**“Bi-connected in God’s Love”**

Genesis 2:15-17 3:1-7 Revelation 21:1-5; 22:1-2, 14

On the day you were born, the Lord your God took you in his arms. God looked down at you and said with a smile, “What I have created is good.” God looked at you, and God saw all the possibilities your life offered for the good of God’s creation. God could see you tilling the soil of God’s garden of love. God could see you reaping a harvest of joy in your heart. For you see, on the day you were born, God gave you a task—to till and keep God’s Garden of Love.

Also, on the day you were born, God gave you a gift—the gift of freedom. You were not born a puppet on a string, responding to the whims of a great puppet master. The story of your life had not already been written. You were born free to choose from which tree you would eat. But it was God’s hope you would freely choose to eat from the Tree of Life, tasting the joy of loving and connecting with another human being. It was God’s wish that you would live and feast on a steady diet of God’s steadfast love, freely responding to God’s love with your love for your creator and your love for your neighbors.

But on the day you were born, you were warned of the consequences of choosing that other tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. I call it the Tree of Independence from the will of God. You see to keep you eating from the good tree, the Tree of Life, God gave you directions for living within the will of God. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” You were born free to accept or reject these commandments, but you were warned, “On the day that you eat of that tree (the Tree of Independence from God) you shall die.”

So, you were born into the midst of a wonderful garden, a garden filled with the fruit of God’s joy, and peace, connected in loving relationships with God and neighbor. Before you stood all the possibilities of a life lived in harmony with the will of God, a life filled with goodness and blessings. Before you stood all the possibilities of a life lived for the glory of God. But subtly and deceptively, temptations began to come, choices of autonomy and independence from God, choices of alienation and separation, disconnection from your fellow humans, and disconnection from God.

These choices came early in your infancy. Like all todlers, your favorite word was “Mine!” “No!” was a close second. Then in your early childhood, you began noticing those other children, the ones who were unlike the others. Like most children, you learned to label anyone who didn’t seem to fit in, or perhaps you were one of those painfully labeled. As you began growing into adolescence, you began eating a steady diet of fruit from the Tree of Independence, and eating from the Tree of Life became less and less of an option. Gradually, you forgot all about that other tree, and temptations became more direct, and you began to ponder certain questions:

“Did God really say that Sundays are holy days? Well, I’d rather sleep in!”

“Did God really say not to put so much importance in what I wear? My clothes are my life!”

And slowly but surely, as you entered into adulthood, continually eating from the Tree of Autonomy and Independence from God, the temptations became more blatant and your denial more direct.

“Did God really say that I am responsible for the well-being of my neighbor? Well, I’m a self-made person. If I can do it all by myself, why can’t they?”

“Did God really say not to hate my neighbor? Well, I think there are worse things a person can do than hate. After all, it’s not like I’m going to murder them.”

“Did God really say that I have to give a percentage of my hard-earned wages back to God? Well, that money’s mine. This just isn’t a good time for me, and I’m sure somebody else will pick up the slack.”

Subtly, unknowingly, you became addicted to the fruit of autonomy, self-sufficiency, and independence from the will and direction of God. Day by day, you became disconnected from the love of God and neighbor. Little by little, you forgot about your responsibility of tilling the Garden of God’s love.

Very early in life, you tasted the fruit of the Tree of Independence from God, otherwise known as the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And, with each bite, a little part of you began to die. Your awareness of your connection to God’s presence grew weak, and your connectedness with your neighbor grew feeble. You embraced your God-given freedom but forgot about God’s direction, God’s commandments to love. You became autonomous.

But of course, eventually, you began to realize that independence from God isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. You see, if you are free to ignore the needs and concerns of others, then others are free to ignore you. If you can choose to hate, they can choose to hate you. If you can choose to take advantage of your power over others, sooner or later someone with more power will take advantage of you. For you see, when the whole world is independent and autonomous, then everyone is basically alone, disconnected, and living outside of God’s Garden of Love. The Bible says this place is somewhere East of Eden.

But this does not have to be the end of your story, the story of your creation or recreation. And it’s certainly not the end of The Story, the ongoing story of scripture. In fact, your story may be just beginning, and that is the Good News of Easter. In Jesus Christ, God is at work re-creating, reconnecting our world. Death does not get the last word, not our physical death, nor our spiritual death. You see, the Story of the Bible is that God left the garden and traveled east to find us, and God is leading us back to God’s good and wonderful garden where we are well-connected in relationships of love, joy, peace, kindness, and all the other fruits of the Spirit found on the Tree of Life.

Now I realize that, in the world we live in today, my words may sound a naïve because the world we live in is anything but a garden of love. The world we live in seems more fractured and alienated and disconnected from God’s garden than ever.

And that’s kind of how Christians felt in the time when the Book of Revelation was written. In many places in the Roman Empire, Christians were persecuted for their religious beliefs and practices. Some professions excluded Christians from their guilds, leaving some Christians without a job. Some Christians were shunned by their families, leaving some Christians without a home. And in a few cases, some Christians were martyred. So, some Christians began to worry and wonder, “It sure doesn’t feel like God is leading us back to a Garden of love.” “Has Jesus’ Kingdom of Peace and Justice really come near?” “Is Jesus really the King of kings and Lord of lords?” The Book of Revelation was written to answer these questions.

Many theologians would say that we are living in a time between ‘The Already, But Not Yet,’ and theologians have used the World War II D-Day Invasion as a metaphor for this theological point. After the Allied forces had firmly established their presence on the continent of Europe, and with the industrial supply of military equipment coming in every day from the United States, the defeat of Germany was in a sense already established, but not yet complete. There were still many battles left to fight.

In somewhat the same way, the Book of Revelation proclaims the already established and guaranteed victory of Jesus over evil, but not yet complete. Through the cross, we have been permanently reconnected (bi-connected) to God and neighbor, but there is still a lot of healing to be done.

I remember hearing a speaker who said that the story of Revelation is really the simple story of a great battle between a huge seemingly all-powerful monstrous beast and a teeny tiny little lamb. And the followers of the lamb look on with great fear and trepidation, for it’s so plain for any logical person to see this battle is going to be a slaughter, not even a contest. And indeed, it isn’t a contest, not even close. But the surprising Good News, the climactic culmination of The Story is this: The Lamb Wins! Love Wins!

Friends, hear and believe and live into the promised conclusion of the biblical story. When all is said and done and the last spiritual struggle with evil is done, “Every tear will be wiped away. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.” The home of God will be among us, and we shall all feast together from the Tree of Life. Hear and believe and live into the Good News of our Christian Story: “[God is] making all things new,]” permanently connected.

Let us Pray:

O Wonderful Creator, the story of your steadfast love, commitment, and connection to your creation is beyond our comprehension, and the blessings of your grace and mercy are beyond our wildest hopes and dreams. May the fruit of your Tree of Life blossom forth in the Garden of this church. Following in the footsteps of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, may we eagerly till the soil of your creation with kindness and joy, mercy and peace, hope and humility, that you might reap a harvest of love. Amen.

David A. Cagle

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