

“Original Blessing”

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Genesis 1:24-31

Those of you, who were in church last Sunday, know that my sermon this morning is a response to a paragraph in Chris’ sermon, called “Recycle,” that he preached on April 3. To remind us of the sermon, here is a brief summary. Chris said: “in the scripture text for today Jesus, Mr. Recycle himself, is recycling, his disciples. Yes he is. He could have thrown them overboard. He could have given them a pink slip. He could have tossed them out into the garbage pile. He could have started with a new group. And who would have blamed Jesus. They all forsook Jesus and fled. They all betrayed him and hit the trail. They all denied him and deserted him. He appears before them but not to criticize or scold or shame. He appears before them, Jesus that is, to bless them and commission them.” Still, all good. I am agreeing wholeheartedly. And then...

Let me say that it is a rare day indeed when I disagree with Chris’ sermons. Oh, I may not like too many masculine references for God, or I may roll my eyes when he speaks of his BELOVED Tar Heels. But for the most part, my theology – my thinking about God and how God wants us to live as Children of God – runs pretty much along the same lines as our pastor’s thoughts.

But I was caught up short. Yes, I actually cringed when I heard our leader say the following words near the end of his sermon on April 3rd.

“Really, nothing of us are worthy. Let me say that again so I can get an amen this time. Really, nothing of us are worthy. And none of us will ever be worthy. And the great thing about the Easter story is that Jesus hangs with us despite our unworthiness.” Right there, in the fourth row, on the right of the sanctuary, I shuddered. Couldn’t help myself, really. Especially the sentence, “And none of us will ever be worthy.”

You see, I am what I call a recovering fundamentalist. I doubt that I made up that phrase, “recovering fundamentalist.” I had been taught from the time I was in children’s Sunday school that I was born bad. Remember the wordless book song. Four little blank pages: My heart was BLACK as sin until the Saviour came in. His precious blood (the red page) I know, has washed me WHITE as snow. And someday when I’m old, I’ll walk the streets of GOLD. Oh wonderful wonderful day, that washed my sins away.”

My sweet little Sunday school teacher said that I had to ask God’s forgiveness for my sins or spend eternity in the fires of Hell. For me, there was no FUN in fundamentalist.

In order to be certain that we weren’t tainted with temptation, our church held “alternate activities” on nights of school dances following football games. We were not to attend movies. Not even Walt Disney movies. We girls were discouraged from wearing more than lipstick and a little foundation. We were taught that other religions, like Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah’s

Witnesses and even our Roman Catholic friends and neighbors belonged to CULTS, and of course, would never get to Heaven. And we were taught that God was a JUDGE who, if displeased with us, would send us straight to – you guessed it – H-E-double hockey sticks, exclamation point.

Imagine how I felt, then, at age 20 to find myself pregnant with my first child, married – really a child myself. I smoked, too. I really was bad. I knew that I must be headed straight to the Hot Place where the fires were never quenched. I lived in fear that no matter how hard I tried, no matter how much I worked for Jesus, I probably wouldn't make it to the streets of gold.

Imagine again, a young married woman of 24 with two small children, meeting with her new Baptist minister, who told her for the first time in her life, that God is a God of LOVE. God loves all of us – no matter what. No matter what. That God loves the Charles Mansons, the Osama bin Ladens, my enemies, just the same as God loves me. Think that it was rough to feel unworthy of heaven for 24 years? Try believing that God loves us all the same, without regard for who we are or what we have done – or as one prayer of confession says – what we have failed to do!

For the first time in my life, I really embraced my faith. I reveled in this kind of love, which I had never experienced before. I could hardly stop singing with happiness because of this new love given to me by God.

Thirteen years later – if you're keeping track of my journey, I am now 37, a single parent, finishing my final year of seminary. I had an opportunity to hear Matthew Fox, a formerly Catholic and now Episcopalian priest, speak at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, in Rochester, New York, (optional: one of those fine Northern seminaries. Yep there are divinity schools north of the Mason Dixon line!) Matthew Fox's theology, based upon the Hebrew scriptures, states that blessing permeates "all creation from the very beginning." He continues "There is no doubt that original blessing is the basis of all trust and of all faith. Original blessing underlies all being, all creation, all time, all space, all unfolding and evolving of what is..." Original Blessing! Not "Original Sin" as I had been taught back in fundamentalist days where we all begin life – not in innocence – but in sin.

Fox continues to say, "The (Hebrew) word for covenant, *beriyth*, is also directly related to the (Hebrew) words for 'create' and for 'blessing.' A covenant is a blessing agreement, a promise to bless and to return blessing for blessing." Fox also quotes former president of the Catholic Bible Association of Germany and author, Herbert Haag, who writes: "The doctrine of original sin is not found in any of the writings of the Old Testament. It is certainly not (emphasis mine) in chapters one to three of Genesis...The idea that Adam's descendants are automatically sinners because of the sin of their ancestor, and that they are already sinners when they enter the world, is foreign to Holy Scripture."

Fox cites Elie Wiesel, a holocaust survivor, whom he calls "a Jewish prophet." Wiesel says, "The concept of original sin is alien to Jewish tradition."

One last quote from Fox: “We enter a broken and torn and sinful world – that is for sure. But we do not enter as blotches on existence, as sinful creatures, we burst into the world as “original blessings.”

Enough quoting from “Original Blessing.” You can get a copy at your local bookseller or online anyway. I’ll cut to the chase. What does all this have to do with us today at Wedgewood Baptist Church?

Fox’s theology has to do with the idea of living in the reality of being blessed by God -- not cursed by God. This thought of being God’s blessing contradicts atonement theology – the belief that we are “such worms” that we needed saving from our own bad ways. And that’s where Original Blessing has meaning for me. Phrases like “such a worm as I,” “saved a wretch like me,” etc., in our hymns and in the way we think about ourselves – especially concerning whether or not we are worthy to take communion or to consider that Jesus might or might not recycle us – cuts to the quick. I believe that we are all worthy.

And I am thankful that Jesus knew the worthiness of his disciples and chose to recycle them. Even though they made mistakes. Even though they walked away. For it is certain that we all do make mistakes. We lose our tempers, we ignore peoples’ needs, we separate ourselves from God. But it is also certain that WE ARE WORTHY. WE ARE BLESSED BY GOD. WE ARE LOVED. WE ARE GOOD. Let’s proclaim this together. Would you repeat after me?

We are worthy!
We are blessed by God!
We are loved!
We are good!

And on this basis we are WORTH RECYCLING. Not because Jesus swept down and “rescued” us from our unworthiness, but because we have been blessed BY GOD since our beginnings. Thanks be to God for this blessing! Let us resolve to live up to our worthiness and our goodness as children of God! Amen.