



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

Lessons From the Garden

Sermon by Pr. John Strommen

on Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17, 3:1-8 (Luke 11:4)

on Sunday, September 13, 2020 (15th Sunday of Pentecost)

We learn in this memorable lesson that we are made from “Adamah,” which means dirt, dust. We are from the earth - an animal, a creature. The name Adam is taken from this root word.

My friend, Dusty Feller, was reminded of this daily on a church mission trip to East Africa. Our Tanzanian hosts were learning Dusty’s name, but they never quite got it right. You see, in Swahili, there is no word for the name, “Dusty,” but there is for the word “dust.” The Swahili word for dust is, “vumbi,” so they inevitably would call Dusty either “Dust” or “Vumbi.”

“What are you doing now, Dust?” “Vumbi, what do you want to eat?”

Vumbi, dust. There has never been a more appropriate name for a human person, for that is what we are. As such, we have bodies and five senses with which to experience an exhilarating world around us. What a gift it is!

And yet, as dust, how vulnerable we are. We are mortal. As Genesis reminds us, “from dust we came and to dust we will return.” When we see what the fires in California can do as they rage out of control, we are mindful that the ash that remains is what is left from what was previously living. Trees, grass, flowers, animals. Fire doesn’t distinguish.

And, of course, there is the pandemic we find ourselves in, where we live with a horrific death toll that keeps mounting. Our nemesis is a virus we cannot see with the naked eye. It’s all too easy at a time like this to take the old Kansas song to heart with its memorable refrain, “all we are is dust in the wind.” Vumbi!

But when we read Genesis, we learn something else. Dust is not *all* that we are, for we are dust joined together with the breath, or Word, of God. In the first chapter of Genesis, in fact, it says we as humans are made in the image of God. So, we are not only

dust animated by the breath of God. We are formed in the image of God. And as *godlike* beings, we can reflect on the nature of things, the meaning of life; we can create symphonies and skyscrapers; we can choose good or evil, subjugate others to our will or empower them to live fully.

Is it any wonder we're sometimes confused about who we are as human beings? These are two very different things, aren't they – dust and God-likeness? I mean, an objective observer could say, "Well, which one is it? If you're made out of dirt, you're certainly not made in the image of God." And vice versa.

Yet, we are both. God created us that we might have the best of both worlds: to be a part of creation as grateful participant, and to have a personal relationship with God who calls us into meaningful work. And both of these characterizations of what it means to be human *are all about a relationship...a relationship with God.*

Here's what I mean: as grateful participant in creation, we are invited by Genesis to trust that God *will* provide for us as surely as God gave a lavish garden to Adam and Eve! So, we delight in things that grow, good food, the wind on our face, the glory of sound and music, the brilliance of sunsets and mountain ranges, the different kinds of love we experience. And we know that these were given to us as gifts from a loving and benevolent creator. "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden," said God (save for one tree, of course). But the message is clear: enjoy creation and being human. It is a lavish and beautiful garden that will sustain your lives and give you pleasure. So, as people who believe in a gracious God, we are thankful, we are grateful, and this story tells us to trust that, out of God's abundance, God will continue to provide for us; to trust that God will continue to breathe life into us as God's love meets us in our daily existence.

But within the gift of creation, we have a role to play, a purpose. God created us to "till and keep" the garden. So, made in the image of God means we are managers on earth of the gift of creation, curators of life writ large! Managers and curators for God, the owner.

What do you think? Are we good curators of God's rich tapestry of life? Or do we sometimes treat our planet like a supermarket from which we extract whatever we want? A garden is not a supermarket and demands TLC. This brings us to the difference between tilling and keeping, and raises the question of whose garden is this anyway?

Interesting image, tilling and keeping. “Tilling” is all about maximizing the earth’s potential to grow food, or to provide whatever we want or need. “Keeping” suggests making sure the earth and all its living things are kept healthy. In other words, there are limits built in here that we humans are obliged to honor. But we are prone to overreach. When does the tilling part overwhelm the *keeping* part (preservation)? Preservation – keeping - always has an eye on the bigger picture: honoring God’s purpose for all of life to thrive! But when we overreach, and over-till God’s garden, we may be thinking more of our own purposes and profits. If we don’t till *and keep* as we have been asked to do, the earth may not be able to sustain us and God’s will has been thwarted. At least temporarily.

For instance, when the breadbasket of the world was over-cultivated in the years leading up to the great depression, the breadbasket turned to the dust bowl. When chemicals and fertilizers are overused today in farming, the run-off threatens the ecosystems around it - all the way to the sea. When deforestation and overgrazing happen on our watch, the same line is crossed. I’m not saying it’s always easy to determine, but it clearly is the case that over-tilling – overreaching - can conflict with “keeping” the garden we call creation.

But it goes beyond agriculture, doesn’t it? When we fail to manage our anger at someone, and we over-cultivate it, we may cross a line and intentionally hurt them. When we covet someone, and we cultivate that, our desire may cross a line to have that person. And it happens in politics and elsewhere that we might cultivate a story that exceeds or contradicts what is true, all because we have our own objectives that we want to protect. And yet, God put us in the garden to protect God’s purposes and objectives, not our own.

The story of the forbidden fruit in our text today is all about the failure to recognize limits, and what it means to “keep” God’s garden. It happens when we misinterpret what it means to be made in the image of God. You see, to be *like God* is not the same as *to be God*. And make no mistake: when our two symbolic forebears, Adam and Eve, chose to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were not seeking knowledge, they were seeking independence. Independence from God. They were moving from a *God-centered world* where they as humans had their proper place, to a *human centered world*, where their own designs and wants were at the center and God was moved to the periphery.

But notice what happens after they eat of this fruit: they are filled with self-consciousness and shame. The trust they had in God has been breached, so they run and hide from God. And we've been running and hiding ever since.

Apart from a relationship with the breath of God, we are just dirt, dust. Without God at the center of things who orders all of life to thrive in complimentary ways, we devolve into competing worlds where each of us are at the center. Currently we see this played out in tragic ways as our country wrestles with tribalism in many ways, pitting my tribe against your tribe. My agenda over yours. It's a win/lose scenario. It's a consequence of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We can be our own gods if we choose, but what a mess it is when that happens!

And so, we have pandemics to face – biological and moral – and largely of our making. Viruses that spin out of control partly because we can't work together. Global temperatures that threaten to return us to dust are a byproduct of overreaching with energy sourcing. Gross inequity of the produce within the garden is a result of competing worlds, not a cooperating or sharing world. Demonizing groups of people or placing them at a disadvantage, while falsely propping up one's own is yet another moral pandemic.

Yet despite all this gloom and doom, we have every reason for optimism! We all know that Adam and Eve got kicked out of the garden and into a hard life, consequences of their rebellion. And yet God never left their side, never stopped loving them. God will never leave us either. In fact, in Jesus Christ, we are a new creation - a creation that rises up from the ashes of pandemics, moral quagmires, changing times and changing weather.

In Jesus Christ, God is at our side, reminding us that we are not just dust, but we are called to trust – trust in the breath of God that fills us with life and a future. And that's something the world needs right now: trust in God and hope in God's story. That is what we bear witness to, pandemic or not. May God give you the faith to bear witness to this hope.

Amen.