

February 25, 2018

*"Who Taught Us That?"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Genesis 1:31, 2:1-3,7,15-18, 3:1-11a

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

One of the things John and I enjoy doing together is taking long walks on the bike paths here in Falmouth. One trek takes us from the parking lot at Old Dock Road to the bridge under Saconneset Road. Once we saw some deer along the marsh behind the Chapoquoit Grill, and of course, there's all kinds of sea birds to look at, and the sunset on that side of town is spectacular. Another favorite hike begins near Surf Drive Beach and goes to Woods Hole. That view is spectacular as well, as you look across the sound to Martha's Vineyard and beyond. Sometimes it's so windy you can hardly stand up, and you watch all the waves and white caps, and the air is filled with the salty smell of the sea. And other times it's flat calm and so serene with the sun sparkling on the water. It truly is a magnificent scene which glorifies the creation our God did make. And it's always fun to interact with the tourists taking their pictures, commenting... "Isn't it beautiful? Where are you from?" (Assuming that we're tourists, too.) "Oh, about ten minutes up the road." "Aren't you lucky!" Yes, indeed, we are lucky – blessed, to live in this Garden of Eden called Cape Cod.

Well, one thing we often see on our walks are seagulls flying high with clams in their beaks, which they drop on some rocks or on the road, breaking the shell, thus enabling them to easily get at the meat. I've seen it many times in the parking lots at the beaches, and yet it still fascinates me as to how they learned this behavior. Who, pray tell, was the first seagull to come up with that idea? How is it passed down to the young ones? I can imagine this scenario in a typical seagull family. "Okay kids," says the father seagull, "I want you to wrap your little bird brains around this important lesson. We're going to study the laws of gravity today, with particular attention given to Newton's second and third laws of motion. Pay strict attention here because I'm going to teach you how you can drop a clam from just the right height so that it breaks perfectly and the meat comes right out of the shell. Because if you let your clam go from too low an altitude, it won't break, and you'll have to do it again and again. And if you drop it from too high an altitude, some other, mean seagull will get to the meat before you can, and steal it from you. And, one very important additional word of caution... be especially careful you don't drop a heavy clam on some human's new Lexus. That gets them really mad at us, and we don't want that! Go ahead and poop all over their cars and windshields, but please be careful with where you drop those clams!"

But seriously, though, how do those seagulls learn that behavior? It's a valid question. And that got me to thinking, especially during this season of Lent, about another learned behavior and a similarly valid question. And that behavior is sin! And the question is, how did we humans, supposedly made in the image of a perfect God, learn how to sin? And not only have we learned how to sin, but we've become so darn good at it. Now some of you here today might think the church spends too much time dwelling on sin during Lent, trying to make people feel guilty. But that's not it at all. You see, sin is a sickness – a dis-ease of our soul. But because God has a special thing for us sinners, the Gospel's focus is on our cure and our salvation, through God's love and forgiveness and mercy. Remember that! The Gospel's focus is on our cure and our salvation through God's love and forgiveness and mercy. That's the good news of Jesus Christ!

But for us to fully appreciate the cure, we must first acknowledge the dis-ease. So let's go back for a moment and look at our Scripture lesson about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. There it was. A world so perfect and beautiful and pleasant, until we humans messed it up. Now some theologians speak of Adam and Eve's sin as the original sin – that because they disobeyed God and sinned, and because we are their descendants, original sin has been passed down through the ages, to us. So that sin is part of our DNA. Now that might be true in some respects, but I think Jesus may have put it best when it comes to sin. He said, in effect, that evil begins in the heart, with bad thinking and feelings. Consider that. Because look how easy our thoughts can spiral into destructive thoughts and feelings and even actions. You know, when those very graphic news reports came out earlier this month about Larry Nassar, the United States Gymnastics Federation's team doctor, and the way he was abusing those preteen and teenage girls, my own husband said that if anything like that happened to our granddaughter Cora, he'd feel like he would want to kill the man. Of course he would never do that, but I'm sharing this with you because just thinking thoughts like that is sinful. Because I think I remember something in scripture like, "Do not take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, 'Revenge is mine,' says the Lord. 'I will repay.'" Not you!

Now obviously this is an extreme example, but just think about all those day to day irritants that cause you to think negatively. Things that get you upset, or cause you to get angry. Things that cause impure thoughts. Things that cause us to quarrel with one another. And we can easily find ourselves lashing out and doing or saying things we shouldn't – sinning. And when that happens, doesn't that affect our very being? We become disheartened, anxious and even depressed. By contrast, consider those

opposite thoughts and feelings. Think about those fruits of the Spirit like love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and gentleness and self-control. Just saying, even hearing those words, don't they bring a calmness to your very being? Love, and joy, and peace, and patience, and kindness, and gentleness, and self-control. These are the things we must focus on – especially while we still can. As the poet writes, “We should be careful of each other. We should be kind... while there is still time.” Author Samuel Beckett called time, “the double headed monster between damnation and salvation.” Yes, we delude ourselves into thinking that there will always be more time to set things right.

One of my favorite parables puts our struggle between sin and righteousness and time, all into perspective. Jesus once said, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field.” Now the man obviously is God, the seeds are you and me, and the field is the world. And just as we pray in the Lord’s prayer, “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven,” so Jesus is talking about the whole world, and how it is meant to be a place where we live and work together in goodness and righteousness and harmony. And how you and I are the ones to bear fruit in the world. But Jesus continues, “Then at night, while everyone was sleeping, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the grain, and then went away. So when the wheat came up, the weeds appeared as well. And the workers said, ‘Master, did you not sow only good seed in your field? Where then, did all these weeds come from?’ The master answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The workers said, ‘Do you want us to go and gather the weeds up?’ But the master replied, ‘No, for in gathering up the weeds, you will uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest. Then at harvest time we will gather the wheat into my barn, and we will bind the weeds into bundles, to be burned.’” Yes, at harvest time, which can be at any time, God will make his final judgments.

And another reason I like this parable is because it so aptly describes our human condition – wheat and weeds. Just look around. Some people are intent on building up, bearing fruit, showing compassion, giving freely, even sacrificially. Others are intent on tearing down, spreading animosity, destroying lives, as we saw once again in the Parkland shooting. We all know people who are honest, ethical and upright. And we all know people who are deceitful, corrupt and manipulative. And St. Paul indicated, even within ourselves, the wheat and weeds struggle together, when he said, “I don’t understand myself. I want to do what is good, but I don’t. I don’t want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.” Yes, we know we are just as capable of inflicting revenge as we are of turning the other cheek. Just as capable of lashing out with an angry, hurtful word, as we are to speak with gentleness and kindness. Like the

workers in the parable, we would like to be able to separate the good from the evil. But, as Aleksander Solzhenitsyn writes, “If only there were evil people committing evil deeds, and all that was necessary was to separate them from the rest of us, and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

And so what are we to do? How do we fight the enemy that lurks within? Well, the first thing we can do to fight the enemy is to stay awake. Notice, Jesus said it was while everybody was asleep that the enemy came. And isn't it true that it is usually while we're “sleeping” that problems arise. I don't mean physical sleeping, but sleeping in the sense that we aren't paying attention to our faith, to what God call us to do, who God calls us to be. We allow the world to lull us into complacency, and lead us into temptation. Instead, we are to focus on those fruits of the Spirit that I spoke of earlier – love, and joy, and peace, and patience, and kindness, and gentleness, and self-control. These are the things that should be written on our hearts.

And the second thing is to always remember, like I said earlier, we have a God that has a special thing for us sinners, and the Gospel's whole focus is on our cure. St. Paul tells us that “God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” The Apostle Peter said, “God doesn't want anyone to perish, but for all to come to repentance.” And of, course, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son. That whoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life.” And that's what Lent is all about. Understanding that on that cross, Jesus sacrificed for us by taking the sins of the world with him and putting them to death. And by his resurrection, Jesus Christ claimed the ultimate victory over sin and evil.

Yes, indeed, praise God, that he has a special thing for us sinners and our salvation. Amen.