world than to blame himself. It is hateful to him to think poorly of himself. Does a bear think poorly of himself? No, because the bear is innocent. But Adam now hates to think that he has sinned. He does the best he can to evade his guilt.

It seems to me that our human race has not gotten much better along these lines. Perhaps part of the bitterness of our political discourse is that we are tempted to absolutely refuse to entertain the possibility that we might be wrong. We deny the possibility that the other side might be right — or at least have some portion of the truth that we would do well to consider. The bitterness of these days reflects Adam's ancient desperation to not be found in the wrong.

But if we do not admit that we might be wrong, it is hard for us to get better. More than that, if we stubbornly maintain that *we* are the righteous ones, we might hurt other people along the way. That leads me to my second point: let us beware of the temptation to avoid confession, lest we hurt others in the process.

Well, if we *are* wrong, but refuse to admit it, then we are liable to hurt other people. For one thing, we represent a problem in their lives. They must live with someone who would lead them astray. They must live with someone who is not a good teacher of the children or others. Or, if we have been secretly sinning, they must live with someone who is not as good as he could be, as she could. Resources are being spent on sin. The time and money could better have been spent on taking care of the family or in doing better work on the job.

But there is something more, something perhaps even worse than being a bad teacher or squandering resources on sin. There is also the temptation to despise those with whom we disagree. There is the temptation to throw to the wolves those who are not really happy with our sin. So the drunkard gets mad at his wife and hits her, or the drunken wife hits the husband. It would be oh, so much better if the sinner would simply up and admit his sin, her son, and try to get better. If we will not admit our sin, it is hard to get better.

Now we come to a Lutheran conviction. It is my third point: It is hard to repent if you think that forgiveness and improvement are not possible. In his commentary on this morning story, Martin Luther writes this:

If God had said: "Adam, you have sinned; but I shall forgive you your sin," then with the utmost loathing [of his sin] Adam would have humbly and frankly acknowledged his sin. But because the hope for the forgiveness of his sins is not yet available, he feels and sees nothing except death itself because of his transgression of the command. (Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, Volume 1)

In a way, this is the main point of the Lutheran Reformation. Luther was born into a world in which the preaching of God's holy law was powerful. Yet that preaching left people in misery because they could see no way forward. They were like Adam and Eve in the garden: they were conscious of their sin, but did not know what to do about their sin. Or worse still, burdened consciences were misled into think that the way forward was to make themselves righteous through hard work. But such works-righteous preaching leaves Jesus out of the picture. That is why Luther so emphasized the preaching of the Gospel. He preached about Jesus and forgiveness. He preached about the possibility of a clean heart and renewed spirit. He preached about the possibility of giving up the desperate attempt to say that everything is okay and instead turn to something healthy: confession of sin and amendment of life.

Today's Psalm has some beautiful words about forgiveness. Listen again to these verses are from Psalm 130:

²If you, LORD, were to note what is done amiss,
O LORD, who could stand?
³For there is forgiveness with you;
therefore you shall be feared.
⁴I wait for the LORD; my soul waits for him;
in his word is my hope. (Psalm 130:2-4, LBW)

That last phrase — “in his word is my hope” — that is the idea that guided Luther in his Reformation. He wanted to so preach God’s word that it would actually give hope to people.

When we have sinned, our cure is not to flee from God, but to draw closer to him. Adam and Eve tried that, to flee from God. They tried to hide from God, but that can never work in the end. We *can* draw closer to God through the humility to say, “I have done wrong. I have *been* wrong. But I trust the word of absolution. I trust that Jesus so loves me that through confession and absolution he forgives me and loses my sin in the sea of his forgetfulness.”

We all have experience of this, I do believe. If life has been good to us, we have been forgiven by someone we love. Then our heart was happy again. Then we faced a new and good day.

This is what the Church wants for us. Jesus is in our midst this morning, as he has promised to be. This is what he wants for us. Jesus wants that we should lay down any desperate attempt to maintain our innocence and instead lose ourselves in his love and in his ways. He wants us to get back on track. He wants us to give up our stubbornness and to admit that we might have done wrong... that we might *be* wrong, but that it is okay to admit that and to aim to do better, through the grace and merits of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.