

Sermon for Sunday, May 28, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"THE APPLE ON THE TREE AND THE PAIR ON THE GROUND"

II Corinthians 5:16-21

Text: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."

II Corinthians 5:17

Most of us are familiar with the story of Adam and Eve and how the Bible says they were tempted. God told them not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We have either assumed or been taught by somebody that that was an apple. It doesn't matter what it was--it was probably a pomegranate or something. We have always associated it with an apple and the fall of man.

Last week we were driving through Ireland. Ireland is a beautiful country. One song writer has called it a little bit of heaven that has fallen down to earth. Our cab driver was proud of his lovely country and at one point was pointing out to us some apple trees covered in a burst of blooms. Jokingly I said to him, "Well, Ireland may be the Garden of Eden, but that's the tree that got us all in trouble." In a flash he shot back, "O, No! The problem wasn't the apple in the tree, it was the pair on the ground."

Well, I've thought a lot about that since then. Temptation--the apple in the tree--is always around. And our problem isn't the fact that temptation is always there, but what is important is how we respond to temptation. So our driver was right. The problem isn't the apple in the tree, it's the people on the ground.

Not long after that we went to visit the ruins of an ancient Catholic monastery just south of Dublin. Our guide told us that this part of Ireland was known as the Garden Spot of the nation. And I'll have to admit, it was truly beautiful country. Yet, there we were, visiting ruins going back to the 12th century. And do you know why those ruins were there? Because a military genius named Cromwell, who posed as a great Protestant, went to Ireland. We don't know what the population of Ireland was then probably 7,8 or 9 million people and when Cromwell left there were only 500 thousand people left and all of those glorious monasteries of Catholicism had been put to the torch by Cromwell. Was the problem the apple in the tree or the people on the ground?

During the years of my ministry, from time to time I have become concerned over individuals or over families who--for some inexplicable reason--ceased to be very active in the fellowship of the church. Out of experience I have discovered that usually something dreadful--something in terms of the brokenness of human relationship--is happening in the life of that person or the fellowship of that family. And as sin begins to work its way in an individual or a family, he or they feel cut off from the fellowship of the church. They begin to feel that they are bad and there is no place for them, no spot for them, in a holy place where people are good and people are devout.

Now, on the other hand, hardly a Sunday passes that we do not have visitors of a rather special sort and as we visit later in the homes of these visitors, I discover sometimes that something is wrong, something amiss, something is out of kilter in their lives. It may be a marriage on the verge of divorce. It may be the breakdown in family relationship and communication. It may be something even more serious. And these people, out of a sense of deep need and desperation, have come to the church seeking help, asking forgiveness, yearning for acceptance, hoping and seeking consolation in a fellowship where they will be loved, accepted, understood. Yet, in a Sunday or two, we see them no more. Somehow they have not found the acceptance they seek and so desperately need.

Now, over the years, these observations have led me to draw two parallel conclusions. The first conclusion is this: sin is a lonely business. Sin tends to cut us off from one another, to break the fellowship we have together. There are two illustrations that come to mind in the experience of the disciples of Jesus. The first one is Judas. In his heart he proposed to do a wicked, sinful thing. For thirty pieces of silver he would betray his Lord into the hands of his enemies, he would become the vehicle, the instrument of the very death of the Son of God. And when this decision for sin was firmly made, when he was committed to this disastrous course of action, the Bible tells us that Judas then broke fellowship with the disciples. His sin cut him off from them and sent him running out into a black, lonely and desolate night. The Bible says literally that Judas "went immediately out: and it was night." You know, that is what sin is like. It drives us from the love and fellowship of those whom we care the most about. The other example is that of the disciple Peter. He had boasted to Jesus, "Though all men would deny thee, yet would I not deny thee." Yet, in that bitter night when the trial of Jesus was in progress, when his master was being reviled and beaten and mocked, three times--not once, not twice--but three times he denied him. And as the cock crew, the Bible says of him, "And Peter went out and wept bitterly." Yes, sin is a lonely business. It cuts us off from God and it cuts us off from one another.

But there is a second conclusion parallel to the loneliness of sin that I have drawn over the years. That conclusion is this: the pious, devout fellowship of the church does not ordinarily permit a man to be a sinner. Now, I am not saying that we have always done this. There are times when the church has taken a sinner in and loved him back into the very grace of God. Some months ago, Sydney and I were a part of the Lay Renewal Team in Chattanooga and after the services one day, we were out in the parking lot talking to the minister of the church. A lady went by with one of the most lovely, little girls I had ever seen. She was so strikingly beautiful and so charming that Sydney and I both commented about her to the pastor. He said, "Let me tell you the story of that child. That child's mother became pregnant and she was not married. She came to the Session and she confessed her sin and she asked the Session to forgive her and to accept her. She asked the congregation for forgiveness and asked that she be accepted. The congregation surrounded her with love and care and prayer. For months she was loved and we all feel that that child is our child. She is beautiful because she's been prayed and loved into the world." But ordinarily we do not permit a person to be a sinner. For example, if a prostitute or a person guilty of murder attempted to become a part of our fellowship we would be very awkward attempting to relate to that person. What would happen if one of our Elders was apprehended by the law for embezzlement; or what would happen if one of our Deacons was arrested for breaking and entering; or what if one of our young people was jailed for stealing a car? Or what if the wife of one of our prominent members ran off with another man and then decided she wanted to come back? No, our fellowship is based on our goodness; on our moral uprightness. When sin enters the picture, it breaks up, tears up, our fellowship. And, you know, there is really no place for the sinner in the congregation of the righteous! I would simply remind you of what the leaders of the church in Jerusalem wanted to do when they brought the woman taken in adultery to Jesus-- they wanted to stone her to death. They had no place for the sinner. Sin is lonely. It cuts us off from God and one another.

With these thoughts in mind, I'm going to read parts of three verses from our scripture this morning. They have one thought in common. As I read them, see if you can catch with me the thing they have in common. Verse 18 reads, "And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ." The first part of verse 19 says this: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself." And the first part of verse 21 reads, "For he hath made him to be sin for us." Now, all of these passages have one thing in common and it is this: God has done and is doing something about sin in you and me.

As I grow older, I get a lot more realistic about life and I get more realistic about myself. I used to think that if I tried a little harder or if I worked a little longer, or prayed a little louder that somehow I could do something about the sin in my life. I don't think that any more. This doesn't mean I have quit trying, but it does mean I have become more grateful to God that he has already done and He continues to do something about the sin in my life. You see, I now know that it's not the apple in the tree, but me on the ground. As a matter of fact, if you think that just because I'm pastor that I won't sin, that I won't lose my temper, that I won't have grumpy days, and that I'll always be perfect, all you need to do is speak to my family!

Back in 1951 Bertrand Russell made a radio address in London. This is what he said: "At last man has emerged from the desert into a smiling land, but in the long night he has forgotten how to smile. We cannot believe in the brightness of the morning. We think it trivial and deceptive; we cling to old myths that allow us to go on living with fear and hate--above all hate of ourselves, miserable sinners." And then he added this: "This is folly. Man needs for his salvation only one thing: to open his heart to joy, and leave fear to gibber through the glimmering darkness of a forgotten past. He must lift up his eyes and say: 'No, I am not a miserable sinner; I am a being who, by a long and arduous road, has discovered how to make intelligence master natural obstacles. I am a being who has discovered how to live life in freedom and joy, at peace with myself, and therefore, with all mankind.'"

Well, I think we would all have to say that man has indeed come a long way out of the darkness from those crude, fearful days when we cowered in caves and dressed in skins and bashed one another with stone axes. I think we can agree that man has discovered how to make his intelligence master natural objects. But I do not think we can say, "No, I am not a miserable sinner." We can't say that because we are still bashing one another but with instruments far more deadly than a stone axe. Least of all can we say that we have learned to live at peace with ourselves and therefore with all mankind. The reason we can't be at peace with ourselves and one another is because sin is still a very real part of human experience. And this sin is a lonely business that breaks fellowship between man and man, and between man and God.

But, praise God, the Bible says that God has done and is doing something about sin. Now, this means that I don't have to go on lying to myself or lying to you about me. I don't have to go on pretending to be something I'm not--playing roles, acting out, wearing masks, hiding behind some facade. Once I know God has done something about sin I can dare to be what I really am--a sinner. Thank God for that! God hates my sin. He loathes it. He despises it. It is an abomination to God. But God loves me. I'm loved and accepted not because I'm good or deserving or anything else, but because God on the cross has forgiven me. And I can bear to accept myself as I truly am because God accepts me completely and totally. And then, when that happens to me a strange thing occurs! Because into my life and into my experience there comes something new, the very power of God now invades my life and enables me to live as a new creation, a new person. And there comes into my experience a thrust of power that enables me to be what I have never been before, a saved sinner who is free to be himself because he knows he is loved and forgiven.

And then a second miracle happens. Because I know that I'm loved and accepted and forgiven, I can begin to love and accept you. Not because your good, not because your moral or upright, but because God loves you, too. And you and I are bound together in a fellowship of the unholy, of the men who confess they're sinners who are forgiven. I no longer need to be lonely because God in Christ forgives me. God has given me a fellowship--the fellowship of sinners, of fallen saints--for you and I can reach out and welcome one another into the fellowship of God's mercy. Then I can be what I really am, a sinner who is forgiven and I can dare to love you even though you are a sinner, too, and to hear in the fellowship of the unholy--I am made one with God and one with you, and you with me. That's what God does with people under the tree.