

It's Tricky

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“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food. . . .” – Genesis 3:6a

The topic of my sermon is sin, and I am reminded of another sermon about sin from another preacher to whom it is said that president Calvin Coolidge listened one Sunday morning. Coolidge, as some of you know, was not a talkative person, and when he got home from church that particular Sunday, when Mrs. Coolidge, for whatever reason, had not accompanied him to church, over lunch Mrs. Coolidge asked Mr. Coolidge about the service.

“How was church, Cal?” she asked.

“Fine,” the president replied and kept eating his soup. After a period of silence Mrs. Coolidge went on.

“What did the preacher speak on?”

“Sin,” came the reply, and more slurping of soup. And more silence. Mrs. Coolidge tried again.

“What did he say about it, Cal?”

The president replied, “He was against it.”

And so am I. I suspect that most of you are, as well, but that hardly does justice to the topic. Sin is big, it's important, and it's tricky. It concerns the writers of the Bible from its opening to its closing pages. According to some Christian thinkers, like Augustine and Calvin, sin accompanies all of us through our lives from the moment we're born until the moment we die. In fact, Psalm 51:5 says that we're sinners from the moment we're conceived, which is part of the biblical foundation on which St. Augustine built the notion of original sin – that we inherit sin from our parents just as we inherit other traits, like eye color and body build.

Sin, in this classical formulation, does not mean specific sins, which is what you and I tend to think of when we hear the word sin. Every Sunday, in this church and in all churches in the Reformed tradition, we begin worship by praying for “the forgiveness of our sins, which we name silently in our hearts.” During that silence most of us start tallying up for God the previous week's wrongs: forgive me for not telling the truth about that haircut, forgive me for being short-tempered with my grandchild, forgive me for cutting off that other driver, and so forth.

That's the way you and I tend to interact with sin – we chop it up into bits and pieces and refer to it in the plural, sins. We tend to interact with sin like the waves on Lake Erie, but most Christian people who've given serious thought to sin know that sin is deeper than this and trickier and more dangerous than this; they see sin as Lake Erie itself and not simply its waves.

Such thinkers go back to the story in Genesis that Barb read for us in the first lesson, which we'll study in some depth this summer in our Bible study. It's that wonderfully sad story of our mythical first ancestors, whom we call Adam and Eve simply for convenience's sake. It's a wonderful story because it's true – it tells us something profoundly true about the nature of the world and the human condition. And it's sad because what it tells us about the human condition is that we are all sinners, without exception, and that none of us will ever be free from sin in this life.

And the reasons we'll never be free from sin is because sin is not something apart from the goodness of God's creation. Sin, rather, is part of that goodness, which is why I have taken as my text the opening words of verse 6 of Genesis 3, which says, in its entirety, "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; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate."

The tree was good for food. It wasn't a bad tree. Its fruit was not poisonous. The humans did not die from eating it, just as the serpent had told them they would not. The sin was not in the fruit, and it wasn't in the eating; it was in our disobedience – our separating ourselves from God's will. But what leads us to do that separating from God, in this case and in the majority of cases, is not bad, it's good – the fruit was good and beautiful and wise-making. And it is because of the goodness embedded in that which is prohibited that we are drawn to sin. That's the tricky part about sin: it almost always contains some good, to which we are naturally and reasonably drawn. We are drawn to sin not because of evil but because of good.

Somebody lies. Why did they lie? Except for people with serious psychological problems, it's not because they're drawn to lying. In the majority of cases it's because they wanted something, they were afraid, or they wanted to save face. There's nothing wrong with wanting things. There's nothing wrong with trying to protect yourself. There's nothing wrong with trying to preserve your sense of self-respect. Those are all good things. But when you try to secure or preserve those good things at the expense of the truth, then we've got a problem.

Somebody dishonors their wedding vows. Why did they do it? In the majority of cases, it's not because they deliberately wanted to hurt the person they're married to. They did it because of something they were drawn to in the other person – some physical beauty, some personality trait, some spark of chemistry – all good things in themselves.

Somebody takes advantage of somebody else in a business transaction. Why did they do it? For some people, of course, taking advantage of others has become their M.O., their way of life. They feel life is a zero-sum game, in which your gain is my loss, and since I don't want to lose, I'm going to do unto you before you have a chance to do unto me. This is a type of self-preservation. It's a mistaken way of thinking – there's more than enough to go around if we deal justly with one another – but it's a very powerful motivator for people to secure leaders for themselves who promise to get rid of "those people" who are here taking "our" jobs.

The National Socialist German Workers' Party is better known today as the Nazi party, and you and I tend to shudder even at the name. The Nazis have become identified with such atrocities that it's hard for most of us to imagine what it was about them that attracted the support of millions and millions of Germans. Their initial appeal was largely economic, which is reflected in their name. The Nazis were a political party that attempted to protect the welfare and advance the interests of German workers – factory workers, farm workers, shopkeepers, small business owners. And those people were the hardest hit by the Great Depression, and when Adolph Hitler promised to bring relief to people who were struggling financially, they supported him enthusiastically. And it was perfectly reasonable and sensible that they would do so, and there was nothing wrong with ordinary German people wanting relief from economic hardship.

But Hitler's way of promising relief from that hardship was to target smaller, weaker, and politically less powerful groups – Jewish people, immigrants, and political minorities – and blame them for Germany's woes. Hitler promised to make Germany great again if the German people would allow

him to round up and deport those undesirables. And so the German people did, and we know the rest of that awful, evil story. Nazism didn't begin in evil, it began in good, and if we fail to recognize that fact, then we have little hope of recognizing when our own actions morph from a desire for good into appalling evils.

Let's consider a less extreme example, but still in the realm of politics. We're told that we're more polarized, politically, than we've been in a very long time, with people who voted for Donald flummoxed by why anyone would vote for Hillary and vice versa. We call each other names – what an idiot, how stupid can they be, can you believe that, and so forth – because we can't see the good in what we perceive to be the wrong of how someone else voted. People who voted red can't see the good that the folks who voted blue saw and vice versa, and so folks chalk up the other side's votes to ignorance, stupidity, or duplicity.

But that's too simple. In spite of a lot of hidden self-interest and corruption in politics, I've known enough politicians to know that the vast majority of them are actually striving after the greatest good for the greatest number, and I always try to ask myself what the good is that this person is pursuing that seems so wrong to me. And I sometimes reach out for help in doing that. One of the reasons I read the columns of David Brooks is precisely because he's more conservative than I am, but he's also very intelligent, very compassionate, and very articulate – he can espouse views that I might not agree with, but he does so in a way that allows me to see the good in them that he sees, and for that I'm very grateful to him.

For years, I puzzled over the petition in the Lord's Prayer in which Jesus taught us to pray that God not lead us into temptation. Why would God do such a thing? Leading someone into temptation seems patently evil – pathological, even – so why should we have to ask God, of all beings, not to do that to us?

It's because, I believe, of the tricky nature of evil, which is so often embedded in the good. God has made us part of a wonderfully good creation, and has asked us to interact with it in some ways and not in others. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God – that's the way God wants us to interact with creation, according to the prophet Micah (6:8). God has led us into this beautiful world, filled with goods of every kind – physical goods, emotional goods, spiritual goods – and when we interact with them as God asks us to do – justly, kindly, and humbly – they remain goods to be enjoyed and celebrated. But when we interact with them unjustly, unkindly, and in an arrogant fashion – they remain goods, but now they've become embedded in evil. And so we pray to God, earnestly and regularly, please don't let us interact with your good creation in that evil way. Lead us not into temptation.

When you're tempted to do evil, friends, ask yourself what the good is that's embedded in that evil, and then remind yourself that there is always another way for us to enjoy the good things of life without separating ourselves from the will of God. It takes vigilance, it takes creativity, it takes effort, and it takes perseverance, but it can be done. Enjoying the good without turning it into bad is always possible. But it's tricky.