

“In the Middle of the Garden”
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11
1st Sunday in Lent

March 1, 2020
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

According to our text,
in the middle of the Garden of Eden
there was a tree.

This is, by my estimation, a very mysterious tree.

- a) About this tree, God told Adam, “...of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Except that’s not what happened.
When Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of the tree, they don’t die.
So what’s up with this tree?

- b) About this tree, the serpent says to Eve, “...when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Is that what happens when they eat of this tree?

They run from God.
They’re afraid of God.
But they don’t become divine like God.

See, I don’t understand this tree.
A very mysterious tree.
Do you understand this tree?

Of course, when I ask about the tree, I hope you realize that the tree in the Garden of Eden is not just a tree.

The tree stands for something very important.
What do you think the tree stands for?

One possibility is TEMPTATION.

The tree stands for that which tempts us.

That which we want to do—but know in our hearts we ought not to do...

Lutheran pastor Lori Brandt Hale tells about the time
her then almost 4-year-old son—
heard about temptation and the devil during children’s church.

After Sunday morning was done, her son had some questions for her:

“Hey Mom,” he started, **“what do you know about the devil?”**

Hale recalls: “My mind immediately jumped
to a SPECTRUM of theological views.

Should I start with Augustine?
Should I couch my answer in general terms
of conservative and progressive interpretations of the text?

Is he ready for process theology?
(Am I ready for process theology?)
...Then I looked at him and remembered that he was 3.

“What do YOU know about the devil?” Hale asked him.

Her son’s response was instructive.

“Well,” he began, “the devil talked to Jesus.”
(Good, Hale thought, he was paying attention.)

“The devil was mean” he continued.

And then her son leaned closer...and, dropping his voice to a loud whisper,
he said: *“If we were at a store,
and you and Dad were in one aisle
and I was in another aisle, and...”*

--his hushed tones became downright conspiratorial at this point—
“—there was candy...

...the devil would say ‘You should take some.’”

Hale thought for a moment.
She was impressed at how well the children’s church leader that morning
had taught her boy!

So she asked him:

“Honey, if we were at a store,
and Dad and I were in one aisle and you were in another,
and there was candy,
and the Devil said ‘you should take some!’—
--What would you say back to the devil?”

A genuinely sweet grin lit up her son’s face
and without hesitation he replied:
“You taught me I should say thank you!”¹

Why do any of us approach the tree?
Take from the tree?

Why do any of us pretend that the tree in the middle of the garden is just like
any other tree?

I don’t understand the tree, but I do know this:
Everyone has such a tree.
Everyone has a tree in the middle of their garden.

Do you remember what the Apostle Paul wrote?

“For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”
Paul knew about the tree...

Do you remember what William Faulkner said?

¹ From “Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2,” edited by David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

According to Faulkner, the only thing worth writing about is "...the human heart in conflict with itself..."²

William Faulkner knew about the tree.

Even Jesus knew about the tree.

When I hear the passage that Susan read/Parks read, my picture is NOT of Jesus saying, "Hey look, it's the devil, I'm going to defeat you today!"

No, I hear those temptations that Jesus faced as an inner struggle for Jesus. REAL temptations!

How good would it be if Jesus turned stones to bread!
He could feed so many people.

How good would it be if Jesus ruled the world in political power!
He could provide peace and justice for so many people.

In the wilderness, I see the very heart of Jesus in conflict with itself.
He's staring at the tree.

Do you know about the tree?
Do you know about the human heart in conflict with itself?

The Presbyterian church in which I grew up had about 500 members.
Full of upwardly mobile people, full of professionals, high-achieving types.

After I left for college, something happened at that church. It was new and unknown in that congregation. What happened is this.

A member of the church committed a crime.
He was white-collar, professional.
Not an arrogant guy, a good guy, a good person.

² This comes from William Faulkner's speech at the Nobel Banquet in Stockholm, December 10, 1950, found at https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1949/faulkner-speech.html.

We often let the world tell us that our lives are MISSING SOMETHING.
That in order to be acceptable, we need something BESIDES God's grace,
besides our baptismal identity.

Maybe it's living in a particular neighborhood that we let the world tell us
we need.

Maybe it's having the best children on the block.

We convince ourselves that we're missing something, and whatever this
something is that's missing in our lives, we've just got to have it. It becomes an
almost insatiable desire.

Maybe that's what the tree stands for.

*The notion that something is missing from our lives,
and without this something, we won't be ok.*

The President of Princeton Seminary, Craig Barnes, has a fascinating take on
this. He writes:

“God's notion of paradise [is] that you [and I] are created and placed in the
garden where you don't get to have everything.”

Something is missing.

He goes on:

“I do not know what is missing in your life...It's probably different than
what's missing for the person sitting next to you.

It could involve a particular type of relationship that you've always wanted.

It could involve something at work.

It can be a health issue.

It can be something from your past that you're never going to be able to fix.

It could be a dream for the future that is never going to come true.”

And whatever it is that's missing, God has decided to put this tree not in some far corner of the garden where we can forget about it. God has decided to put it right in the middle, where we walk by it every day.

“This,” Barnes says, “can drive us nuts. There can be nine hundred ninety nine wonderful trees in your garden...but where do we pitch our tent? Under this one piece of fruit that we do not have....And we want to know why we can't have it: *Other people have this*. Why can't I have this?”

Now creating paradise with a tree we cannot have—is this God's twisted form of amusement and entertainment?

No—it is exactly the opposite.

It is, as Barnes puts it, God's way of “honoring you, of giving you dignity separate from all the rest of creation, because what this tree...does
in the midst of your garden
is force you to have freedom.

“You've got to make a choice about what kind of steward you're going to be of this thing that's missing in your life.”³

Have you done any thinking recently about what's missing from your life?
About the empty space?
About that thing of which you say: other people have this, why can't I
HAVE THIS???

About the tree that's in the middle of your garden?

Our faith does not ask us to despair about that tree.
We are called to be hopeful about that tree.
You see, it's a very HOPEFUL thing to me that Jesus knew about the tree.

Not just at the beginning of his ministry, when he was tempted by the devil.
But also at the end.

³ From “Living Gratefully,” a sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Craig Barnes at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, November 18, 2012. I am indebted to a lecture that Dr. Barnes gave at The Festival of Homiletics in Denver, CO, in May, 2015 for the original idea for this sermon.

At the end of his ministry, Jesus found himself in a garden.
It was the Garden of Gethsemane.

And Jesus prayed in that garden.
He prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me...”
And God would not, or maybe could not, give Jesus that gift.

Jesus asked for a very particular gift on the last night of his life.
And at that moment, he was left...empty.

Left without the gift he asked for. But NOT left without God...

At that moment in the Garden, God asked Jesus to trust in God’s goodness.
To trust the mind and imagination of God to see Jesus through.

I wonder if God just might be asking the same thing of us today.

What if, during this Lenten season, you took a long look at whatever it is
that’s missing in your life.

And you said:
I’m not going to try to fill this.
I’m going to trust the mind and imagination of God to see me through...

In Max De Pree’s book, “Leading Without Power,”
De Pree tells the following story of a scene from WWII:

“In the seemingly hopeless summer of 1941,” De Pree writes,
“as the German army approached Leningrad (now...St. Petersburg),
the staff of the Hermitage Museum packed up
tens of thousands of paintings and sculptures,
antiques and treasures, to be shipped east,
away from the Germans and the upcoming siege.

It was a tragic time.

“The staff left the empty frames and pedestals in their proper places in the museum as a sign of their conviction that someday they would be able to restore the Hermitage and its priceless collection of art.

“Though they were losing their art,
they were determined not to lose hope.

“The Germans surrounded Leningrad for more than two years, and the Russians endured that long and arduous time with little to eat and often under attack.

“The staff of the Hermitage and their families” AMAZINGLY—
did not abandon the museum!

Instead, they “moved into the basement of the museum,
determined to preserve the building.

“Russian soldiers and citizens came regularly to help clean up the damage done by the German artillery and to patch up as best they could the broken windows to keep out the snow.

“As a way of saying thank you, the staff conducted tours of the museum for those people.

“But of course the art wasn’t there.

“Photographs show the Hermitage curators conducting the tours,
avoiding the piles of snow on the beautiful parquet floors,
with the groups of soldiers standing
in front of empty picture frames and forlorn pedestals.

“The curators described from memory and in great detail
the Renoirs and the Rembrandts to the soldiers...

They did it—
they made faithful use of the empty space in their beloved museum—
because of their “dedication, commitment, and love.”⁴

⁴ Max De Pree, “Leading Without Power: Finding Hope in Serving Community,” San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997. I am indebted to a sermon preached by Craig Barnes when he was installed as the new President of Princeton Seminary for calling my attention to this book.

Have you thought about the empty space that's in your life that you have tried so unsuccessfully to fill?

What would happen if you approached that empty space,
not with a constant effort to fill that space,
but with a commitment to be faithful
with the emptiness...

What would happen if you trusted God with whatever is missing—
knowing that there is nothing deeper or more powerful in this universe
than God's commitment
and God's dedication and God's love...
for you?

Amen.