

Sermon Series – Church Doctrine
Week 6 – 08/12/2018
The Doctrine of Original Sin
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During the summer of 1969, Richard Nixon was in the White House, and in June, he announced the withdrawal of 25,000 U.S. troops from Vietnam.

That happened just 5 days after the last episode of “Star Trek” aired – 12 days before Neil Armstrong became the first human to step foot on the moon – and 20 days before the Stonewall riots.

In the month of August, Charles Manson sent his “family” on a two-night murder rampage; Ted Kennedy plead guilty to leaving the scene of a fatal accident in Chappaquiddick, and nearly 400,000 people showed up at a farm in Bethel, New York, for a three-day music event that became known as the legendary Woodstock Festival.

A lot of things happened during the summer of '69 – some very exciting, some very scary – but all of it very *significant* to massive cultural shifts that were going on all over the country.

The summer of '69 was a pretty noteworthy in my own life too...

It was the summer I turned 12.

Turning 12 was a huge rite of passage for me; not only did it earn me a full promotion from childhood to adolescence, it also earned me admittance into a mysterious a new world – the world of Junior High School.

And, if that wasn't enough, it also earned me a seat in the newly formed confirmation class at my church.

Which took place every Saturday morning – at 8 a. m. – for two years.

Now I don't know what your confirmation experiences were, but one of the hallmarks of my experience was the Evangelical Catechism.

I was raised in the UCC, in fact the year I was born, 1957, was the year that the UCC officially became the UCC.

But before that, my family attended the Evangelical and Reformed church, and before that, we were part of the German Evangelicals.

The German Evangelicals were a group of German immigrants living mainly in Missouri, and they were very ecumenical in nature, but they also tended to cling to their traditions.

In fact, even as late as 1969, they still hadn't gotten around to changing the sign to say United Church of Christ.

So it's no surprise that on my first day of class I was given a Catechism.

Have any of you read the Evangelical Catechism?

Have any of you read the Heidelberg Catechism?

The Evangelical Catechism had for most of its history served an immigrant church in a particular cultural context.

But in 1969 we were undergoing a cultural revolution, and of course by then, we were no longer considered immigrants.

Yet the catechism hadn't even begun to catch up with any of that.

Nevertheless, over the course of the next two years I was required to memorize a lot of that catechism.

Today I can't remember a single one of those memorized lines, but as I was researching for this sermon it suddenly seemed important that I revisit what it had to say about Original Sin. So I looked it up.

Starting with Question 23:

23. Did man remain as he was created?

No; for our first parents fell away from God when they permitted Satan to lead them into unbelief and disobedience.¹

24. What were the sad consequences of this fall of man?

By this fall man lost the strength and beauty of God's image and came under the power of Satan, sin, and death. This corruption has been transmitted from Adam to all mankind.²

25. What is man's condition since the fall?

Since the fall, man is not prepared to do good, but inclined to do evil. This inherited corruption is called original sin.³

26. What is sin?

Sin is unbelief and disobedience in thought and desire, word and deed, whereby evil is done or good is neglected, whether thoughtlessly or willfully.⁴

27. What is the punishment of sin?

The punishment of sin is death, as it is written—⁵.

28. How manifold is this death?

¹ Read Genesis 3.

² Gen. 2:17. Gen. 3:17-19. Rom. 5:12. Rom. 7:14. 1 John 3:8.

³ Gen. 8:21. John 3:6. 1 John 1:8.

⁴ Ps. 19:12. Matt. 15:18. Jas. 4:17. Luke 12:47. 1 Tim. 5:22.

⁵ Romans 6:23

This death is threefold: physical, spiritual, and eternal.⁶

29. What did God in his mercy resolve to do to save mankind from sin and its punishment?

God in his mercy resolved from all eternity to save fallen mankind through his only begotten Son.⁷

Today, in the United Church of Christ, we are as a whole considered to be a pretty “progressive” denomination. In fact, some would say that we are on the frontier of whatever is beyond that – and that statement is not always meant kindly.

So we tend to forget, or maybe we just choose not to remember, that our ancestors in faith were actually onboard with some of these more rigid theological constructs.

If you attended church in 1969, regardless of your denomination, the Doctrine of Original Sin was a major feature of your religious landscape – none of us escaped it – and we all still bear the scars of it.

And as I went through confirmation week after week, Saturday after Saturday, I was indoctrinated to believe that I would never amount to anything because of my inherited inclination to do evil – and I didn’t even have to do evil, or sin; all I had to do was think about it.

The idea of Original Sin, or cause has been around for a long time.

It is rooted ultimately in our desire to explain evil.

The ancient Jews tried to explain it in the story of Adam and Eve, claiming that Evil began in disobedience to God.

⁶ Ps. 90:7-8. Matt. 10:28. Matt. 25:41. Eph. 2:1.

⁷ 2 Tim. 1:9.

Paul reflected on it in his letter to the Romans to explain his doing not “what I want, but...the very thing I hate,”⁸ reasoning that “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin.”⁹

But it was Augustine of Hippo who took the Hebrew creation myth and combined it with Paul’s attempts at self-analysis to cook up a theological doctrine that is more evil than the evil it tries to explain.

Augustine believed that the disobedience of Adam was automatically passed on to each new generation, and that every single new life is born into a state of sin – or separate from God.

And the only cure was baptism. Baptism brought us into the body of Christ, and through Christ’s sacrifice our separation from God was overcome.

But if a person died before being baptized, they went straight to hell. Period.

So this logic gave the church some serious power. It kept Christians in a state of child-like dependence on the church and her sacraments, and it made it possible for church leaders to exploit people in all kinds of despicable ways.

But original sin is not found anywhere in the Bible.

And not only that, none of the Eastern branches of Christianity have ever accepted it¹⁰, and of course our Jewish forbearers rejected it.

But here’s what really gets me...

The reformers, who could see clearly enough the exploitation and abuse being doled out by the church, didn’t even bother to question

⁸ [Rom 7:15]

⁹ [Rom 5:12-14].

¹⁰ (Eastern Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Christian)

the doctrines used to accomplish it – instead they picked them up with a vengeance.

Augustine's thinking was the foundation of Calvin's Doctrine of the "Total Depravity of Man" where he said, "For our nature is not only utterly devoid of goodness, but so prolific in all kinds of evil, that it can never be idle..."

He said that "we are obnoxious to God" and, that being baptized didn't fix anything because salvation was limited only to a few, known as God's elect.

And then he claimed that there was nothing you could do to be an elect. God had already predestined those who were the winners and those who were the losers, which successfully pitted everyone against each other.

One can't help but wonder how many lives have been made miserable – how much human potential has been stifled by such a negative and damaging view of our humanity...

And all of that just in the last 500 years.

My solution was to leave the church. After I completed Confirmation, I was quite certain that God did not have a spot reserved for the likes of me – at least not in Heaven – so I went looking for a better deal.

And I'm really glad I did because it helped me find myself as part of a far more spacious and forgiving source than I had ever imagined possible.

Rabia, an Eastern mystic from the 8th century, puts it this way, "In my soul there is a temple, a mosque, a church where I kneel."

Rumi says, "I know there is a gold mine inside of you."

Mohammed declares, "God is closer than your jugular vein."

Jesus says, “The Kingdom of God is within you.”

And modern day Desmond Tutu says, “If you are made in the image of God and I am made in the image of God, then when we meet we shouldn’t simply say hello, but we should genuflect or bow saying, ‘The image of God within me recognizes and greets the image of God that is within you.’” The Hindu concept of Namaste.

Danielle Shroyer, in her book *Original Blessing*, says that “Every religion in the world lives at the intersection of the presence of the divine and the reality of humanity.” She says, “If you ask me, every interesting thing comes from this intersection. It is THE intersection, the crossroads from which everything else proceeds.”

“So how we talk about it matters because how we talk about it determines how we see God, how we see ourselves, how we treat others, what we value, how we react to success and failure, what we believe we’re capable of, and whether we are at peace or not. It determines whether we grow and mature, or whether we give up and give in. It determines what kind of person we become, and what kind of communities we become, and therefore what kind of society we become, and what kind of world we become.” ¹¹

We are human, which means we have the potential to be both a blessing and a curse.

We are capable of both incredible good and terrifying evil.

And sometimes we *sin*.

We’re cracked pots, imperfect vessels, beautiful messes and we’re paradoxes.

¹¹ P. 8

We're selfish and selfless, we are both sinner and saint.

But before anything else, we are made in God's image, and we are made to reflect that image in the way we live.

Before scripture tells us anything else about ourselves, it tells us we are good.

Genesis 1:1 states, "In the beginning, God created..." And then God goes on to create all kinds of really cool things like humpback whales that sing, birds more colorful than a box of crayons, and gorgeous lions stretched out under the shade of the African baobab tree.

And then God declares that it is good – the whole universe and everything in it is good!

The rocks are good. The clouds are good. The trees are good. The rivers and valleys and forests are all good, good, good!

And then, on the sixth day, God created humans, male and female in God's own image. God breathed God's own breath into us. We have running through us the same creativity that made the stars. We are not just creations of God, but we are co-creators with God.

And what did God say about us? That we are good! We are very, very good!

Not just "good" like on other days of creation, but "very, very good!"

And that introduction precedes the introduction of sin in the second account of creation found in the next chapter, which means that before we are anything else, we are very, very good!

We are born into a conflicted world and within us lies the potential for both creation and destruction, both blessing and curse, but sin is not the primary thing that is true about us, and when we ground ourselves

in the fact that God created us good, we are capable of confronting all the other things that are true about us, even the difficult things.

In George MacDonald's story, *The Princess and the Goblin*, a young princess lives in a big house in the country. Unbeknownst to her, goblins live in the mountains nearby, and they constantly dig tunnels and create caves in the hopes of drawing nearer to the village and its inhabitants. So the princess is kept hidden safely in the house, where one day she becomes lost and stumbles upon an old woman in the attic, sitting at a spinning wheel with golden thread. She learns this woman is her great, great grandmother, who claims to have been there the whole time, watching over her. The grandmother tells her this golden thread is woven into all things, and if the princess will hold onto it, she will always be able to find her way back to her. When the goblins tunnel under the country house itself, threatening to flood the princess and everyone else within its walls, the princess follows the golden thread and finds her way to safety. The thread saves her, because it is her connection to life.¹²

We are not born fallen. We are born tethered to God with a golden thread. It is a thread that can never be broken. And that thread will always, always lead us to life¹³.

May it be with you all, according to God's word. Amen

¹² George Macdonald, *The Princess and the Goblin* (N. P.: Rossingnol, 2015), taken from *Original Blessing*

¹³ Danielle Shroyer, *Original Blessing: Putting Sin in Its Rightful Place*, P.54