

The Journey: "Out of Relationship"

[Genesis 3:1-7](#)

[John 9](#)

Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

Lynnewood United Methodist Church

March 26, 2017

We are part of God's creation, part of this wonderful swirling event when light came out of the darkness and God created humans in God's own image. We are intended to be in covenantal relationship with God, such that a very early writer says God even breathed life into the first human being. We could say that at creation humanity is "at one" with God. The whole bible is a story of being "at one" at times, and then "at odds" at other times with God.

When we are "at odds" with God, we are "out of relationship." Another name for this is sin. Listen to this contemporary definition of sin:

"What is sin?

It is the glory of God not honored.  
 The holiness of God not revered.  
 The greatness of God not admired.  
 The power of God not praised.  
 The truth of God not sought.  
 The wisdom of God not esteemed.  
 The beauty of God not treasured.  
 The goodness of God not savored.  
 The faithfulness of God not trusted.  
 The commandments of God not obeyed.  
 The justice of God not respected.  
 The wrath of God not feared.  
 The grace of God not cherished.  
 The presence of God not prized.  
 The person of God not loved.  
 That is sin."

~John Piper

Sin is being out of relationship with God and attending to our own will and not God's will.

We have traditionally said that sin came into the world when Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The question that I keep coming back to, with these scripture readings today, is "Why do we always have to blame someone?" Poor Eve! For all these years, Eve gets blamed for going against God and taking Adam with her.

Actually the blame starts even earlier—if you can have anything be earlier than Adam and Eve. The writer blames the serpent, who is "more crafty than any other wild animal." The snake (in some translations) is the personification of evil. He even talks! Something caused

sin; let's blame the snake. Then let's blame Eve who followed the snake and ate the fruit. And then let's blame Adam who followed Eve and ate the fruit.

Paul wrote: "Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all" (Romans 5:12). That verse in Romans put original sin down in stone. And St. Augustine carried out this train of thought in the 4th century. Augustine was a bishop in North Africa. He took Paul's writing and developed the theological interpretation that Adam and Eve's decision to eat the forbidden fruit introduced sin into the world. It was the "original sin." The Fall, as it came to be known, caused all humanity to inherit this "original sin." As a young man, Augustine led a raging, hedonistic sex life. He later blamed his own behavior on Adam and Eve. We can't control our own sex drives? Let's blame Adam and Eve!

Bruce Feiler has a different "take." In his book *The First Love Story: Adam, Eve, and Us*, Feiler shows that Adam and Eve achieve knowledge by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They are a couple, making decisions, with a give and take that we see in all relationships. They are the "first love story."

United Methodist theology focuses on free will more than on original sin: we are created in God's image with free will to make decisions about what is ethical and what is not. Choosing what is not ethical is sin. When we say, "The devil made me do it," that is not taking responsibility for one's actions. Just blame the devil?—That is the childish way, not the mature, ethical way of looking at our behavior.

If you go to the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome, you see the Creation, Michelangelo's masterpiece painted on the ceiling. At the very center of the ceiling is the Creation of Eve. Until the 1700s no women were allowed in the Sistine Chapel, and yet Michelangelo had painted women beside all the men. He carried out the theology that Eve (beside Adam) was at the center of the Creation story, and Mary (beside Jesus) was at the center of the Last Judgment story. Mary was thought of as the second Eve. The Latin name for Eve, *Eva*, spelled backwards is *Ave*, the greeting the angel spoke to Mary as well as the famous and beloved piece of music about Mary, "Ave Maria."

Michelangelo went against the orthodox Christian view of his time that Adam and Eve caused the downfall of the human race. I like to see artists and theologians doing battle with these old ideas. Why put the blame on the characters of an ancient story for our sin today?

When we look at the story about Jesus from the Gospel of John in today's scripture, we see a whole lot of blaming going on there too. To start out, the disciples want to blame either the blind man or his parents for his blindness: "'Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents?' Jesus says, 'You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame'" (John 9:3, *The Message*). Then the Pharisees want to blame Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. They say: "Obviously, this man can't be from God. He doesn't keep the Sabbath." Obviously, he's to blame! He's going against our law! Then the author blames the Jews for not believing the blind man's cure. The text has them go ask the parents of the blind man,

and then it has them ask the blind man himself again. The text wants to blame the Jews for being dense and unbelieving. This Gospel was written at the end of the first century when the early church was separating from the Jewish synagogue, and the author wants to blame the Jews for not accepting Jesus as the Messiah. So the author has the Jews say of Jesus: "We know this man is an impostor" (verse 24). Even the writer has to blame someone!

And in the story, the Jews blame even the blind man: "'You're nothing but dirt! How dare you take that tone with us!' Then they throw him out in the street" (verse 34). Jesus concludes, speaking to everyone there, and to us: "If you were really blind, you would be blameless, but since you claim to see everything so well, you're accountable for every fault and failure" (verse 41).

We are accountable. There's no getting around it. We are accountable for our actions. We can lash out at others and blame them for our weaknesses if we want, but, truly, we know better.

Since the early Christian Church, people have believed in an ancient concept of atonement. The word means "at-one ment." We want to be "at one" with God, like at Creation. We want to be without sin. Paul's writing and then Augustine's biblical interpretation developed the idea that Jesus' death on the cross would atone for the sin of all humanity. This is a puzzling idea. It's the idea that because Jesus was without sin, the benefit of his death could be spread out over all people who inherited original sin from Adam and Eve. The idea evolved from the ancient practice of animal sacrifice in Jesus' time. A lamb was sacrificed to atone for the sins of the people. This is why we call Jesus, "lamb of God." Jesus was symbolically the innocent lamb whose death was unnecessary, yet it became understood as a saving act, not for him, because he was "of God," but for us because we are not "at one" with God. Many believe literally in his doctrine of original sin and that Jesus' saving act on the cross has changed their lives and brought them salvation. Others believe parts of the doctrine. And some reject it all. We are all Christians, but we do not have to interpret the bible and our traditions in the same, one way.

A more recent understanding of atonement has to do with responsible living. Dorothee Soelle, a German theologian, says that the life and teachings of Jesus are an example to encourage us to choose ethical living, not sin, and thereby be "at one" with God (Soelle, *Choosing Life*). We are not saved just because Jesus died on the cross; we are saved through our effort to live our lives according to God's love. You are certainly free to understand Christian theology as it gives your life the most meaning. I remember when one of my children asked me about this puzzling doctrine of atonement: "What does it mean, Jesus died for our sins?" In many ways, instead of saying Jesus *died* for us, I prefer to say Jesus *lived* for us. His death was political, an execution by the Romans because he became a threat to the Roman regime and the Jewish temple establishment. It was his life that gives us hope. By example, it teaches us a way not to put blame on anyone, but perhaps ourselves. "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" (alludes to John 8:7). Jesus was a martyr for love. Love must be our cause.

We can be so ready to put the blame on others that we miss our own shortcomings—our sins. And failing to be critical of our own behavior is a sin in itself. It puts us out of touch with God.

On this journey of life, sometimes we are "in relationship" with God and sometimes we are "out of relationship." So as we contemplate how we might move to closer relationship with God, what could we do to rectify the brokenness in our lives and in our society?

Are there people you have been meaning to reach out to with an expression of kindness? Is there someone you need to forgive—or someone you need to apologize to?

What can you do to change the social sins we all know exist, like racism and hatred of people who are different? What can our church do to work for a more loving and just society? Instead of putting blame on others, it's time to take up the needs we see around us. It's time to admit our own part in the sins we see, ask for forgiveness, and find a new path that brings wholeness to all. This is our challenge.