

That is Not Your Gift
Genesis 3:1-13
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Sometime in the early sixteenth century, renaissance writer Desiderius Erasmus wrote a short novel to amuse his good friend Sir Thomas More. Long before he engaged in the conflict with King Henry the VIII that eventually lead to his execution, More embroiled himself in numerous political and religious arguments and Erasmus thought his serious friend needed a smile. Erasmus entitled his work In Praise of Folly. The five hundred year old document begins with a thought which all preachers understand. Erasmus writes to Sir Thomas "lend me your ears, but not the ones you use to hear preachers of sermons, but ears like the ones used by Midas to hear the directions of Pan."

Pan, you might recall, told Midas how to become wealthy beyond his wildest dreams. Erasmus knew that many times we listen halfheartedly, inattentively, like when we sit in church and the preacher drones on and on. At other times, we hang on every word, desperate for understanding like Midas listened to Pan describe how to acquire the golden touch.

This morning, I hope we will listen with the ears of Midas, not with the ears of bored parishioners. For the words God has for us today can truly make the difference between lives of needless struggle and lives of joy and contentment.

This summer we are learning how to look at life with new eyes. Instead of seeing our lives as responsibility, obligation or even drudgery, we are discovering how to see our lives as gifts of God. In fact, we are trying to see every day and every moment as marvelous gifts from our creator. Some of us have been experimenting with starting every day with two questions: "What is the gift God has for me in this moment?" and "What is the gift I bring to this moment?"

So far, Adam and Eve have been our guides to this new perspective on life. We've learned from them that God has given us the magnificent gifts of creation and life and that God has placed some stellar gifts within us to return to the world. Namely, God has given us the abilities to tend the garden, order creation, expand the family, extend compassion and deepen intimacy. This week, we continue to learn from Adam and Eve; however, this Sunday, we will learn from their mistakes.

Some Christians believe that Adam and Eve were historical figures and that these chapters in Genesis teach history and science as well as theology. In other words they believe there was an actual day in ancient history when a snake spoke to a woman named Eve about a tree in a garden. Other Christians believe Genesis is a collection of stories meant to convey theological truth about our relationship with God. Although they hold the writings as sacred stories about God's relationship with creation, they do not believe they were meant to detail the process of creation or to document the precise history of the planet. This latter group place Adam and Eve in the same category as the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, wonderful characters in sacred stories that enlighten us to the ways of God but not historical figures like Abraham, Sarah, King David and St. Peter.

I have my own beliefs that I am happy to discuss if you are interested, however I don't think it matters which way you see Adam and Eve when it comes to the meaning of today's sermon. Whatever the intention of the inspired writer, there are important lessons to be gathered for our lives from the third chapter of Genesis.

As Genesis chapter two concludes, we read "And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed." That state of blissful contentment, however, changes quickly and radically. Chapter three begins with a description of the cleverness of the snake, the wiliest creature made by God. The crafty serpent approaches Eve and says, "I can't believe God would tell you not to eat from any of trees in the garden." Eve responds with complete innocence, "Oh no, we may eat the fruit from almost all the trees in the garden, we are just forbidden to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden. In fact, we aren't even to touch it, lest we die."

Let's replay the conversation for the crux of the issue is in this opening repartee. The snake says, "Did God say, you couldn't eat from any tree in the garden?" His question means did God limit you in any way. Did God have the nerve to make any tree off limits. Did God say there was any tree you couldn't enjoy?

In her beautiful state of trust Eve says, "No, God did not prohibit us from eating from any tree, just one tree. The serpent is protesting any limitation on human freedom "is there any tree you can't have." Eve is responding with affirmation of the generosity of God, "God allows us to eat from almost every tree, there's just one he said to stay away from."

Contrary to pop theology, this powerful story is not about sex. It is about something far bigger and more universal to the human experience than even sex. This story is about our role in the order of creation. It is about who we are as human beings. This opening conversation between the snake and Eve is to teach us that God has graced us with mind boggling gifts, almost every tree in the garden, however, we are limited beings. There is one tree, we can't have. There are some gifts that belong only to God.

The serpent replies to Eve's wondrous trust, "you won't die if you eat of that fruit. You will become like God. If you eat of the tree, you will receive the ability to know all things, to do all things, to experience all things, to handle all things. You will be in control. You will have all power, all knowledge, complete freedom, perfection. No rules, no limitations, you will become like God.

Eve takes a closer look at the forbidden tree and thinks she'd like to be in God's league so she eats and gives Adam the fruit and he eats as well. Almost immediately, their perspective on everything changes. They see their naked bodies, bodies they had been seeing every moment of their lives with gratitude, contentment, celebration, but now they feel ashamed of what they see and cover themselves with fig leaves.

They hear God rustling the leaves as he walks in the garden. This is the same God they have known every breath of their lives. The God whom they loved, whom they welcomed, whom they ran to like loving children, but now they feel ashamed in their creator's presence and afraid of judgment.

They see each other, companions up to now, flesh of flesh and bone of bone, at ease in one another's loving presence until the fruit is taken and digested. Then they turn on one another, "that woman that you gave me, Oh Lord, she made me do the wrong thing."

All that was joyous, loving, good and celebrated becomes problematic, sources of shame, reasons to hide. When Adam and Eve receive the gifts God offers them with joy and gratitude, they thrive in happiness and contentment. When they try to take the gifts that belong only to God, they feel shameful, afraid, discontent, and alienated from God and one other. As they long as they receive the gifts provided by the hand of God, they feel blessed. When they try to take the gifts belonging only to God, they feel inadequate, uncertain, worried, wounded, naked and ashamed.

I know you are worn out with Michael Jackson, however I am unable to read this passage without thinking of him. He was blessed with astounding musical gifts. Whether he sang your kind of music or not, Michael Jackson unquestionably had gifts of composing, dancing, singing, arranging that surpassed most. What coach Darrel Royal said of running back Earl Campbell, could be said of Michael, "He might not be in a class by himself but it sure don't take long to call roll."

Yet this gifted man was so contorted by family, friends, fans, managers, record companies, and half the other people now trying desperately to make money off his death, he reached a point where, rather than celebrate the gifts he had, he tried to take gifts that belong to no human being. As Courtland Milloy wrote this week in the Washington Post, Jackson was not happy with the "man in the mirror." An African-American man of 50 years, Jackson spent millions to alter his racial presentation, his gender presentation and his age presentation. In a tragic sense, rather than see himself as a gifted man celebrating the gift of life, he saw himself naked and ashamed.

Our race is a gift of God and should be received with gratitude. Our gender is a blessing from God and should be cherished. Even our age is a treasure from God and should be embraced. When we try to tamper with these wonders from God we, like Michael, end up feeling naked and ashamed.

More than likely, you and I will neither rise so high or fall so far as Mr. Jackson, however, we are enticed to take gifts that do not belong to us. We too pursue control over our lives. Rather than celebrate the miraculous bodies and distinct beauty given to each of us, we try to reshape ourselves, remake ourselves, become someone we were not created to be. Trying to become the creator, we end up feeling miserable about who we are, what we look like, how far we fall short of the standards of beauty promoted by our culture.

Rather than celebrate the families we have been given, the marriages we have been blessed with, we turn our friends, our children and our spouses into projects and exert massive amounts of energy into trying to make them into the people we want them to be. In the process, we alienate the people we love, frustrate ourselves and end up feeling lousy about our friends and family.

Rather than cherish the love in our lives, we attempt to have it all. We want the benefits of marriage and the excitement of silly love affairs. Like everyone from Mark Sanford to Steve McNair, we defy the limits imposed upon our lives by God and seek a life that is simply not possible. We end up destroying our marriages, our careers and in some cases even our lives.

Rather than accept that we can't make everybody happy, we try to be all things to all people. Running at speeds humans are not built to endure, we try to keep the kids happy, the spouse happy, the boss happy, the neighbor happy, the church happy, the school happy, mom happy, sister happy, our beloved pastor happy and in the process end up wearing out and giving up.

Rather than accept the fact that we can't control the cancer in our body or the addiction in our son or the incompetency in our boss or the wrinkles on our skin or the affections of our girlfriend or the movement of the stock market, we attempt to manage the entire world and end up angry and bitter.

We have been given astonishing gifts to enjoy and present to one another. We have not been given the gift of total control, all power, all knowledge or perfection. Those gifts belong only to God for only God is pure and good enough to use them well. When we try to take them, we end up feeling inadequate, ashamed, angry, miserable.

In the past year, I have done several weddings for families in our church and the experiences have altered my retirement plans. I used to worry about how I would manage financially in retirement, but no longer. After what I have seen in the lives of these families during the wedding and especially at the rehearsal dinner and reception, I've got enough dirt on them all to keep me in hush money for the rest of my life.

Seriously, it has been a blessing to be involved with these families in such magnificent times of celebration. Weddings, however, will teach us that we are not in control. A year ago, I did a wedding for Carly and Juan in Miami, Florida. The setting was gorgeous, the bride was beautiful, Juan was beautiful, I was beautiful. Every moment of the wedding was planned with care and love. Everything was perfect . . . until we opened the door and left the air conditioned building for the wedding site. A blast of heat hit us all with such power that we almost melted on the spot. We can't control the heat of a summer day in Miami.

A few weeks ago, I participated in the marriage of Rebecca Cowell and her husband Mike. It too was an outdoor wedding. The weather, however, was not a problem; the storm clouds stayed way out on the horizon. We all gathered on a beautiful hillside, the music began and someone said, "Do you have the bride's bouquet?" "No, I thought you had it." "Where's the pillow with the rings?" "You were suppose to bring it."

Everything had to halt until Curtis could descend the hill and retrieve the necessary accouterments. Once all necessary objects were in place, Noah, a junior groomsman whispered to me that he was not feeling well. He asked, "Pastor John, if I get sick, should I stay standing up front or walk to someplace private?" More stuff we can't control.

At the Morrison wedding, everything and everyone was in their place at the fancy University Club in Washington. People from Pakistan, New York City, Berlin, California and various other places around the world were right on time. As the appointed hour arrived, we were short just one person . . . the groom. Something unplanned came up and made him a few minutes late.

The Mealo wedding came off without a hitch . . . almost. Everyone made it to Mystic, Connecticut on time for the rehearsal. We practiced each movement of the wedding and then, as I presented the couple to recess down the aisle, the bride turned to the groom and said, "did you bring the music for our recessional?" A short pause followed, indicating he had forgotten it. Then he said what all grooms learn to repeat with great earnestness, "I'm on it." The music was in place later that day.

Last night Charmaine and Steven were married in one of the most intricately planned weddings I have ever seen. Each beautifully appointed segment of the wedding moved along like clockwork and then, for reasons unknown, the side candles on the Unity Candle simply fell over during the ceremony. A groomsman and I had to chase the candles down and replace them to keep the entire wedding platform from catching on fire. No matter how hard we try to control our lives, God always has a way to remind us that control is not one of our gifts.

Tuesday, my daughter Joanna asked if she could ride her bike down to the school after dinner. I replied that I didn't think she was quite ready for a trip like that alone. She replied, "mommy let me do it earlier." I looked at the growing shadows outside and said "that was earlier, it's starting to get dark and I want you to stay home." I keep trying to stay in control of things.

Karen went off to run some errands and I did the dishes while Joanna and Jacob played whiffle ball in the back yard. They hadn't been playing for more than ten minutes when Jacob ran into the house yelling that Joanna needed me right away. He had hit a plastic ball into her eye and a lump the size of a grapefruit was already appearing. I can't even control things in my own back yard. We have many gifts from God but total control is not one of them.

One of the oldest confessions of faith in Protestantism is the Heidelberg Catechism. Established in 1563, the confession poses a series of questions to new converts and then provides the answer. The second question goes like this: How many things are necessary for thee to know, that thou, enjoying this comfort, mayest live and die happily? **Answer:** Three; (a) the first, how great my sins are; (b) the second, how I may be delivered from all my sins (c) the third, how I shall express my gratitude to God for such deliverance.

The catechism gives us direction for the new perspective on life we are pursuing this summer. For as we realize that we have tried to take gifts that are not ours, gifts belonging only to God, we can confess this sin to the Lord and receive the forgiveness of Christ. Then, we can live out our days expressing gratitude for the gift of forgiveness as well as all the other gifts showered upon us and leave the responsibility of total control, perfection, power and knowledge to God. If we can find peace with the fact that some gifts are ours and some are not, we shall, as the catechism promises know all we need to know to live and die happily.