

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
SECOND LESSON: Romans 5:12-19
FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT
March 1, 2020

“The Fatal Flaw”
Sermon ©Lisa C. Farrell

Most of the apostle Paul’s letters were situational. He was responding to a crisis or a need in a congregation or group of congregations, and he knew the people involved personally. In most cases he had been the founder of the church in question. But Romans is not like that. Although he did ultimately die in Rome, Paul had never been to Rome before this letter was written. He knew some of the people who had been part of the Roman church, like Priscilla and Aquila, but most were strangers. The Roman churches, although flourishing, were not founded by Paul. And since he was not responding to a crisis, the letter to the Romans is much more theological and considered in nature. In fact, Romans is the closest thing to a theological treatise that Paul wrote. The reading we have today is a carefully crafted argument. This is not off the cuff. This is Paul having thought things through presenting them in the most eloquent and persuasive way he can.

Paul begins with the problem of the human race—sin. “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.” This sentence alone requires careful taking apart! “Sin” in this case is a noun. It’s a thing. It’s an abstract thing, but it’s a thing. It’s like a spiritual force for evil. And the one who brought it into the world was Adam. Because Adam sinned, sin became part of the human make-up. Because Adam sinned it is now part of our DNA to sin. And because Adam sinned death entered the world, spiritual death and physical death.

Paul’s understanding of Adam and Eve was literal. He interpreted the scriptures to mean that God created two human beings who were the parents of us all. And because he had this literal understanding he was able to make a very neat parallel between Adam and Jesus. One man brought sin into the world, and another has delivered us from it. From a literary standpoint it’s perfect. But do we have to believe in a literal Adam and Eve in order to “get” what he’s saying?

If Adam and Eve were not actual physical people, if this story is an allegory, then what? Scientifically the fossil record shows that human like creatures were alive 200,000 million years ago. In fact, we have so far discovered fifteen different types of humanoids existing at different times and in different places, including hobbits, which I think is adorable. Evidently they

only lived on one island in Indonesia and had very big feet. About 400,000 years ago some humanoids started cooking with fire and making tools. Basically, they invented the barbecue. But they also learned to make clothes, because it could get cold. Our ancestors, homo sapiens, were just one among a number of human species that existed at the same time. Neanderthals and homo sapiens even intermarried. There are many people alive today who have some Neanderthal DNA.

Evolution is not smooth and consistent. Science has shown us that it often comes in spurts with rapid advances being made in a relatively short period of time. That happened about 45,000 to 35,000 years ago among the homo sapien group. Suddenly, the homo sapiens hanging around the barbecue pit started creating musical instruments and complex art. We don't know what caused the change, but the fact is the DNA did change in this particular group enabling them to develop in much more sophisticated ways. They made delicate jewelry, needles and thread for clothing. They grew crops. They developed elaborate burials for the dead, so they must have believed in some form of afterlife. **And they had language.** While other human species also had the ability to speak and probably did, the shape of homo sapien skulls made it easier.

What happened? Did God flip the genetic switch? Adam Hamilton, well known author, pastor and public speaker points to this period of time in which to place what we call "the fall." It is here, Hamilton suggests, that everything went right and everything went wrong all at the same time. The change was rapid and pervasive. The homo sapien group started using reason and symbols. Communication grew more elaborate. They began to live in larger communities. But with the capacity for reason also came desire, rationalization, jealousy, fear, hatred and violence. And it is during this period of time that virtually all of the other humanoid competition was wiped out. Coincidence? I think not. We were more adaptive, and I think, ruthless. The story in the bible of Cain and Abel may be one of the most inspired, because brother killed brother.

Something in human nature went wrong as we were becoming human. We acquired free will, but we used it in destructive ways. No one has to teach a two-year-old how to be naughty. That software come pre-loaded. To use the computer analogy again it's like we all have a crazy virus running around inside of us deleting good files and creating corrupted ones. As a species we have much capacity for good, but we also have a fatal flaw.

The problem is in human nature itself. God's solution was to take on human nature and fix it from the inside out through Christ. Paul says the gift is not like the problem. Because of the brokenness of human nature we are all affected. It's like an inherited disease. But Jesus doesn't have this disease. He's human, but without sin. Our spiritual union with him can enable us to be healed, to literally become freer and freer from the power of sin in our lives and to become more like God. The Eastern churches call this divinization. The Western churches call it sanctification. It means the same thing. To become more and more the person God created us to be. This is freedom from spiritual

death. And Christ gives us even more, because ultimately we will be freed from physical death as well.

Paul uses the literary parallel of Adam and Christ to make his point, stating that: “just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.” It is not really necessary for us to believe in a literal Adam to grasp what he is saying. Paul’s point is that “Adam” (singular or plural) transmitted his nature to his progeny. And now we’re stuck with it. Christ came to bring us grace, hope and restoration as he communicates his nature to us. The fatal flaw is no longer fatal.

Why would God create such flawed beings? Why take the risk of flipping on the genetic code so we could become creative and independent? It was a huge gamble. Our ancestral siblings were far simpler creatures. They would not have been able to conceive of such a thing as a city, much less live in one. But when we became fully human we became capable of inventing, adapting and changing the world we live in. When we look at what has happened to the environment, that has not always been a good thing. But God decided the risk was worth it, that despite the flaw, an independent creature who could in turn create, was a good thing. It is this that has distinguished us. But it is this too that might lead to extinguishing us. And to save us from ourselves God sent Jesus into the world to show us what being truly human is meant to be—to be human without the fatal flaw.

Can the world be saved from us? Can we be saved? We are such short-sighted self-centered creatures! We deny that climate change is real even in the midst of wildfires and crippling drought. As glaciers disappear we pretend it’s not a problem so we can continue to make money and live comfortable lives. We fill the oceans with plastic and destroy the very thing that brings us oxygen to breathe and live. And we lie and we steal and we fight over limited resources. I am not an optimist when it comes to human nature. Without the grace of God I think we are lost. But God has not given up on us, and God’s Spirit will work through us if we invite God to be the center of all we do. We do not need to lose heart, because God is in control, and God has given us the ministry of reconciliation to reach out to the world with the healing love of Christ. God knows the problem, and God has provided the solution. Amen.

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

¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

² The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,³ but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

⁴ “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. ⁵ “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁶ When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Romans 5:12-19

¹² Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—

¹³ To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone’s account where there is no law. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come.

¹⁵ But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! ¹⁶ Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man’s sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. ¹⁷ For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!

¹⁸ Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. ¹⁹ For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.