

Welcome

Q&A: What's the worst sin?

There're a lot of ways to answer that question, but the early church leaders had a specific answer: Pride. When we put ourselves at the center and expect everything to revolve around us, when our needs, wants and desires come first, we sow the seeds of destruction.

Today, we're going to celebrate what happens when we put God in the center of our lives. It's counterintuitive, but this leads us to real flourishing.

Message

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is probably my favorite season in the Church year because it's a season of transformation. In Epiphany, we asked who God is and saw that God is the one who lives in solidarity with us, calling and equipping us to be God's images in the world.

Lent is the chance for us to prepare for that calling. It's a way for us to take time together to look inside ourselves and do some careful introspection, to ask as a community where we are not prepared to embark on God's call together.

This year, our series is called "God is Not..." This is a technique to know God that originated with the theologian Thomas Aquinas. In his masterwork *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas wrote,

"We cannot know what God is, only what [God] is not. We must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist rather than the ways in which [God] does." — Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*

That sounds strange, I know, but it's Aquinas' attempt to take seriously the command not to create idols of God. God is infinite and beyond our comprehension - what theologians like Aquinas call a mystery. But we constantly create pictures of God - pictures that are false. Pictures that do more harm than good.

Like Michelangelo carving the David, we're carving away the things God is not as a way to see more clearly the divine mystery that is God. As we see what God is not, we are more clearly able to confess our participation in those things and turn from them.

On Ash Wednesday, we...

Today we face one of the most basic and difficult truths of faith: God is not you.

And, more to the point, you are not God.

There's a level where this is a no-duh statement for most of us. We're not the all-powerful creator of the universe.

Turn with us to [Genesis 2](#)

But I want to take you into [Genesis 2](#). Because this story gives us a very different perspective on what it means to 'play god'.

Genesis two is the second creation story in the Bible. The first is the poem that sees God create the world in seven days, imagining creation as a cosmic temple. This story is a lot more earthy (pun intended). This story imagines God as a potter, shaping humanity out of dirt. This is one of my favorite passages in the whole Bible so I'm going to work hard not to get into the weeds with you.

The purpose of creation stories is to help us understand who we are. What is a human in relation to God? To other humans? To the world in which we live? [Genesis 2](#) answers those questions, and today I want to attend specifically to our relationship with God:

Then the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground. He breathed the breath of life into the man's nostrils, and the man became a living person. -- Genesis 2:7-9 (NLT)

Then the Lord God planted a garden in Eden in the east, and there he placed the man he had made. The Lord God made all sorts of trees grow up from the ground—trees that were beautiful and that produced delicious fruit. In the middle of the garden he placed the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

I hope you heard the echoes of our last series there. God scoops some dirt together and makes a human, and breaths God's own spirit (breath) into us. From the beginning, we're a fusion of earth and heaven, of flesh and spirit. God places us in a garden with two trees - one that grants immortality and one that grants autonomy. And God has a specific vision for us, a tree God *created us to choose*:

The Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it. But the Lord God warned him, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die." -- Genesis 2:15-17(NLT)

Hear that? God created us to live forever. God *wants* us to live forever, in relationship with God. In God's world, on God's terms. God - the one who made us - knows what path leads to life.

After God places the human in Eden, God sees we are alone, so God pulls us in two. (If you know this story, you're probably thinking, 'Wait, wasn't there a rib involved?' Well, no. The Hebrew word actually means 'side' - it was the King James that translated the word as 'rib' and the translation stuck. The image is actually of God pulling the human into two, making two from one.) So by the time we get to this next bit, we have two humans, living in God's garden. Two partners, allies, created to live in God's world on God's terms.

Our calling is to 'tend and keep' - to cultivate and care for God's world, in partnership with God. Then that pesky snake shows up:

The serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the Lord God had made. One day he asked the woman, “Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?”

“Of course we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,” the woman replied. “It’s only the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God said, ‘You must not eat it or even touch it; if you do, you will die.’ ”

“You won’t die!” the serpent replied to the woman. “God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil.”

The woman was convinced. She saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. -- Genesis 3:1–7 (NLT)

Again, so much happens in this exchange, but the heart of it all is that the woman wants to be like God - ‘knowing good and evil’, which is the Hebrew way of saying, ‘Calling the shots.’ Deciding what’s good and bad.

The woman doesn’t see that she has another path to godlikeness - eternal life. God put a choice before us - eternal life or autonomy. Both are ‘like God’. But only one brings true flourishing - eternal life. Choosing to live with God in God’s world on God’s terms, trusting that the one who created us knows the path to flourishing.

Instead, the man and woman decide to be their own gods, and immediately consequence sets in: whereas before they were fully present to each other and unashamed, now they feel separation. Shame. Already, the weight of sin has begun to erode the beautiful world God created.

MUSIC BREAK?

It’s not hard to look around today and see how far we’ve taken this original sin. Nothing is more sacred in our culture than the individual. Individual freedoms have become an idol upon which we’ll sacrifice our neighbors, our families, our children. No price is too high so long as our individual freedoms (which to be clear means ‘the ability to do whatever I want’) remain intact.

But [Genesis 2](#) warned us this is the path of sin, of destruction and death. It’s hard to imagine anything that could have illustrated this more clearly than the last two years of pandemic, with our national death toll approaching one million citizens. (Flu deaths over a high two-year period, 2017-19, totaled 90,000).

Our commitment to individualism is literally killing us.

In the preface to the newly released third edition of her autobiography, professor and civil rights leader Angela Davis opens by lamenting that, “**Today, as we witness the perilous repercussions of neoliberal individualism, I am more convinced than ever that we need to engage in relentless**

critique of our centering of the individual. As was the case fifty years ago, I believe that if we fail to emphasize how our lives are precisely produced at the many junctions of the social and the individual, we fundamentally distort the ways we live and struggle in community with one another and with our nonhuman companions on this planet.” — Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography, 3rd ed.*

Dr. Davis insists that we are not our own. We belong to one another and to the earth. I would add that we belong to God, and if we refuse to see that, then we are committing the same original sin of pride we see in [Genesis 3](#).

How do we resist individualism? It begins with an acknowledgement - simple but not easy: I am not the center of the universe. The world does not revolve around me. My comfort and freedom are not the most important thing.

That’s hard to think, isn’t it? It’s hard to *confess*, isn’t it? (Confessing, by the way, means ‘agreeing’. When we confess, we’re agreeing with God that God’s way is right and true.)

Admitting this opens a space for us to ask how others matter. And herein is a key:

Love enables us to put the Other first.

Most parents don’t struggle to put your children first. Even though having a child significantly curtails your personal freedoms. Why not? Why do we so readily trade our personal liberties for our kids? Because we love them.

The same is true of romance. Long-term relationships require real sacrifice. We call marriage a ‘ball and chain’ - an ugly name for a beautiful sacrifice. When we *love* another person, we’ll happily lay down many of our rights to be in relationship with the other person.

What God calls us to is expanding our capacity to love to the world around us. Can we give ourselves in love to the culture in which we live? To our political opponents? To those of a different faith or no faith? To the irksome coworker or micro-managing boss?

Can we imagine that *our* good is more important than *my* good?

How does our world change when Jesus people are no longer leading the crusade for ‘my rights’ and instead campaign for ‘our collective good’?

Friends, we are not God. God is not me. God is not you. Neither of us has the wisdom to know what is truly good and right for ourselves, let alone for all humanity and for our world. Let us begin our Lenten journey toward the Cross by admitting that together, and by asking God to show us the way to life.

Communion + Examen

Jesus invites us to set down our individual rights for a seat at his table with our community.

When in the last week have I been more concerned about others' good than my own?

When have I been more concerned with my own rights and freedoms?

How might I be tempted in the weeks ahead to prioritize my own wants and desires above others?

How is God inviting me to grow in my love for others during Lent?

Assignment + Blessing