

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH PEOPLE?
First in series: "People Can Change!"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
March 11, 1984 Genesis 2 and 3

I believe people can change. Do you believe people can change? Do you believe you can change? Do you believe you can change other people? How many have perceived marriage as a process of conversion? Have you heard her say, "He drinks now, but he won't after we're married!" Or, "He runs around a lot now, but he won't after we're married!" How many feel she succeeded? I doubt she changed him. The success rate of changing other people is very low. But, they can change themselves. And, God changes people.

The gospel is based on conversion. People can be changed; people can be converted. A gang of kids placed candles strategically in the choir robe room and burned the Lutheran Church in Turlock two weeks ago. Do you believe those kids can change? A business in our society that really angers me is child pornography. Wouldn't you like to take people that film little children taught to do sexual activity, and string them up by their thumbs? Do you believe that such people can change? Do you believe you can change from whatever you don't like about yourself to what it is that you really want to be and do?

This series of sermons during Lent answers that question with a resounding, "Yes! People can change." The lectionary this Lent suggests fascinating stories of people who were changed by Jesus or who had the opportunity to change.

Today, the suggested passages begin at the beginning and ask, "What's the matter with people?" Why are we in such a state, and why is it difficult to change and be the kind of people, and make the kind of world we want.

Our passage is Adam and Eve, from the beginning of the Bible, Genesis 2 and 3. Can you imagine families throughout the centuries asking Grandpa, "What's the matter with people? Why is the world in such a fix?" And Grandpa would lean back, the family would get comfortable, and listen again, with rapt attention to the story of Adam and Eve. Don't get all confused about the historicity of it. It's not so much factual history as it is the story of us all, for the name "Adam" means "human." Adam and Eve are Everyman and Everywoman. See yourself and all humankind in the story.

The story of the man and woman--tempted by the snake, ate the forbidden fruit, and subsequently banished from the garden--illustrates the broken relationship humankind has with God. The bond between the Creator and the created has been twisted, distorted and broken. We call this "Sin." Sin is not a popular concept. Laughed at by movies and authors; ignored by psychology and human potential movements; downplayed by the church; sin, nevertheless, is the condition in which people find themselves. The desire to change must set against the backdrop of sin. Try as hard as we might to change, ultimately we will fail if sin has not been understood, taken into account, and confronted.

What is sin? The story of Adam and Eve does not give us as neat a definition as we would like, but the story graphically illustrates sin. After they ate the fruit, the distorted relationship they then had with God illustrates sin.

First, they hid from God. They were ashamed, embarrassed over what they had done. They did not want God to see them so they hid in trees and covered themselves with fig leaves sewn together. Nudity is a symbol of purity, innocence, virginity. They lost

their innocence. They no longer could be open before God. They did not want God to see them as they now were. They covered up. This was the first Watergate.

When you were a child and you broke mother's favorite vase, what did you do? You probably hid--under the bed, up in a tree. You were hiding from her anger, but you were also hiding from yourself, for you no longer were innocent. Now you had joined the ranks of "vase-breakers." Now, you had hurt your mother, disappointed her, and broken something dear to her. You had changed. Never again could you recapture the innocent state of pre-vase-breaker. So, you hid, as much from your new discovery about yourself as from your mother.

Sin is cover-up. We hide behind masks of goodness, righteousness and smiles, when underneath we know we are dirty, evil and distrustful. We play games--"see how good I am" or "see how bad I am" or "see how I am a failure"--so don't confront me, don't count on me, don't expect much from me. Adam called out, "Lord, I was afraid and hid from you because I was naked. (I lost my innocence.)" Sin is cover-up.

The second distortion in their relationship with God, the second aspect of sin, as experienced by Adam and Eve (and all of us), was their inability to assume responsibility for their actions. Did you catch the dialogue in the story as it was read? The dialogue as God tracked down the culprit? It is humorous because it is so real, so ordinary; again, the story of you and me, Everyman and Everywoman. Let me read it to you from the Good News Version, as it reads as well as it tells, Genesis 3:11-13.

"Who told you that you were naked?" God asked. "Did you eat the fruit that I told you not to eat?"

The man answered, "The woman you put here with me gave me the fruit, and I ate it."

The Lord God asked the woman, "Why did you do this?"

She replied, "The snake tricked me into eating it."

Adam was asked, "Did you eat?" A simple "yes" or "no" required. But Adam evaded, "The woman you put here, it is her fault!" The man blamed the woman, the woman blamed the snake, and the snake got it!

Sound familiar? Like quizzing your kids, "Who spilled the milk?" "Well, he set it too close to the edge of the table." "Yeah, but you bumped it." "Well, you made me bump it." How rare it is to find someone who will take responsibility!

Can you imagine this dialogue. God walks in the garden and asks, "Who is making such a mess of my world?" Ronald Reagan says, "The Communists." Konstantin Chernenko says, "The Americans." God asks, "Why are you building weapons to destroy my creation, destroy my planet, destroy my animals, trees, birds, destroy my people, my children? Why?" The United States says, "The Soviets make us do it." The Soviets answer, "The Americans make us do it." Will no one take responsibility and say, "This must cease! We must move beyond war to a world where differences are settled without violence." Who will take the responsibility to prepare for peace rather than prepare for war? Who will take responsibility rather than blame the woman who blames the snake?

A family was dining in a restaurant. The waitress sailed up; you know, that particular kind of waitress who moves about as if she were captain of a ship. She sailed up, pad in hand, looked and waited. The parents ordered their dinner. Then the boy looked up and said, "I want a hot dog." "No hot dog," said mother, "Bring him potatoes, beef and a vegetable." The waitress, ignoring the mother, looked at the boy and said, "What do you want on your hot dog?" "Ketchup--lots of ketchup--and a glass of milk." "Coming up," the waitress replied and walked away. The boy turned to his parents and said,

"Gee, she thinks I'm real!" What a rare experience for that boy! To be given the privilege to make a decision and to take responsibility for his actions. Refusing to take responsibility, passing on the blame, is the second distortion called sin as seen in this story.

The third distortion called sin as seen in this story is what enticed Eve to eat the fruit. God told them not to eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, the tree of knowledge of good and evil. But the snake said, "Oh, go ahead. God doesn't want you to eat it and gain wisdom because then you will be like God." Eve saw that the tree was beautiful, the fruit was delectable, and she thought how wonderful it would be to become wise, to be like God, and so she ate, and Adam ate.

The relationship with God, the relationship between Creator and created, is distorted and broken because humankind wants to be like God, wants God's place, God's power. Sin is the banishment of God from the throne, the center; and put there, in God's place, is yourself. Self-centeredness is the third distortion called sin, perhaps the basic sin. The essence of sin is self-centeredness. It is the desire to make our interests the point of reference for everything, the setting up of ourselves as the center of life in the place of God. Self-centeredness: all for me and none or little for you or anyone else. Self-centeredness is the worship of yourself in place of God.

What is sin? Sin is the distorted, broken relationship with God. Sin is the hiding from God, pretending, evading, refusing to take responsibility, blaming. Sin is self-centeredness. That is what's the matter with people.

The story does not end, however, with sin. God is very active, both in the story and in your life. What is God doing? Look at the story.

First, God searched for Adam and Eve. God looked throughout the garden. Like the shepherd who, though he had 99 sheep, looked diligently for the lost one, God hunts, searches for you. Wherever you go, wherever you hide, however you hide, whatever the masks you wear, whatever the games you play, God searches for you.

Secondly, God confronted Adam and Eve. God asked, "Why did you eat?" God confronts you, sometimes gently, as through your conscience, "What did you do that for? How about this? Why that?" Sometimes, though, God confronts you with a blow between the eyes. Many a tragedy, many a crisis, have been occasions for God to get through and confront persons with the realization of what they are doing with their lives.

Thirdly, God judged Adam, Eve and the snake. They were banished from the garden and suffered. There is judgment. You cannot live in sin without judgment. Judgment is the consequence of actions. We assume that we can do and live as we please. Yes, we can, and we will suffer the judgment for it. You can eat sweets and starches, and fat will be the judgment. You can drive wildly through red lights, and either a traffic ticket or a bad accident will be your judgment. God judges, and you cannot forever hide from your responsibilities, evade blame, or worship yourself without judgment.

Fourthly, the story doesn't end in Genesis. It continues throughout the Bible, culminating in the ultimate expression of God's love for you and me. Banished from the garden, yes, but God has provided a means of entry to the new garden and a complete, restored relationship with him. God has provided the means by which people can change: the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The matter with people is sin. But God searches, confronts, judges, loves and saves.

"WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH PEOPLE?"

GENESIS 2 AND 3

DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

MARCH 11, 1984