

The Grace of Limits
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11
The First Sunday in Lent, (Feb. 26) 2023
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But they could have lived with that.

They could have had a great life.

They could have been immortal.

They could have stayed in the garden forever!

But No!

That was not enough for them. They had to do the one thing God said not to do. They couldn't trust God and obey God. They could not live on God's terms – they decided to live on their own terms. As a result, God made a pronouncement on them, "*You are dust and to dust you shall return.*" We have inherited that pronouncement from them, along with the inability to live on God's terms – and our lives are frantic and full and bloodshot and burned-out from over-reaching and trying to become something more than God intended.

We do not want bad things, that is not our temptation. We just can't quit from trying to be more and do more good things.

Listen to Judith Viorst in her poem from her book How Did I Get To Be Forty, and Other Atrocities:

*I've finished six pillows in Needlepoint,
And I'm reading Jane Austen and Kant,*

*And I'm up to the pork with black beans in Advanced Chinese
Cooking.*

I don't have to struggle to find myself

For I already know what I want

I want to be healthy and wise and extremely good-looking,

I'm learning new glazes in Pottery Class,

And I'm playing new chords in Guitar,

And in Yoga I'm starting to master the Lotus position.

I don't have to ponder priorities

For I already know what they are:

To be good-looking, healthy and wise,

And adored in addition.

I'm improving my serve with a tennis pro,

And I'm practicing verb forms in Greek,

And in Primal Scream Therapy all my frustrations are vented.

I don't have to ask what I'm searching for

Since I already know that I seek

To be good looking, healthy, and wise,

And adored.

And contented.

I've bloomed in Organic Gardening.

And in Dance I have tightened my thighs,

And in Consciousness Raising there's no one around who can top me.

And I'm working all day and I'm working all night
To be good-looking, healthy, and wise.
And adored.
And contented.
And well-read.
And a marvelous hostess,
Fantastic in bed,
And bilingual,
Athletic,
Artistic...
Won't someone please stop me?

Can you identify with her? For centuries, theologians have said that the sin of Adam and Eve was pride. And although I agree with that, I might have a little different emphasis. I think Adam and Eve could not live within the limits God gave them. They did not know how to stop until God intervened and said, “This has to stop!”

Remember, God gave them a calling -- to till and keep the garden. And before their sin they knew the pleasure of working together and working with God. To put it in Wendell Berry's words – “*They knew their work, they knew how to work, and they knew each other.*” God also gave them great freedom and a boundary – a line not to cross – the eating of that one solitary tree. And within that good and safe place (as long as they stayed away from that one tree) there was joy and goodness.

Now I think what was true in this old story is still true: God calls us and gives us freedom and gives us boundaries (God's terms) – and as long as we hold these together life is good. It may be hard, but it will be good.

Over the years, Wendell Berry has written extensively on learning to live within boundaries and discovering great freedom and joy once we come to terms with those boundaries. Primarily he has written about learning to live on and take care of a particular piece of land instead of looking over the fence at someone else's land. America has a long history of farming a piece of land until it is ruined and then moving on to another piece and repeating the process. But there is great joy and satisfaction of living within one's boundaries of land and over time, helping heal the land and helping it to flourish.

As a writer and poet, Berry has also learned that if one is going to write poetry, then the poet must accept the form and the limits of poetry. For example, there are lyrical poems, limericks, epic, sonnets, villanelle, elegy, haiku, free verse, and others. Each style or form has certain rules for writing. Each form has a particular purpose. Limericks are short and usually humorous. An elegy, on the other hand, is usually serious, and expresses grief. To know the proper form is to know the best expression. You don't grieve over the death of friend in a limerick.

Finally, Berry often has written about the boundary of marriage and learning to love within the covenant of marriage. Coming to terms with the covenant or form of marriage, helps deepen a married couple's love.

I would add that the covenant of baptism does the same thing. Baptism is making vows to God and to God's people and as we learn to live within those vows, we come to discover the deep richness and joy God intends for us.

Overall it is very simple: God wants us to live and work with God and each other and enjoy this creation. And as long as we live on these terms – God’s terms, God’s limits, we will know laughter and joy, good relationships and the satisfaction of doing God’s work, well. God just wants to be human. That is all. Be human as God intended, and part of that means living within the limits of being human.

We keep trying to be God. Or to be super-human. Or to be on our own. Without boundaries. Without limits. We don’t need no stinking limits. We don’t want to answer to anyone. And we certainly do not want anyone telling us which tree we can eat from.

If God or religion or morality or ethics or just plain good sense says, “Be careful.” Or “If you keep going the direction you’re going it’ll come back and bite you.” Or “If you keep burning these greenhouse gases they will change the climate.” Or “Don’t touch that hot stove...” We pay that advice no mind and do our own thing. “I’m telling you, don’t eat of that one tree...”

Years ago, we were over at Joe and Barbara’s house sitting on the deck, when Emily was about 8 and Callie was about 5 and Mollie and Grace were there and I think Katie was too. All of them came running up and asked if they could pet Joe and Barbara’s cat. Now, this particular cat didn’t care for people, especially little people chasing it around. And both Joe and Barbara said, “Don’t pet the cat. It’ll scratch you. It doesn’t like to be held or petted.” Well, about five minutes later from inside the house, we all heard the cat screech, there was a brief pause, and we heard a child cry. Joe looked at the rest of us and said, “I told them the cat would scratch.”

Well, these old stories in Genesis are like that. It's not so much God punishing us as much as God telling us what will happen if we try to pet the cat, if we eat the fruit, if we keep on doing things our own way without any sense of our limitations, without any sense of who God is, who we are, and who we are not.

Bill Coffin used to say, "We are not so much punished for our sins as by our sins." God says, "Here are the consequences: Life is going to be hard, full of pain, and grief. I've created you to be mutual companions but now, one of the consequences of this chaos and sin is that women will be subjugated to men." (Do you hear this? Male domination is the result of human sin. Not God ordained. Not God's original plan. Not God's will.) "Furthermore, the good earth from which you were made, and with which you were in relationship, now you will be disconnected from it. Instead of caring and tending the earth, you will exploit and destroy it. Finally, you will have to leave the garden. Our sacred covenant is broken. Our sacred place of community is destroyed. You've unleashed chaos, disconnection, fear, and rebellion, now you have to live in it" (3:14-24). "You wanted to live without limits, well, go to it."

The story goes on in Genesis. Over in chapter 11, we're on the plain of Shinar and decide to make a name for ourselves (v. 4). We build a tower, construct great cities, drill oil wells down through miles of ocean, drive automobiles, burn gas, drill more wells, dig for coal, burn coal, remove mountain-tops to dig more coal, melt the ice caps, warm the globe, change the weather, de-create what God created, find other ways to burn, dig, drill, manufacture, exploit, split the atom, go into space, go to war to make sure we have enough gas for the cars we drive, go to war so our children can kill someone's else's children so we can burn more gas and drive more cars, build more highways to handle the number of cars we drive, go

into debt to pay for our cars and our homes and our electric bills, work two jobs to pay our debts, work two and half jobs to pay our debts, get banks and Wall Street to make money on our debts, because the name of the game is growth – grow the economy, grow the business, grow the city, grow the church, grow the waist-line, grow the cancer. Get big or get out. Plow from fencerow to fencerow. Plow up the fencerows and tear down the fences, force our neighbors off their land so we can plow their land, send them into the cities looking for jobs, sell our subsidized corn cheaper than farmers in Central America can sell theirs which makes them lose their farms, so they come north looking for work to feed their families. All because of growth. All because we don't believe in limits. All because we don't want anyone telling us what we can do or not do.

Now our gospel story says Jesus was tempted, as well. In fact, Jesus was tempted in the same way Adam and Eve were – tempted to be superman, tempted to be God. Ironic, don't you think?

Adam could not stay within the limits of being the human God called him to be, and in turn, gave us a curse. Jesus stayed within the limits of being human and gave us a blessing. One trespassed; the other stayed put. One tried to be God; one was content to remain a human being. One wanted to live on his own terms; one was modest enough to live on God's terms.

Part of the irony is that the one who tried to be God did very badly as a human being while the one who was content to be human became known as the Son of God.

The Apostle Paul says that the good news is that because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ we are freed from the endless cycle of repeating

Adam's sin. We are free in Christ to live life on God's terms.

Many years ago, I went to see Dude Templeton in the hospital. She was a remarkable woman, never dull, and I have talked about her several times over the years. I had been her young pastor but had left that little country church three or four years before. I heard she was sick and since I was driving through, I wanted to go by and see her. She was almost 90, was the mother of ten children, was the cornerstone of that little church, and one of the finest cooks I've ever known. She believed it was her duty to train young adults in church about church potlucks. She said, "You cook your very best because it is for the Lord. And you cook a lot because it is for the church." That little church had long had legendary potlucks because of her leadership and her cooking. Men would line up six or seven deep in front of "Big Mama's" cobblers or biscuits or fried chicken, as everyone except me called her.

Well, Big Mama, or Dude, or Ms. Templeton, as I called her was no longer big. She had lost a lot of weight and was not doing well. She was going down. She was weak and tired though she smiled when I came in and I held her hand, twisted and gnarled by arthritis. She didn't have her old laugh and she told me she was ready to go. Death did not scare her although she was concerned about her family and friends and did not want them to grieve over her passing. She said, "I'm 89 years-old and most of my friends have gone on ahead of me. Mr. Templeton passed on thirty years ago and I'm ready. I've made peace with God and with everyone else I can think of. My house and belongings are in the hands of the kids and there's nothing I want or need. I'm ready for the Lord if the Lord is ready for me."

As I walked out into the hall, the young doctor was coming in, “We’re giving her some medication that will help get her appetite back and get her back on her feet.” I thought to myself, “She doesn’t want to get back on her feet. She’s ready to go.” But being young myself, I didn’t say anything.

Ms. Templeton had lived a long and good life, a modest life, and had long ago come to terms with the life she had been given. It was a good life, and she was grateful.

It was grace.

May it be so with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.