

Ancestral Fault
Romans 5:12-17
Grace Morris

This summer, Pastor Jerry began, instead of preaching traditional sermons, telling the stories of the bible from start to finish. Those of you who have been regularly tuning in, though, have probably noticed a pattern. Many of the scripture passages he's selected have not been from the stories themselves, but from other parts of the bible that describe the story's meanings to later Jews and Christians. The story my sermon today draws on is that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, but rather than reading from Genesis, today's scripture comes from Paul's letter to the Romans as he describes the significance of what happened in that Garden.

We read from Romans, chapter 5, verses 12-17, from the new translation of the New Testament by David Bentley Hart:

¹²Therefore, just as sin entered the cosmos through one man, and death through sin, so also death pervaded all humanity, whereupon all sinned; ¹³for prior to the Law there was sin in the cosmos, but when there is no law sin is not taken account of. ¹⁴Yet death reigned from Adam till Moses, even over those who did not commit sin similar to the transgression of Adam, who is a figural type of the one about to come. ¹⁵As the transgression, however, not so the grace bestowed: for if by the transgression of the one many died, so much the more did God's grace and the gift in grace of the one man Jesus the Anointed overflow to the many. ¹⁶The gift, moreover, comes not as though through one who sins; for, from one – the verdict for condemnation; from many transgressions, however – the grace bestowed for rectification. ¹⁷For if, by the one's transgression, death reigned through the one, so much more will those receiving grace's abundance and the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one Jesus the Anointed.

This is a dense chunk of text on a good day. What Paul is describing here, though, is probably familiar to many of you. This passage is a key source for what Christians later came to call the doctrine of Ancestral Fault, or more commonly known today as Original Sin. It's the belief that when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, that one sin not only resulted in their punishment, but a lasting punishment for every generation to follow. Ancestral Fault says that all humans are born inheritors of a fundamentally tainted spiritual DNA: born sinners as consequence of Adam and Eve's actions.

Now Paul makes very clear in this letter, though, that there's hope. Paul tells us that Jesus is like a second Adam – where Adam's actions resulted in the damnation of all future generations, Christ's sacrifice results in the salvation of all future generations. Sort of like two sides of a coin.

Honestly, that probably should have been the end of it. That's not what happened though, Ancestral Fault became a key element of medieval Christianity, and when the protestant reformers broke away from the Catholic church, they took Ancestral Fault with them. Our

Methodist Book of Discipline upholds that it is the natural corruption of the nature of every man descended from Adam.

And, as a quick aside before I go any deeper, I just want to say, if this whole concept of inherited sin makes you a little uncomfortable – that is okay. It makes me and many people wiser than I uncomfortable too. There's a middle ground here, we're allowed to have complicated feeling about it and still learn from its role in our Christian history. I'm here to talk about the latter, but don't be afraid to address the former as well.

I have a theory about why we still carry this with us, keep clinging to it. I think it has to do with living in a broken world. We believe Jesus lived and died to save us from sin, but the world is still so messed up. It was in the first century, in the 12th, and it is now. I suspect that this Doctrine of Ancestral Fault has persisted because it has given generations of Christians a framework to understand problems bigger than just us. Two truths can exist side-by-side:

- 1) You, as an individual, are saved by the grace of god
AND
- 2) You have inherited, and are complicit, in a broken world with evils beyond the individual.
Now what are you going to do about it?

I believe that at its best, Christianity has inspired people to fight against those great evils without becoming consumed by hopelessness.

Ancestral Fault it isn't as popular as it used to be in the church, especially in the American church of today. It just doesn't fit well with our American sense of independence and self-determinism. We're the nation of pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps – nearly unpatriotic to think we've got something out of our control holding us back!

"After all," the American Christian says, "It wasn't me who ate that apple in the garden. I don't even know anybody in the garden. Why's it got anything to do with me, then? All that garden and apple stuff – that's all ancient history now. Why should I have to apologize for something that happened generations ago? You know what I think, I think people need to stop using this as an excuse and get over it!

Sound familiar? Some of you may have a good idea where I'm going with this. If not, try replacing the words apples and sin with racism and white supremacy.

I realize those are scary words, especially today. Even saying them feels like lead in my gut. We don't always like hearing them in our safe congregations and sanctuaries. I just ask for you to hear me out.

When we create a "theology" about something, we're no longer talking about the story itself, but instead we're asking questions about that story in a boarder sense, and how it affects our lives:

"What does it mean for a people to be born in a world that is suffering, due to an ancient wound?"

“How is every new generation responsible for accepting that suffering as normal, and allowing it to continue?”

“How can an individual stand against a sin so great and vast that it has the entire world in its grip?”

“What is our responsibility as individuals to unroot this sin from our own heart?”

See, the definition of systemic racism is that it's not got anything to do with people's opinions. It's not about whether you're a nice person or not, or whether you personally trafficked in human lives. It's about recognizing there is a structure so much larger and older than any one person – a structure that tells the institutions of our world, our governments and our schools and our hospitals, that some lives are more important than others.

Medieval Christians knew, inheriting the sin of Adam wasn't a commentary on them personally, if you're nice or if you follow the law. It was always about inheritance - inheriting a broken world and responsibility for it. Not because it's our fault, but because what else can we do, but work to make things better than they were?

White Supremacy is a house that was built generations ago, on foundations laid by thousands of years of war and hatred before that. It was built for the purpose of promoting the lives of some, at the expense of others, and it was designed to be hard to see by those benefiting from it. Now, 200 years later, we are a nation of people still trapped in that house. It has, and continues, to enact unspeakable cruelty upon black and brown lives for the sake of keeping white people in power. I want to be clear though, nobody wins here. Every person who reaps the benefits of another's suffering is tainted. Even if you don't realize it, even if you grew up in a predominantly white Christian community where nobody ever talked about things like that. That's the insidiousness of this system – it keeps churning blood whether we're paying attention or not.

Like the medieval Christians who paved the way of our faith for us, we didn't ask to be born into this, but we are nonetheless responsible for seeking salvation from a sin that we inherited without our consent or knowledge, so let's ask:

“What does it mean to be born in a nation that is suffering, due to an ancient wound?”

“How has every new generation been responsible for accepting that suffering as normal, and allowing it to continue?”

“How do we stand against systems that are so deeply rooted in our nation's institutions?”

“What is our responsibility as individuals to seek to unroot this sin from our own hearts?”

There is one important difference though – biblical Ancestral Fault, the one from Adam and Eve, that was always about a brokenness between god and humanity. And so it could never have been healed by humanity alone – it could only have been healed by divine intervention. Jesus' life and death as one of us.

The sin of white supremacy, though, that's a brokenness amongst ourselves. We have the ability, and the obligation, to heal it. To do the work of dismantling corrupt systems and protecting life. It can be done, and it will ONLY be done if everyone is working on it together. If you are like me, baptized into the sin of white supremacy before I knew what it meant, then do

not let yourself take the easy paths. To ignore it, or to make a new identity of shame and self-pity. Neither of those is helpful. Instead, carry these two truths with you side by side.

- 1) We, as individuals, are deeply and wholly loved and saved by the grace of god
AND
- 2) We have inherited, and are complicit, in a broken world with evils beyond the individual.
Now what are we going to do about it?