

“If Only We Had Hindsight for Everything We Do”

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury*

June 7, 2015

Third Sunday of Pentecost

Readings: Genesis 3:8-13; Mark 3:20-30

Stories, fables, myths, spirit tales, parables are terms sometimes used interchangeably for trying to get at truths that are beyond our grasp and ability to explain in any kind of historical or scientific way.

Now these terms are not the same. Read a fable by Aesop, or a parable from the mouth of Jesus or Kafka, or even a spirit tale from an Anishnabek elder, and you know they are not the same. Nowhere near it.

Yet each one can speak to issues that become clear through the telling and retelling of the story that may have been hidden from us as we go about our day to day business.

And so today we have the story of the temptation in Eden, eating a fruit forbidden from Adam and Eve.

At least that is what I always was taught. The Good News Bible titles it “The Disobedience of Man” while the Jerusalem Bible uses the succinct phrase “The Fall” and the Anchor Study Bible calls it “The Fall of Man.”

The essence of the story is learning something we should not know, and the fact it is wrong to go around without clothes on, and people with knowledge can figure that out.

Or at least the interpreters have put that spin on it. Life in the garden seemed fine until Adam and Eve reached this new understanding that they were naked.

Now this week I learned a new twist on the story I had never heard before. Adam is a Mennonite, and scripture proves it.

Now I hate jokes and stories that highlight a particular denomination or religion or people, but am a little more tolerant when the person telling the story is of the group highlighted. I never laugh at Newfie jokes unless it is someone who is a Newfoundlander telling them. Then I am a bit more patient.

Years ago there was a story going around of a southern Ontario farmer who could make no money selling potatoes. He was buying them at 5 cents a pound and selling them for 3 cents a pound. When he looked at his books he realized there was only one thing to do: buy more potatoes.

It was a backlash, no doubt, to those who would make fun of other parts of the country.

So a Mennonite friend offered me the insight that it is clearly proven that Adam was a Mennonite (a miracle, for sure, since roots of the Mennonite faith was a few thousand years later).

“How do you know?” I asked.

Well, according to this individual, only a Mennonite, when standing next to a naked woman in a garden, would be tempted by an apple.

This is the way in which the story has been interpreted, and reinterpreted.

But you know me, always am looking for a new angle. It seems trite and simple to discover a person has no clothes on. Now, I have seen situations, as the tale of the Emperor who has no clothes illustrates, where people are blind to reality or ignore obvious truths. So learning one is naked may be an example of that.

But I think the story has a deeper meaning, and I am even going to suggest that there are two themes wrapped up in this story.

a) Do not focus on scarcity

The story says that once Adam and Eve focus on their naked reality, their lack of clothes, then the beauty of the garden and the celebration of all that is around them changes.

Is that not what happens when we focus on our scarcity? What we do not have?

The church in the last couple of decades, as membership has been reduced and resources somewhat diminished, has been focusing on “abundance thinking” rather than “scarcity thinking.” Such talk had been aided by the work of Luther Snow, who in his book *Asset Mapping* has shown what most communities have many more assets than they realize, and they should go out there and find appropriate partners and people interested in helping.

Snow’s career began as a community planner, and he thought his work would assist communities. It has, but it is within the church community that his research and insights have really taken off.

Yet it is a hard sell to talk about abundance when people can see what is lacking, and has changed in their lives. Look at today’s story. Once Adam and Eve focus on their nakedness, or lack of clothes, then everything is based on that reality. They worry about creating clothes from the vegetation leaves in order to cover up; they hide from God; they fail to see the beauty of creation and all of the goodness God created.

Phil Callaway has written in a provocative book *Making Life Rich without Any Money*. In it are suggestions around ways that we do not need expensive things to enjoy life. Indeed, it is the cup of coffee with a friend or the creativity with odds and sods around the house that allow children to have an afternoon of fun being creative much more so than expensive toys or the drive to get the latest electronic gadgets or haute couture jewellery.

Karen Armstrong in her book on Genesis entitled *In the Beginning* makes a similar point from a different focus.

She suggests the original creation was a time of closeness to God – human interests and the divine meshed and were in sync. Then humans started to move away from God, worry about their own well-being, survival, comfort, or whatever. And then there was a chasm beginning to form between humans and the divine. Our own interests trumped anything else, and so we felt inadequate to meet our needs because we started to go it alone, and not realize the strength in community and in sharing.

b) If we are to know someone we need to know more than the basic, obvious information of their life, but we should know the basic, obvious information of their life.

My second point is that if we are to know someone, we should know more than their basic information about who they are, but we at least should know that much. Close, special friends are people we can share inner thoughts with, and ponder together important decisions in our lives. But at the very least we should keep in touch, be concerned with their basic physical and person needs, and not get caught with the dismissive decision: "He will understand if I am not in touch," or "She is such a special friends I do not need to worry about ordinary parts of her life."

As last Sunday showed, and as we all experience, being remembered on key events in our life, including our birthday, is a pleasant feeling at whatever age.

And we may not have friends naked in the garden, but we may see individuals more dishevelled than normal, or who look tired and worn out beyond what is usual, and a failure to acknowledge where they are at hardly bodes well for saying "I care about you."

And of course the downloading of the "guilt" around the eating of the fruit of the tree of good and evil is amazing. It is a rare skill for people to take responsibility for their actions. We want to blame others – those who tricked us, made us act, stopped us from acting, ignored our needs and so we, in turn, ignored the needs of others.

We can be skilled in blaming others when all we need to do is be clear about what we should do, and even more importantly, what we have been blessed and invited to do.

It would be nice if we had reverse thinking all of the time – we could look back on the implications of decisions we have made and know their consequence before we make such decisions . We do not have that luxury. As a result, we are invited to think through what we do from a perspective of the other, and from an awareness of the gifts and assets that we have.

Looking back, we may focus on mistakes we made and wish we did not. But God calls us to look ahead, at opportunities yet to be revealed, and invites us to be clear about where we can be open to the presence of God which affirms life in abundance.