

Pentecost 5 (proper 9) July 9, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA
Zechariah 9:9-12, Psalm 145:8-15, Romans 7:15-25a, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
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Anyone here perfect? Anyone here never screwed up in some way? Hold up your hand! Have you ever met anyone who thought they never made mistakes? I don't mean people who know they make mistakes but are unwilling to admit to them - because that's probably all of us, some of the time! I mean people who simply are unaware of their imperfections, or justify them in some way to maintain a facade of purity. No need to ask for a show of hands - we've all met folk like that - people whose egos are often so big that they have to turn sideways to get through a door! we remember them because their projected self-image is so extreme.

How about people whose self-image is so poor that they continually blame themselves for everything? Keep apologizing, even when it's transparently not their fault. Yes, we've met folk like that, too - we remember them because their projected self-image is so extreme.

I suspect that, for most of us - and I include myself - we have been visitors to both of those places; for us they're temporary habitations; but for these folk, they're permanent dwellings: palaces of certainty or doubt.

For us they're temporary because most of us have a level of self-awareness that allows us both to recognize at least some of our own faults; to see - even if in hindsight - some of those moments that bring us low **AND** - sometimes - to know when we've got it right, hit a home run, 'done good.' We've been brought low **AND** exalted, and we remember both.

Authentic human identity is born out of the self-recognized and self-acknowledged experience of both failure and of achievement, of messing up and of making good, of good and bad - and everything in between. Go too far at either end of the spectrum, and, as they say, "Houston, we have a problem!" Getting that balance right is one of the central struggles of our lives.

So where does that land us, as people of faith? An authentic, faith-filled response takes us back to the vision our ancestors had about the created order - remember Genesis 1? One of the most striking things about it only jumps out if you know about other creation stories of the period - for instance, the Babylonian creation story of the god Marduk and the goddess Tiamat. In that story, Tiamat (the representative of the feminine) was killed by Marduk (representing patriarchy). The importance for us of that myth can't be understated, but the main reason why is for another time! What matters about this creation story for us today, is that, after killing Tiamat, Marduk disemboweled her and threw her entrails and other body parts up in the air, where they formed the heavens and the earth. That's hardly a vision of a good creation! And it makes Genesis 1 even more remarkable.

But that "Genesis goodness" - especially the goodness of freshly minted humanity - created a problem. It clearly didn't reflect the reality Genesis' hearers encountered in their daily lives. Their world was not all good - in fact it was, for most of them, full of pain, suffering, and early death, often at the hands of other human beings. The "Marduk" creation was closer to their

experience than the first Genesis creation. That contradiction between a personally harsh reality and a communal vision of a 'good' humanity explains why the second Genesis creation story – Adam and Eve – was included: to offer both balance, and an explanation – how is it that things are the way they are? Shouldn't they be good, because that's what Genesis 1 says? Those would have been the questions! And in answer, someone said "well, let me tell you a story about God, two humans, and a snake!"

So what about that word? "Good?" It can mean so many things! Check out a thesaurus and you'll find the following synonyms: "Moral, virtuous, kind, giving, authentic, genuine, admirable, worthy, humanitarian, altruistic." And you'll also find "competent, reliable, well-behaved, dutiful, orderly, proper." And in one case, a synonym for "good" is "bad!" And therein lies our problem – it seems "good" can mean so many things!

Moral uprightness and ethical behavior, compassionate, caring response; any behavior adding to the health and wholeness of creation - those are most obviously what comes to mind with the Good Creation of Genesis 1.

And when you combine both creation stories from Genesis, what you get is goodness and wholeness, then failure, betrayal, and a divorce between the Holy and the Human. Two sides of human identity that reflect our common struggle as we seek to be fully and authentically human; two sides of our human identity that reflect our common struggle as we seek to be fully and authentically faithful to the earliest vision offered to us as Christians.

Today's readings offer both sides of that struggle. Zechariah offers a wholesome vision of the triumph of a new leader who is humble, who frees prisoners and restores peace. The psalmist talks of God's compassion, kindness, and love for everyone, a God who lifts up all who fall or are bowed down. Not only is this the language of saving and forgiveness, it's also a reminder that if we're created in God's image then it's to this authentic way of living that we're called, this identity we're being encouraged to embrace.

Then we come to Paul, who offers an analysis of human nature that leans to the other side, that talks about failure, falling short, acting out in ways we know on some level, even if not a conscious one, are going to be destructive for us and, possibly, those around us. But he ends in thanksgiving for God's grace that promises compassionate rescue and divine wholeness.

Matthew's Jesus is, at first, harsher, defending himself from critics, and then ending up with a very familiar and welcome invitation into God's compassion and care.

Now isn't that interesting?! All four readings seek to promote a positive view of human possibility, even if two of them also talk about the challenges we face because of our human make-up. Yet we don't always hear the positive – why? Because of this truth, identified by a recent study of children: it takes 15 positive messages to balance out 1 negative message.

Christians did pretty well seeking a healthy balance between the two poles until the 4th Century. The theological struggle then – between Augustine of Hippo, North Africa, and Pelagius of

Britannia – was primarily about how human identity should be defined. Augustine went for a negative view predicated on the second creation story – Adam & Eve & the serpent – and came up with what today is referred to as original sin: a dark, brooding vision where human beings are inherently evil and doomed to suffer. Pelagius, on the other hand, proposed a hope-filled view of human possibility predicated on the first Genesis creation story of human goodness, on God’s gift of free will, and on a partnership between the human and the divine.

Augustine won that battle, Pelagius faded into the background until very recently, and one of the most characteristic components of many Churches’ vision of human identity became first and foremost that of the miserable sinner, threatened with eternal consequences if he or she doesn’t dramatically change.

We are not one of those Churches! The Anglican view of a middle way, a ‘via media,’ leads us forward, inviting us into a realistic and reasonable vision of the human struggle, balancing those parts of human identity that can drag us down into the dark places with a positive vision not only of divine goodness, but of our fundamental goodness too.

Finding that balance is what today’s reading are about. Finding that balance is what our pilgrims’ journey is about as well. Happy travels!