

“Bet You Can’t Eat Just One”

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

Some folks give up things for Lent, and it’s a prime time for going on a diet. In the spirit of solidarity with any of you who are watching your waistlines, here’s a little inspirational story.

It’s about a man named Sam, who decided he was going on a diet. To make sure he would succeed, he announced his plan to all his friends and co-workers. Sam was one of those people, who remarked, “I can resist anything — except temptation!”

Sam’s co-workers were pretty good about giving him moral support until the morning he walked into the office carrying a box of freshly baked donuts.

“What’s with the donuts, Sam?” one of them asked. “I thought you were on a diet.”

“I am,” said Sam. “But I want you to know I wouldn’t have gotten these donuts if it weren’t for God.”

That remark begged for an explanation. Sam quickly supplied one. “You see, I was driving into work, and I knew I’d have to go right past the bakery. I just couldn’t get those donuts out of my mind, so I decided to pray to God for help. ‘God,’ I said, ‘if you want me to have a box of hot, delicious donuts, give me a parking place right in front of the bakery.’ Sure enough, I found one on my eighth trip around the block.”

Some of us truly can’t resist temptation! We’re all too susceptible to that classic tagline from the potato-chip commercials: “Bet you can’t eat just one!” With Stan bringing Mochas and bakery on Tuesdays, Pat and Debbie bringing bakery on Thursdays to go along with the

Sew'n Sew's Thursday dessert and occasional lunch potluck, now our Wednesday Lenten meals, there's just so much temptation.

Something similar was true of a certain woman named Eve, whose story we think we know well. A garden, a tree, a talking snake and a shiny, red apple. That's the way the story has come down to us.

The problem is, a lot of other things have come down to us along the way, things that have nothing to do with the story's meaning to its original Hebrew audience. The story of Eve, the serpent and the garden has become the playground of all manner of creative thinkers, all of whom think they see things that just aren't there. It's worthwhile taking a few moments to examine some of these mistaken ideas.

The first of these mistaken ideas is that it's somehow the woman's fault *because* she's a woman. Unimaginable damage has been done to women over the centuries because some male theologians decided to read this text as proof that women are morally or intellectually inferior to men. For centuries they called women "the weaker sex," implying that, if only Adam had been around to keep a closer watch on his wayward wife — and do a little mansplaining when necessary — the two of them never would have had to quit that prime piece of real estate.

Which is utter nonsense. Women are every bit the equal of men, when it comes to both intellectual attainment and moral sense. Sometimes they even do better, like knowing when to stop and ask where something is at Home Depot, or not panicking when the TV remote is nowhere to be found.

The second mistake is the idea that as soon as Adam bit into that forbidden fruit, the human race — by some sort of dark magic — experienced a cosmic change of condition known

as “the Fall.” Every generation yet to come was doomed to wage a losing battle against sin because Eve boldly plucked that fruit and Adam disobediently ate it.

Well, there *is* such a thing as sin. No one with any moral sense would deny it. Sin is a terrible curse. It’s something we all experience and struggle against. But did God consign the human race to a perpetual *state* of sin purely because some prehistoric ancestor pilfered a piece of prize fruit? Of course not! That explanation makes God into a petty, vindictive ruler, with a distinctly stunted sense of justice. That the sins of the fathers — and mothers — are visited on succeeding generations may be a great theme of classical literature, but that doesn’t mean we need to make it a centerpiece of our theology. The hard truth is, we’ve all got plenty of sins for which to repent, and they’re not Adam and Eve’s doing, but ours. We don’t need to import any sins from our ancestors to establish the fact that we need forgiveness, big-time.

If Adam and Eve aspire to gorge themselves on the fruit of that tree, it means they want to make themselves into little gods. It means they no longer have any need to revere their Creator. The serpent in the story has it exactly right. He explains to Eve that the reason God doesn’t want her to bite into the fruit is because, if she and Adam do so, they “will be like God.” This, of course, is the worst form of idolatry — the desire to assume for oneself the role of a god. The unfortunate Eve buys it hook, line and sinker. Adam, too.

Yet isn’t that what all of us seek to do, in large ways and small, each day of our lives? We turn from the God who created us. We believe we can go it alone in life. We’re like Sam in that little story we started with, driving around the block eight times to snag a divine seal of approval for what he’s already decided to do! We too often work hard to convince ourselves that we know better than God, we’re independent and we can chart our own course.

That's what Eve does, with respect to the fruit of the tree. Listen to what Eve concludes about the fruit, after talking with the serpent: "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate" (Genesis 3:6). Examine that verse carefully and you'll see three distinct reasons — rationalizations, really — why Eve thinks she can legitimately eat the fruit.

1. The tree is "good for food" — it's useful, in other words.
2. It's "a delight to the eyes" — the tree truly is beautiful.
3. The tree is "to be desired to make one wise" — it offers the tantalizing promise of wisdom.

In other words, Eve seeks from the tree *utility*, *beauty* and *wisdom*.

These are good things, to be sure, but they lead her into sin. Yet isn't that always the way? It's not just the bad things that lead us astray; it's the *good* things — or, at least, the things that seem to be good.

Utility

The first of these is *utility* — practical usefulness. When something tempts us, we're more likely to give into that temptation if we can convince ourselves there's something useful about it. ("But honey, we really need a new pick-up!")

Utilitarianism is a powerful philosophy, but it can also be ethically blind. Utilitarianism was a school of thought that grew up in England during the 1700s. John Stuart Mill was its chief booster. Mill maintained that just about any ethical decision could be made according to

one simple standard: it must bring “the greatest good for the greatest possible number of people.”

Beauty

The second thing that tempts the woman in the biblical story is the tree’s *beauty*. Now, our aesthetic sense is a wonderful gift, but it’s a poor guide for ethical decision-making. Each year we’re all treated — or subjected, depending on your point of view — to yet another televised Academy Awards ceremony. All the “beautiful people” of Hollywood revel in their few seconds of fame as they step out of their limousines and parade down the red carpet, illuminated by camera strobes. TV commentators focus on every aspect of the gowns, the make-up, the hair. Beauty — or, at least, a certain understanding of beauty — will be celebrated *ad nauseum*. Many of these so-called “beautiful people,” with their marital infidelities and conspicuous substance abuse, are in fact anything but beautiful when it comes to their inner lives.

Wisdom

Finally, Eve is led astray by her misjudgment that the fruit of the tree will make her *wise*. It’s true that we can gain wisdom from making all sorts of decisions — both those that are beneficial and those that bring us pain. Sometimes it’s the lessons our bad decisions teach us that are the most compelling.

The serpent never does lie to Eve. Did you ever consider that? Every word out of his mouth is the truth. But the serpent fails to tell the *whole* truth. He slices off a carefully selected segment of truth, one calculated to reveal God’s motives, and to puff his listeners up with self-destructive pride.

That process by which we turn vice into virtue, in our minds, is called “rationalization.” It’s the same process Eve goes through as she ponders whether to disobey the Lord and bite into the forbidden fruit. When Eve manages to convince herself that the tree is useful, beautiful and a source of wisdom, then she’s able to do what would otherwise be unthinkable.

Think about all those rationalizations and how easy they are to deploy in the service of sin:

- “I’m not committing adultery; I’m just finding the love I need.”
- “I’m not living a greedy lifestyle of over-consumption; I’m just pursuing the American dream.”
- “I’m not hurting anybody when I cheat my customers; I’m just following the laws of the marketplace.”
- “I’m not abusing my child; I’m just enforcing discipline.”

Rationalizations can be deadly.

But here’s some good news. There’s a way out. It’s called grace. Just when we recognize temptation for what it is and acknowledge we can’t beat it on our own, God enters in and gives us what we need to prevail. It’s all a matter of whom we trust. Trust ourselves alone, and we go down in flames. Trust God — the author of grace — and we find, more often than not, the strength we need to resist temptation and live a godly life.

May the peace of God . . .

#328 – Restore In Us, O God