

The Hungry Spirit...Tempted

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

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Boundaries. Like it or not we all have them, those limits to what we can and cannot do, or, should I say, those limits to what we should and should not do. And we're all tempted from time to time to transgress our boundaries.

The Russian novelist Dostoevsky captured that temptation powerfully in his novel *Crime and Punishment*. The protagonist, a young intellectual named Raskolnikov, was extremely poor and had to drop out of the university. He placed all human beings into one of two categories, the ordinary and the extraordinary. Despite his own destitution, he saw himself as one of the extraordinary human beings. The miserly, unscrupulous pawnbroker who lived near him, on the other hand, was only ordinary. Raskolnikov believed that since he was an extraordinary human being he was justified in executing what others considered a despicable act—the murder of the pawnbroker. An extraordinary human being, he believed, could transgress ordinary boundaries, if the transgression led to a greater good. And the old pawnbroker, why everyone hated her anyway.

Raskolnikov devised a plan of murder. And as often happens with such plans, it did not unfold as expected. He was in the pawnbroker's apartment when she arrived home. He was able to kill her alright and to take her money, but she was accompanied by her innocent younger sister. Raskolnikov could not leave an eyewitness, so he murdered both.

Raskolnikov became paranoid. He imagined that every person he saw on the streets suspected him of the murders. He was tormented by what he did, and eventually lost his sanity.

He was tempted. He transgressed his boundaries. And he suffered the consequences.

It is the story of humanity, going all the way back to the earliest pages of the Bible. The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is a

goldmine for interpreters of the Bible and for interpreters of human nature. Adam and Eve are an archetype, a paradigm of your life and mine. They are a mirror reflecting the reality of the human condition. What does it mean to be human? Look at Adam and Eve. They tell our story. Foolish are we, if we fail to learn from them.

God placed Adam—actually it is the Hebrew word *adam*, meaning “humankind”—in the Garden of Eden. According to this ancient story, God gave Adam and Eve three instructions (*Interpretation*, “Genesis,” Brueggemann, p. 46). First, God gave them a *vocation*. Their job was to “till and keep” the garden. They were gardeners. Their job was to enhance the beauty and productivity of the Garden of Eden. Second, God gave them *permission*. “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden,” God told them. Everything was good and was to be enjoyed. And then third, God gave them a *prohibition*. “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but 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.” The text tells us nothing about the tree of knowledge. It is mentioned nowhere else in scripture. You see, the tree itself is unimportant. What is important is the prohibition. Adam and Eve were given a boundary.

Vocation. Permission. And prohibition. Life is about balancing these three instructions from God. This garden in which we live, this garden we’ve named earth, is an act of utter graciousness. We didn’t create it. We don’t sustain it. It is God’s gift to us, pure graciousness. And if we will look closely at the trees in our garden, they will tell us something about this gift from God. It has restrictions. It has boundaries that we dare not cross. We might wish for a garden with no dangerous trees, no boundaries, but that is not what we were given.

Enter temptation. In the form of a crafty serpent. I don’t know which came first, our dislike of snakes or this text. But as far as I’m concerned, the biblical writers could not have chosen a more appropriate creature to be the Tempter. Notice what happens in Genesis 3. For the first time God is treated as a third person, the one talked about. These are not words spoken *with* God. This is not directed *to* God. God is talked *about*. Listen to the subtle distortion in the crafty serpent’s question to Eve, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

That's not what God said, is it? The serpent was a master of spin, we would say today. God gave permission, remember? "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden." Everything was good and to be enjoyed, except the one tree. So Eve—meaning the "mother of all living"—corrected the serpent. But it was too late. Do you see what the serpent has done? The serpent awakened Eve to the possibility of a way other than God's way. There was a way to live other than obedience to the Creator of the garden.

"You will not die," the serpent told Eve, leading her further down that road. Besides, the serpent continued, God's holding out on you. You see, if you eat from that tree, God knows that you will become like God.

Suddenly God is no longer Adam and Eve's partner and provider. God is a barrier, and somehow they must get around that boundary. I don't think the text itself can be improved upon. So let me read to you what happened next:

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, and he ate.

And here's the outcome. Don't miss this:

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Adam and Eve were exposed. They were found outside the boundaries set by the gracious Creator of the garden, as if a spotlight shined upon them alone. Shame was stacked upon shame such that it could not be covered. The prohibition was violated. The permission was abused. And the vocation, tilling and keeping the garden, soon will become arduous, backbreaking labor.

Like Raskolnikov, they were tempted. They transgressed the boundaries. And they suffered the consequences.

Adam and Eve live on the printed page what you and I and every other human being face: the temptation to live outside the boundaries of our

gracious Creator. We may wish we lived in a different kind of garden, a garden without this kind of tree, but this is the kind of garden we're given. There are boundaries, and foolish are we, if we fail to learn from Adam and Eve.

Imagine what a powerful experience it would be if we all had the courage and honesty to tell of our own willful disregard for God's boundaries? Imagine a service where a man stands in the back and with tears tells the congregation of his years given to violent anger. I beat my own wife and hurt my own children, he might say. I hated blacks and others who were different from me. I'm so ashamed.

Or imagine a woman standing and with a breaking voice telling of her unfaithfulness. I thought it was an innocent conversation, she might say. But it didn't end there. I lost my husband, my children. I lost my honor.

Imagine if we all could do that and be released from the shame. But we will not because we are afraid. We're too afraid to be that honest. You see, the truth is that we're all tempted. We all transgress the boundaries. We all suffer the consequences. And we're all left with a hungry spirit. That is why we need the season of Lent. This is a time for raw honesty and confession. Even if we can't muster the courage to stand and tell the world, at least we must be honest with ourselves and with God. And we can trust that the One who was gracious enough to give us this garden will be graciousness enough to forgive us and cleans us of all unrighteousness. Thanks be to God!

Closing Prayer

Creator God, come to each of us in our gardens. See us as we are. Forgive us and free us from the shame that clings to us like a poisonous vine. O God, for those who need it desperately, do a miracle of forgiveness. Amen.