

Galatians 4:4–7 (NRSV)

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

All in the Family

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: January 4, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Galatians 4:4-7

Brian Hehir is fond of saying that original sin is the one doctrine of the church for which we have empirical evidence. He doesn't mean that we have evidence that the story of Adam and Eve and the apple in the Garden of Eden is historical. It may be, but we don't have empirical evidence for that. But what he does mean is that the basic truth of the story is unquestionable. He means that it is perfectly obvious that God and humanity are alienated from one another. The wrenching sorrows of our world testify to the truth that we live far from the gentle confines of Eden. Made in the image of God, we cannot help but admit that the image has faded; its luster has dimmed.

There is an irony to the story. In a way the creation story may contain the very seed of our downfall. We were made in the image of God, but even in the beginning God was far away. In Eden we were children in the park. Our needs were fully met. All we needed to do was obey and all would be well.

From the beginning, like all children I guess, we resisted our status. The snake seems to have understood us better than God. Or maybe the snake, being the snake, aimed to take advantage of a flaw in the system that God hoped we wouldn't discover. In our very nature was the desire to grow up, as the snake says, "To be like God." We wanted to be wise. We wanted agency. We wanted control. In the Garden we felt infantilized, and we wanted to grow up.

The trouble was we were never made fully in the image of God. We had potential, to be sure, but we were not infinite like God. We desired things that were beyond us. We wanted to know good and evil, but it turns out that the knowledge of good and evil was beyond us. Oh yes, we came to think we knew the difference. We still think that. But in truth, our vision is clouded at best. And in the name of good we do much evil to one another. We don't understand as much as we think we do. Made in the image of God we were like a photograph. You could see the resemblance, but in the end we were but a two-dimensional facsimile.

Well, all of this led to a real mess. God had hoped that he could create us, give us a nice place to live and plenty to eat, and that we would do as we were told, and everything would be alright. But we wanted more. And we couldn't handle it. We just didn't have it in us.

Within the very next chapter of our history we committed the first murder. Things quickly spun out of control, and but a few chapters later, God drowned the lot of us, except for Noah and the passengers on the ark. God started over again with people he thought he could trust, Noah and his family. But again within a few chapters we were getting too big for our britches. We started building a tower in Babel, and God found it necessary to frustrate our endeavors another time. God mixed up our language so we couldn't understand one another and devise evil deeds together.

This back and forth became trend. God would try another idea—sometimes a covenant, sometimes a punishment, sometimes a promise—but no matter what it kept ending up the same way. According to the story God figured the only thing to do was to try to rein us in completely. God would take us into the desert for forty years of training and give us the Ten Commandments

and a million other rules to follow. God would set up an intricate system of rewards and punishments, blessings and curses to motivate our compliance. But you know it worked out. God grew ever more bald from pulling the hair out of his head. No matter what, the fundamental flaw remained. We wanted to be like God, but we were simply incapable of it. Like Brian Hehir says, the evidence for Original Sin was as clear as day.

I suppose every religion has a way to explain the human condition. And most of them have a way to address the human condition, too. For every religion must deal with the gulf between us and God, or the gulf between our aspirations and our reality.

One Christian version goes something like this. The world is imperfect and alienated from God. Some religions reject the world because of this imperfection. But in the Bible, God's creation is both imperfect and good. As frustrated as God gets with the world, destroying it or utterly disparaging it is simply not an option. God almost destroyed it once and promised never to do that again. God simply won't back away from those first moments of creation when he saw each day as he created it and declared that it was good. Nonetheless, trying to manage the world from afar just wasn't working for God.

Finally God came to the conclusion that being an absentee landlord would never work. Now, we may assume that God, unlike other absentee landlords, could keep close enough track of his property. But the real problem was that God didn't really know what it was like to be human. To be sure, this sounds odd. How could God who knows everything not know what it's like to be human? Well, the answer is blindingly simple. God never lived with human limitations. God was infinite and simply couldn't grasp our limits. God had no idea what it felt like to live as flawed and imperfect human beings. That's probably why God was so frustrated all the time. God kept saying to himself, "Look, I've given you the rules. I've showed you what to do. I've told you everything you need to know, and still you don't get it right." And out would go another handful of hair.

Finally God came to two related conclusions. If he was ever going to know, really know, what it meant to be a human being, he would have to become one himself. And second, God realized that to really love his creation he would have to become a part of it. He would have move in, become part of the family.

So, as Paul says in this morning's scripture reading, "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law" to be one of us. This was a big deal, and trying to describe it was very difficult. It occupied the early Christian church for a long time and through many councils and controversies. The early church understood that what they were trying to describe was the bridging of the gulf between heaven and earth. They needed to bridge the gulf between heaven and earth while maintaining the full character of both of them. All of this came to a head when they tried to say who Jesus was. They said he was both human and divine. But then it got complicated. Was he half human and half divine? Was he human on earth and divine in heaven? Was he divine when he did nice things like healing the sick, but human when he angrily chased the money changers out of the Temple?

Finally they said that Jesus was fully divine and fully human—100% both, inseparably, all the time. Now, if you have a hard time conceptualizing what that means, then you're being honest with yourself. This formulation of the nature of Jesus, which was adopted at the Council at Chalcedon over 1500 years ago and remains a central Christian belief, is impossible to conceptualize. As Hamlet says, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." There are truths beyond our logic, mysteries beyond our math,

and subtleties beyond our science. And this is one of them. Jesus was fully divine and fully human simultaneously.

But let me assure you, this is no dusty, ancient or archaic formulation. It's not just some doctrine devised by a committee. It is the lifeblood of our faith. For Jesus, fully divine and fully human, is one of us. Before Jesus it was God the balding monarch. But now it became God the father. But even the parental relationship became intimate. Paul uses the word that Jesus himself prays in the Lord's Prayer: Abba. The formal word used almost everywhere is father. But here Paul and Jesus use Abba. We might translate it Poppa, Dad. It's intimate. It's no longer the stern, distant monarch.

And not only that, God's role in the family became extended beyond parent. In Jesus we gained a brother. Paul says, "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts." In the incarnation, in Christmas, in Emmanuel (God with us), we gain a brother, a sibling. But there's even more. When God became part of the family we, too, were transformed. The Spirit of Jesus was placed in our hearts, says Paul.

Before then we were fully separate and alienated from God. But now, in the moment of Jesus' birth, the distance collapses. God is within us. God is part of us. The photograph, the image God made us in, has become three-dimensional.

It worked the other way, too. We came to be in God. God must have gotten quite a jolt when he first experienced human limitation and sorrow. In Gethsemane and on the cross, we see the result. We encounter God crying out in anguish, God crying out to God, God feeling utterly abandoned and alone. God came to know the pain of our limitations firsthand. There's nothing like raw experience to teach something new, even if you're God. In Jesus God's love for us took on flesh. God now experienced empathy for us. God experienced our condition first hand.

But there's more. The Spirit of Jesus has been placed in our hearts. God is within us. Because of that we know the desires, the hopes and the love of God. From the beginning God loved us. But felt it most poignantly when God became one of us. And when God became one of us, God's Spirit was also placed in our hearts.

Finally God had relented, as it were. Finally God recognized that our desire to be like him and know good and evil, that desire we expressed way back in the garden, finally God understood that our desire was good and right. There was more to our desire than our striving egos. There was something in us that longed for the heart of the divine. And so, now, it is lodged in us in the Spirit of Jesus resides in our hearts.

Of course, the story doesn't have a neat, uncomplicated ending. For much like Chalcedon's formulation would say it, the human and divine are both in us, fully and inseparably. Our lives and condition remains complicated. But there are some things we can never again doubt. The first is that God loves us so much that he became one of us. So now God is with us and in us; always near, always present. The second is that when God's Spirit was placed in our hearts there came with it God's deep and abiding love for his creation. Made like God, with God in us, now we may love like God. We still struggle with life. We are still fully human even as we are fully encompassed by God. But the original alienation is healed. Now, when we listen well to the beat of our hearts, now, we experience God's love for all of God's creatures flow within us and animate our very being. We experience in our hearts that we are all family, all of the same flesh, all of the same Spirit. Amen.