

## “FOOD FOR THOUGHT: FRUIT”

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-24

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The story doesn't say that the fruit was an apple. Some early pictures show it as a fig which makes a little more sense for the region. Apparently Christians are to blame for the tradition of the apple based on the similarity between the Latin words for apple (*malus*) and evil (*mala*).

The bygone tradition of giving one's teacher an apple comes from a different source. At one point in many cultures, teachers were quite poorly paid and were compensated for that with a basket of apples. Eventually the apple becomes associated with education in general. Sort of fits with our story as the thing Eve and Adam hope to attain is knowledge.

It's not that they are without knowledge. They've been given the task of keeping the garden, something that surely requires some technical ability. The knowledge which they seem to lack is about good and evil. Many scholars and theologians have described their condition as a “state of innocence.”

Despite the fact that we think we know people with this kind of innocence, this is not the world we live in today. We have, according to many religious thinkers from various traditions, “fallen” from innocence and been kicked out of the garden. We no longer enjoy harmony with God and creation... if we ever did. The evolutionary history of human beings would suggest that our existence has from the beginning been a struggle for survival, and yet many civilizations tell a story of a time when life was good, peaceful and innocent.

This should tell us that we are in the realm of myth, not history. The names tell us that the garden story is about truths that cross generations and not about individuals. Adam means “from the ground” reminding us that we are kin to the soil, that our lives depend on working the ground for sustenance. Many have forgotten this truth and abused the earth to the peril of all humanity. Eve means “the mother of all living” reminding us that no one just pops into existence. We are quite literally dependent on another human being from birth.

Though we value independence in our children, the most successful people, that is those who make contributions to the health of the earth and human communities, focus more on “connections with” rather than “power over” others. The struggle to till the soil for our daily bread and pain in child birth are not so much curses as they are guides for choosing the good over evil, for tending our relationship to the earth and to others. The whole of the law, said Jesus (as did other rabbis of his time) can be summed up in two commandments: “Love the Lord, your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.... Do this and you shall live.”

And that brings us to the serpent. The garden is not without danger. There is an alternative viewpoint present among the trees. Even paradise has a stumbling stone. Two stones actually: the prohibition, “do not eat...” and the serpent, perhaps the less important of the two. It just speeds the action along. The couple would have realized themselves soon enough that the fruit did look good to eat. They would have pondered its name, wondered why God was so keen on denying them the knowledge of good and evil. And they would have seen that such wisdom would be a good thing to have. What they couldn't have understood was the harm that such knowledge would bring to them.

Harm that God, apparently, wished to spare the couple. But really, what did God think would happen? “On the day you even touch the tree...” They are told. Could there be any clearer invitation than that... to an innocent couple?

Imagine you are the storyteller, living in the post-garden era, as we all are. You are having a meditative moment asking yourself whether you would be better off living in a world where bad things couldn't happen or in a world where bad things did happen, but opportunities for good were also present. Adam and Eve lack awareness of the good. They have harmony, peace, and meaningful work, but they are not moral creatures. One might argue that they are not yet fully “in the image of God” until they acquire the knowledge of good and evil.

Now I know that this is some pretty heavy thinking for a summer sermon that's supposed to be fun, but let me add one more level of complexity. “Knowledge” in the Hebrew sense of the word is not mere intellectual understanding. It is the same root word used in referring to sexual relations. The fruit offers not just an understanding of what is good and what is evil, but an intimacy with good and evil, or put another way, the capacity for good and evil. That's what the storyteller is suggesting. We can either have an untroubled but limited garden world or we can have this world where the struggle between good and evil for the human soul is undetermined.

And that brings us to the fruit. The couple has eaten the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but not from the tree of life. Because it's not clear where this is all going to end up, they are quickly pushed out of the garden lest they eat of the tree of life... and live forever; a rather terrifying thought if they should choose the path of evil.

Thus begins the story of the Bible, a story in which God attempts to bring us along righteous paths. It doesn't go well at first. Cain murders Abel. Wickedness thrives until the time of Noah when God tries again. Tries again with Abraham, with Moses, with David, with the prophets, with Jesus.

And so, here we are. God's still trying.... If Jesus can be believed, the thing that matters most is the fruit we bear. When Paul refers to Jesus as the “second Adam” in Romans, he is not talking about returning us to the garden, to a state of innocence not knowing the difference between good and evil. Jesus is fully acquainted with good and evil, but he shows us and gives power to choose the good. He cast out demons. He healed the sick. He fed the hungry. He calmed the storm. He offered forgiveness. He refused to offer up

violence in the face of violence. He connected with the pain of others, with the struggles of life. In short, he lived out love of God and love of neighbor.

I'm not talking about a simple dualism, where some people are good and others evil. Each of us is on intimate terms with good and evil. Most of our actions carry good and evil consequences. At times we despair of ever being able to achieve "the good." What power do we have over the systems of injustice that nurture a world where the few prosper at the expense of the many, where racism and sexism continue to put up roadblocks for black, indigenous, people of color and women, where the thirst for power fuels war, and greed pilfers the resources of the earth?

An apple a day will hardly put a dent in these social ills. But the systems that set our world on this path developed from a forgetfulness of our responsibility to the earth and for one another. These responsibilities stand behind our capacity for good. These responsibilities bear the kind of fruit that we find in what Jesus calls the kingdom of God.

Revelation offers up this beautiful image: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:1-2). Not just apples, but mangoes, pears, peaches, figs, kiwi, bananas.

Fruit matters. It is something that both nurtures us and enables us to nurture others. It comes in a multitude of forms and expressions. Paul lists some of them in Galatians: "The fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things" (Galatians 5:22-23). We have the capacity for good and evil. These are the things that foster the good, that connect us, one to another, that inspire care for our Creator and their creation.

The tree of life has come to the city, where innocence is no more, but the possibility for life, for goodness, for health and wholeness remains. Its fruit looks as good to eat as the fruit from that other tree we ate from long ago. And it is good not just for wisdom, but for goodness as well. Food worth thinking about. But don't just think about it. Take a bite. There is no prohibition here. This tree is for any and all who would eat of it. Food to heal our souls, to restore the earth, and to bless the world. Amen.