

Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent, February 26, 2023
Genesis 2: 15-17; 3:1-7

Children Need Boundaries!

My mom was a lifelong educator, first teaching children, and then teaching adults how to teach children at the Mennonite seminary in Elkhart IN. I grew up hearing her say, “Children need boundaries!” (Exclamation point! You could say it was her pet peeve!) Imagine my interest when a news story came up recently on my phone screen: “*A Child Psychologist Shares the 5 Signs You’ve Raised a ‘Highly Spoiled’ Kid—and How Parents Can Undo It.*” Here’s how it begins. “As parents, we hate seeing our kids unhappy, and giving in sometimes feels a lot easier than saying no. But constant coddling and pampering can be harmful in the long run: Parenting styles that shield children from challenging experiences reduces their opportunities to build resilience. As a child psychologist, I’ve seen spoiled kids grow up to be overindulged, selfish, unhappy and constantly dissatisfied adults.” Anybody know anyone like that? Listen to these five signs the author identifies.

1. *Not taking “no” for an answer:* Your kid expects to get things their way and usually does. In fact, they’re the ones constantly telling you “no.”
2. *Being more into receiving than giving.* Spoiled kids are unappreciative of what you do for them. Instead of saying “please” and “thank you,” their go-to word is “gimme.”
3. *Demanding things ASAP:* They don’t consider that other people may be inconvenienced by their requests, and expect you to set your priorities aside and cater to them.
4. *Only thinking about themselves:* They feel entitled and expect special favors. If another kid in class gets an MVP sticker, they get upset and say: “I deserve it more!”
5. *Never satisfied with what they have:* They’re used to having all the toys in the world, but it’s never enough. They always want more, more, more.

Which brings us to this morning’s story from Genesis. It’s set within the context of the Creation story, a story which is beautiful and profound in many ways. But I confess that this part of the story has always set my teeth on edge. For one thing, I don’t like the way it places the bulk of the blame on women for original sin (starting with Eve). For another, I don’t like how the story implies that our naked bodies are now a matter of shame, that they’re somehow bad or sinful. And finally, I’m confused. Wouldn’t God want us to know the difference between good and evil? Shouldn’t one want to eat the fruit from that particular tree?

Here is where one of the commentaries I read this past week was particularly helpful. Permit me to quote. “Taken as a whole, the purpose of Genesis 2:4b – 3:24 is to account for—to explain and interpret—the present circumstances of human life, and in particular its brokenness. The first couple, and all their successors, carry with them the memory or vision of the way life could or should be, but they face the future with ambiguity and tension. A major purpose of the story, then, is to account for human evil and suffering, and it does so mainly in moral terms, by showing the effects of disobedience. It should not be difficult at all for contemporary readers and hearers to identify with the characters in the story, and thereby to understand better themselves, their world, and their God.” *In other words* (and these are now my words), *this morning’s text is what we could call an archetypal story, in which the human beings God created are trying to figure out who God is, and who they—we—are in relation to God.* In many ways, that’s life most basic quest: to figure out who God is, and who we are in relation to God. And in order to be able to figure that out, well, children need boundaries. God’s children need

boundaries! And it doesn't even matter so much what a particular boundary is about, as to how simply having boundaries benefits us.

When Lois and I became parents almost exactly thirty years ago (Hillary turned 30 on January 30), we learned about an approach to parenting called "*Parenting with Love and Logic*." This approach emphasizes the importance of very calmly and clearly telling our children what the consequences will be of the choices they make, for better and for worse. Because, children learn precisely from having to face the consequences of their choices. Well, that's precisely what God does here! Verse 16: "*You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.*" Now, we could say that God is being arbitrarily and unnecessarily stern here. Or we could say God is being calm and clear. As if God is saying, Here are the boundaries or "fences" I am providing for you, within which you still have a lot of freedom. This is who I am, and who you are in relation to me. And to make that as clear and helpful as possible, to make sure you know where those boundaries are, here is what will happen if you go beyond those boundaries. I'd call that "love and logic!" Thanks for your good "parenting," God!

We've been talking in recent weeks about God's law, and the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit or true intent of the law. As one example we looked at the sabbath, and what the real purpose or intent of the sabbath was (and is). So we see that God's laws—wherever we find them in the Bible, which includes both Old and New Testaments—are in general meant to give us boundaries. The temptations we face in life—the temptation provided by the serpent in today's story, and the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness (which was also one of the texts suggested in the lectionary for today)—are like boundaries. Boundaries we need, and need practice with and even need to be tested on once in a while. Of course, temptations come with consequences. Consequences which may be painful at first, but which ultimately help us—help us learn, help us know who God is, and who we are in relation to God.

Remember those five signs of a highly spoiled child? Let's show those again, with Adam and Eve in mind, and with ourselves in mind.

1. *Not taking "no" for an answer.*
2. *Being more into receiving than giving.*
3. *Demanding things ASAP.*
4. *Only thinking about themselves.*
5. *Never satisfied with what they have.*

I said earlier that it doesn't even matter so much what a given boundary is about, as to how simply having boundaries helps us. They help us be secure. They make us appreciative. They teach us patience. They teach us to think at least as much about others as ourselves. They make us generous. In short, boundaries teach us what it looks like to love God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

If my mom were still alive (and I'm pretty sure she is looking down from heaven) I think she would whole-heartedly agree. So first I want to say, Thanks mom! And second, thanks be to God. And Jesus. And the Holy Spirit. Thanks for continuing to teach us. Even if sometimes it's the hard way.

And finally, thanks to the writers of this biblical story. It ended up being a good one after all!

Amen.