

“Growing Up”
January 8, 2012

Genesis 1:1-5
Mark 1:4-11

Well, now. Here we are on the 8th of January. More than a full week into a new year, the traditional time to make resolutions.

How many of you made a new year’s resolution for 2012? How many of you made more than one? And, dare I ask, one week into the year, who many of you have been able to keep at least one of your resolutions? Has anyone been able to keep all of your resolutions so far?

Allow me to ask one more question: looking back over the last, say, five years, how many of you have been able to keep *any* of your new year’s resolutions throughout an entire year? It’s frustrating, isn’t it? Maybe even a little embarrassing.

Embarrassing or not, the truth is that it’s not always easy to keep our commitments, our promises, our resolutions. And, of course, the deeper truth is that deciding or *discerning* what our commitments need to be can be even harder.

Sure, there are the easy targets for our resolutions: exercise more; be more patient with our children, our parents, our spouses, our friends; worry less; be more generous. At the same time, though, some of life’s challenges require more from us than an extra walk in the day or an extra check in the offering plate.

So, when the new year begins and we fear that the longings we have for our family’s welfare are in competition with the same longings in the hearts of our brothers and sisters from across the border, what new year’s resolution can we make? What new year’s resolution *should* we make? Protect our family from these “threats”? Put our family and other families on equal footing for “limited” resources? Put other families first?

Or when the new year begins, God help us, with the news that a total of 199 children and youth were shot in Oakland last year – and that three children under the age of six were shot and killed since August – *under the age of six* – what can we resolve to do this year? Do we simply resolve to be more grateful that we don’t live in Oakland, or do we resolve to be more attentive to the Holy Spirit’s call to us all to become peacemakers? Or do we instead resolve to pay less attention to the news, so we won’t hear such painful things?

And when the new year begins and we realize that we didn’t manage to keep any of last year’s resolutions throughout the year, do we try the same ones again? Do we make new resolutions? Or do we just give up on the idea altogether?

All these questions point me to a couple of basic wonderings. Why is it so hard to keep the resolutions we make, even when they’re pretty easy ones? And why is it even harder to make and keep resolutions that go beyond our own desires and embrace the world’s needs, instead?

Is it because we human beings are deeply flawed? Is it because we are cursed, contaminated, trapped by original sin?

I confess that, even though I know that the word “sin” makes the skin crawl for a number of us here, I can’t dismiss the notion of sin out of hand to answer my “why” questions about making and keeping new year’s resolutions. The older I get and the more aware I become of my own and others’ limitations, the more aware I become of my own and others’ mistakes, and the

more aware I become of my own and others' brokenness, the more I understand the attraction to blaming all those things on sin, on *original sin*.

But even though it might be easy to understand how the notion of original sin could gain some theological traction, it still doesn't speak the truth to my heart. And that lack of truth for me is especially strong this week for at least two reasons.

The first reason is named Kaila Joy, Amy and David's first child, born on New Year's Day. Holding Kaila three days after she was born, I became utterly incapable of accepting the idea that she – or anyone – was born *sinful*. As I held and beheld Kaila, the truth of original blessing, which Matthew Fox and many others have embraced, held us both. (True, she hadn't kept *me* up most of the night as she tested her lungs and her new noise-making ability, but, still, I'm going to stick with original blessing, not original sin.)

The second reason original sin seems like an especially misguided theological move this week are this morning's readings, the first verses of the Bible and the Gospel of Mark's first story about Jesus. As Patricia read a few moments ago, the creation story that begins the Bible has God pronouncing creation *good, good, good*. And as I read a few moments ago, the Gospel of Mark, the oldest of the Gospels, begins with God pronouncing Jesus as the beloved son with whom God was well-pleased *before Jesus did a single thing* that his followers thought worthy of remembering and recording, except, that is, for giving his parents the slip in the Jerusalem synagogue when he was twelve years old.

So despite the fact that part of the Christian tradition insists that we are all sinful from the beginning and despite all the evidence that suggests the power of sin – child abuse, war, torture, greed, alcoholism, drug addiction, rape, environmental degradation – despite all this, Genesis and the Gospel of Mark point us in a different direction, to the proclamation that we are *good*. Good as God's creations, good as God's beloveds, not because we've earned that appellation, not because we've proved our worth and our goodness somehow. No, scripture and the experience of the mystics throughout the ages tell us we are "good" simply because we exist.

The ancient Israelites seemed to have understood this and taught this through the first creation story in Genesis:

- God created light – and it was good
- God created earth and seas – and they were good and good
- God created plants, trees, vegetation – good, good, good
- God created sun and moon – good
- God created creatures of the seas, the earth, and the skies – good, good, good
- God created cattle, creeping things, and wild animals – good, good, good
- God created humankind, male and female – good, good, good

And, as if that's not enough, we Christians have Mark's story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, at the *beginning* of Jesus' ministry. And at that beginning, as at the beginning of time, God pronounces Jesus good, this time with the words "beloved son with whom I am well-pleased."

This original blessedness is consistent with the truth Jesus is remembered as offering again and again, in parable and story: God's blessing, our belovedness, our goodness does not depend on our good deeds, our right living, or our right believing. It predates our supposedly autonomous adult self. It is simply who we are, and we are given the gift, the call, the *challenge* to live into it. We are given the opportunity, in essence, to grow up, to grow up into it as Jesus did. We are called to grow up and into our blessedness by recognizing it, trusting it, and daring to live it.

Remember, though: growing up and into our blessedness, our innate value as part of God's creation, comes with one basic requirement, one *inescapable prerequisite*. We can grow up and into our blessedness only if we recognize that that blessedness resides in everyone else, no exceptions. It resides in the murderers on death row and the guards who watch them. It resides in the kids killed in the streets of Oakland and around the world, and it resides in the kids and adults who killed them. That blessedness lives and seeks to grow up in the abused and the abuser, the persecuted and the persecutor, the wretchedly poor and in the unconscionably rich.

This, then, is our challenge – to grow up into our blessedness, just as Jesus did, to grow up into being “good” in our essence, by recognizing that same blessedness and good-ness in others. Make it a new year's resolution. Make it a commitment to yourself and to all that is holy.

This year, notice those in whom you do *not* recognize that blessedness. Identify the people in whom you can't see it. And, unfortunately, this being a presidential election year, identifying one or more of those people may be all too easy. Then, look harder. Look with the faith at that person and those people, the faith that original blessedness is in them.

If it seems to you that that blessedness is hidden, buried, distorted beyond all recognition, look into your own blessedness and discover how you might help someone else's emerge. Invite it, nurture it, honor it, as we all grow up and into the people of original grace and blessing God and her creation are longing for us to be.

Amen and amen.

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