

The Apple and the Adoption

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Union Congregational Church, North Aurora, Illinois — Christmas Eve, December 24, 2004

Galatians 4:1-6 RSV

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no better than a slave, though he is the owner of all the estate; but he is under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe. But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

John 1:1-18 RSV

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.

The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (John bore witness to him, and cried, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.'") And from his fulness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

An old English Christmas carol goes like this:

*Adam lay ybounden,
bounden in a bond,
Four thousand winter
thoughte he not too long;*

*And al was for an apple,
and apple that he took,
As clerkes finden writen,
writen in hire book*

*Ne hadde the apple taken been,
the apple taken been,
Ne hadde nevere Oure Lady
ybeen hevene Queen.*

*Blessed be the time
that apple taken was:
Therefore we mown singen
Deo Gratias.*

This old carol expresses a Medieval Catholic doctrine known as "the blessed sin." In Latin, it's called *felix culpa*, or literally, "happy fault". It refers to the sin of the garden of Eden, in which Adam and Eve

ate the forbidden fruit — traditionally called an apple. If that sin had not occurred, Christ would never have had to come to us and we would never have known the redemption that is in Jesus. As the Latin Mass has it, *O felix culpa quae talem et tantum meruit habere redemptorem* — “O happy fault which received as its reward so great and so good a redeemer.” If there’s any scriptural basis for the doctrine of “the blessed sin,” we find it in Romans 5:20, when Paul says, “But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”

Of course, this carol focuses on another Catholic idea, the picture of the Virgin Mary as the Queen of Heaven.

*Ne hadde the apple taken been,
the apple taken been,
Ne hadde nevere Oure Lady
ybeen hevene Queen.*

If the forbidden fruit had not been taken, Christ would never have come, and — what is more! — his mother would never have become the Queen of Heaven. But “blessed be the time that apple taken was,” for we can now sing *Deo gracias* — “Thanks be to God.”

As Protestants, it’s not our “thing” to dwell on the role of the Virgin Mary or to refer to her as the Queen of Heaven. We surely recognize that the humble faith of young Miriam of Nazareth, and her willing response to the angel Gabriel’s message — “Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” — these were what the Holy Spirit used to bring about the birth of the Word of God in human form. But, unlike our Catholic brethren, we don’t see that Scripture gives any role to Mary as a heavenly partner with her Son in the ongoing story of redemption.

Nevertheless, this old carol does allude to an important biblical truth. When “that apple taken was,” something changed in our human condition. The Bible looks at Adam as a glorious figure, created in the image of God — created male and female in his image, for Eve is really included in Adam. Man and woman together make up a picture of what God is like, communicating with one another in love, and exercising dominion over the earth in God’s name. They live in a garden paradise where their needs are met, where there’s no struggle to wrest the fruit of the ground from a reluctant earth, where there’s free and open communion with the Lord. But something happened to spoil this beautiful picture. Enter the tempter, the serpent. “So the Lord told you not to eat from that tree, did he, lest you die? Wrong! You won’t die. The Lord’s only trying to protect his position. ‘God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’ (Genesis 3:2-5). *Take the apple!*”

In the story of what our first ancestors did, the Bible explains what *sin* is. Sin is disobedience to God’s command. God said, “Don’t take,” but they took. Why did Adam and Eve think they could do that? Because the serpent dared them to, and they yielded. The apple was a tasty fruit, but that’s not how he enticed them — “Try it, you’ll like it.” No, he enticed them with another thought: “You will be like God” — or, in another translation, “You will be as gods.” What a concept, to be like a god! To have nobody else for a boss but your own sweet self. To have everything your own way, and not have to worry about what somebody else thinks you should do. To be at the center of your own universe, with everyone else’s needs revolving around yours. To be beholden no longer to Father, Son and Holy Spirit but only to the unholy trinity — “me, myself and I.” When we read of Adam and Eve’s taking the forbidden fruit, we can almost hear Frank Sinatra singing, “I did it my way.”

Adam was the Son of God. Scripture calls him the Son of God in Luke 3:38. The Bible expresses the relationship this way: “Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7). In Hebrew this is a play on words; the word for “man” is *‘adam*, and the word for dust or dirt is *‘adamah*. What’s the Bible telling us? We’re *human beings* because God has breathed his own life into us; otherwise we’d be nothing but

“dust,” the accidental outcome of some blind evolutionary process — which is what some folks today think we are. I read once that all the chemicals and substances that make up the human body are worth about 98 cents. (That was years ago, and I suppose with inflation we’re worth more than that now.) But when you pass your life on to another human being, that being is your child, your son or daughter. We were made to be the sons of God.

But sonship involves love and respect and obedience to your parent. Being a good daughter or son requires maintaining communication with your parent, just as Adam enjoyed the fellowship with his Creator. Our father isn’t someone we can blow off, or we’re no longer really his child. In the Bible, a father is someone people look up to — a man of respect and dignity and wisdom — and his family’s welfare depends on him. Today we have a poor understanding of what fatherhood is supposed to be. Situation comedies have made dads into buffoons. The sexual revolution has given us absentee fathers and deadbeat dads. In our culture we no longer understand how precious that relationship is between parents and children. We may find it hard to fathom what a serious matter it was when Adam and Eve disobeyed what the Lord had told them. When “that apple taken was,” a relationship of trust was broken. As a matter of ancestry and history, Adam was the son of God. But as a living relationship, Adam’s sonship evaporated. The image of God was defaced. Because man and woman listened to the tempter, they lost out on Paradise. But they also lost their exalted place as children of the heavenly Father. Because man listened to the tempter who said, “Have it your way,” he was cut off from that breath of divine life that had made him the son of God. When “that apple taken was,” we died.

In the New Testament we read about some folks who thought they could *earn* their way back into sonship of God by keeping all his rules. — by proving to him how good they could be. Jesus and his apostles understood that this way to sonship was doomed to failure, for it was just another version of the tempter’s enticement: “You will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Self-justification never brings us closer to our Father. It only puts *us* where *he* ought to be, in the center of our lives. If you’re not somebody’s child by birth, there’s only one way you can become their child: *by adoption*.

“When the time had fully come,” says Paul, “God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4). What Adam and Eve lost when they took that forbidden fruit can be restored in only one way: through Jesus Christ, whom Paul calls “the last Adam.” “The first man was from the earth,” he says, “a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. . . . Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Corinthians 15:47, 49). We bear that image when we unite with Jesus and, as his brothers and sisters, are adopted once again into the family of God.

The astounding message of Christmas is this: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (John 1:14). And the corollary is this, in the words of John’s Gospel: “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:11-12). In Christ Jesus we become what we were made to be — no longer having to fake it, but restored as fully human creatures made in the image of God.

“Blessed be the time that apple taken was” — not because the mother of Jesus became Queen of Heaven, but because the heavenly Father, in his love and his wisdom, *looked beyond the apple to the adoption*, and to the countless host of those who would be restored to fellowship with him through his grace and truth revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ. “Therefore we mown singen *Deo Gratias*” — Thanks be to God!

Shirley Anne has written a new poem that sums this up beautifully, and I will close with it.

*Before the dust of centuries dimmed our eyes
and blurred our seeing of the skies,*

*before the wonder fell away
and left us naked to the day —*

*Before the devil came and said,
“You shall live and not be dead
if you eat the fruit of sin,”
and, with his cunning, took us in —*

*Before we learned earth’s sullied ways
we knew of beauty, love and praise,
and walked with God, and saw His grace,
and talked with Him then, face to face.*

*Turn! — turn around and see
the ravages of history
when mankind chose the erring tree
and then could not get free.*

*Awake! — shake off the devil’s lies!
Pluck earth-lens from beclouded eyes.
If Jesus died to make us free
should we still walk by cursed decree?*

*Jesus summons us anew,
“Draw near as little children do.
My Kingdom reigns, heed My call,
behold the wonder of it all.”*

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