

October 3, 2010 – First Baptist Church, Vancouver

Text: Genesis 2:16-17

Title: “Only One Command”

(Fourth in a series of sermons in Genesis 1-11:

“The Story That makes Sense of Our Stories”)

“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely: but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.’”

On the Sunday mornings of this Fall, we are making our way through the opening chapters of the Bible, through Genesis 1-11. Why?

For two basic reasons.

First: the rest of the Bible, where most believers tend to spend most of their time, assumes we know the story, or stories of Genesis 1-11. The Bible does indeed have two halves, not just the Old Testament and the New Testament, but Genesis 1-11 and Genesis 12 - Revelation 22. The second half of the Bible assumes we know the first half!

Second reason we are spending time in Genesis 1-11: The opening chapters of the Bible put everything into perspective for us. It is “the story that makes sense of our stories.” Genesis 1-11 helps us understand what and who we were created to be. And, just as importantly, Genesis 1-11 helps us understand why we are not now all we were created to be. And, most importantly, Genesis 1-11 helps us understand why Jesus Christ had to come into our world...and what Jesus Christ came to do.

“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it, you shall surely die.’”

In the text before us today, in Genesis 2, we are given an expansive picture of what and who we were created to be. In almost child-like simplicity, we have fleshed out for us an expansive, and I think, compelling vision of what it means to be created (as Genesis 1 tells us) in the image of God.

The Living God is Relationship. The Living God can use plural pronouns when speaking self-referentially: “Let us”... “Our image”... “Our likeness.” “Let **us** make humankind in **our** image according to **our** likeness.”

In Genesis 2 we see what it means to be created in the image of a relational God. In pictographic form, God shows us that we were created for a four-fold relational existence, a four-fold relational harmony. We were created for a relationship with the earth, a relationship with others, a relationship with the self, and a relationship with God.

Earth – Genesis 2:7 “Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground.:

Others – Genesis 2:18 “It is not good for the man to be alone.”

Self – Genesis 2:25 “And the man and his wife were both naked and not ashamed.” No need to hide, no need to create “personas”.

God – Genesis 2:7 (again) “The Lord God breathed into his (the man’s) nostrils; and the man became a living being.”

Earth. Others. Self. God. All working together!

And according to Genesis 2, it all hinges on one command. The four-fold relational harmony rests on obeying one command. **Only one.** Genesis 2:16-17 “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely.’” God has generously provided for human existence and wants humans to freely enjoy it all! “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat for in the day that you eat from it, you shall surely die.”

Only one command. Only one. In the Garden of Eden, God gives only one command. Only one. And I submit to you, it is the only commandment God has ever given. All other commands are but another way of speaking the one command. “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat...”

Now, technically, this is not the first command God gives in the story, and, therefore, technically it’s not the only command. For in Genesis 1, in the song that sets the stage for the story, God speaks ten commands. Ten creative commands. Ten times “God said...”

1. “Let there be light.”
2. “Let there be a firmament.”
3. “Let the waters below the heavens be gathered ...and let the dry land appear.”
4. “Let the earth sprout vegetation.”
5. “Let there be lights in the firmament.”
6. “Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures and let birds fly above the firmament.
7. “Be fruitful and multiply!”
8. “Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind.”
9. “Let us create humankind in Our image, according to Our likeness.
10. “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and rule...”

Ten creative commands. The original “Ten Commandments”!

Which helps us then appreciate the commandments God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai thousands of years after the creation. It turns out that those Ten Commandments’...”You shall have no other gods before Me; You shall not make for yourself an idol; remember the Sabbath, honour your father and your mother, you shall not murder...” etc. ...It turns out that God speaks these “Ten Commandments” to make it possible for us to live in the fullness and freedom of the “Ten Commandments” of creation. If we could keep the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai we would live in the blessing of the Ten Commandments spoken “in the beginning”! Especially if we lived the first commandment “You shall have no other gods before me.”

Which takes us back to the Garden, to the first relational commandment. To the only commandment God gives in the Garden. “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.” Only one command. Only one.

Before we grapple with the command, I want to ask the question many ask of Genesis 2: What is not said about “the tree of life”? Later in the story, at the end of Genesis 3, “the tree of life” does come into the picture: the way to the tree in the middle of the garden is blocked. That we will come to see is great grace. But why no word about “the tree of life” at this point in the story? I think Dietrick Bonhoeffer gives the best answer. In his book, *Creation and Fall: Temptation*, he wrote:

It was in the middle – that is all that is said about it. The life that comes forth from God is in the middle. This means that God who gives life, is in the middle. In the middle of the world which is at Adam’s disposal and over which he has been given dominion is not Adam himself but the tree of divine life. Adam’s life comes from the middle which is not Adam himself but God. It constantly revolves around this middle without ever making the attempt to make this middle of existence its own possession. It is characteristic of man that his life is a constant circling around its middle, but that it never takes possession of it. And this life from the middle which only God possesses, is undisturbed as long as man does not allow himself to be flung out of his groove. Adam is not tempted to touch the tree of life, to lay violent hands on the divine tree in the middle; there is no need at all to forbid this; he would not understand the prohibition. He has life. (p.51)

But what Adam does not have is the knowledge of good and evil. Thus the one command in the garden: “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.: Only one command. Only one.

In order to be clear about what God is after in this command, we need to make a number of clarifications.

1. Prohibiting us from eating from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”...we must always say the whole phrase, the whole mouthful...”the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...” prohibiting us from eating from this tree is in no way unfair or unreasonable. God had given humanity all we needed to live “fully human, fully alive”. Any tree. Eat freely. In the beginning we had everything we needed. Which is to say that in His “do not eat” God is not prohibiting something we need. We do not need to eat from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” God is not being unfair or unreasonable.
2. Another clarification. As the Creator, the Lord God has the right to make the rules. Even if they were unfair or unreasonable! The Creator of the game has the right to determine how the game is played! One of the most scary things I have ever heard anyone say is “No one is going to tell me how to live my life.” That is really scary when “no one” includes the Creator. The Creator has the right to make the rules. And there is, at the root, only one.

3. Another clarification. God gives this prohibition for our good. God is warning us: “you will die”. Eat from this tree...and you will die. Note well. God does not say, “I will punish you.” God does not say, “I will make you die.” God does not say “I will kill you.” God says “if you eat from this tree I will not need to punish you. The natural consequences of eating from this tree is death. Sooner or later you will die.”

All of God’s commands...The Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount...are given not to ruin our lives, but to prevent us from ruining our lives.

If I were a supervisor of the construction site of the Patina building behind our Sanctuary, and told my workers “do not jump off the ledge,” would I be seeking to ruin their lives, to stifle their joy and creativity? No, I would be caring for my workers. I would be telling them about the way the universe works. Apples always fall down. It is the law of gravity. They always fall down. So too people will step off the ledge!

Imagine one day a worker saying “Well, I think the boss is an old fuddy-duddy. In the day you jump off you shall surely die! What does he know?” So off the worker jumps...from the 32nd floor. At first, he experiences exhilaration. And he is heard to say as he passes the 22nd floor, “so far, so good.”

God prohibits us from eating from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” for our good.

4. Another clarification: giving this prohibition reveals God’s respect for us human beings. God is treating us as free, rational creatures. Giving such a command to a robot would be nonsensical. As Larry Richards put it: “There is no moral dimension to the existence of a robot; it can only respond to the program of its maker...To be truly like God, humans must have freedom to make moral choices...” (*Let Day Begin*, p.55)
5. Another clarification: in giving the one command, God is taking a big risk. God created a beautiful world – “very good.” “Paradise” in every sense of the word. And then places in the world a creature who has the capacity to choose. And who just might make the wrong choice!

The great German preacher Helmut Thielicke expresses the risk so powerfully. In a sermon he presented at the end of World War II, in a bomb-damaged sanctuary in Stuttgart, he wrote:

When God comes to create human beings, one can almost detect something like a hesitation or even a recoil. In any case, it is the kind of bated breath with which we ourselves are familiar when we approach a decisive point in some piece of work on the success of which everything depends. We stop and stand off for a while. It may be the experience of a roofer who has covered a church steeple with shingles and then in one final, risky effort must set the

cock upon the peak, or of a dramatist who sets out to compose the main and key scene in his play.

So when God pauses before he composes man into his creation, we sense that there is a risk connected with it: will the creation of man mean the coronation of creation or its crucifixion? Will creation reach its pinnacle when there is added to its creatures a being who rises above the dull level of reflex and instinct, who is endowed with mind and will, and is capable of living as a partner and co-worker of God his Creator? Or is the creation of this being called “man” the first stage in a tremendous descent that starts in the Garden of Eden and leads to a disturbed and desolated earth, that transforms the child and image of God into a robber and a rebel, and through him carries war and rumors of war to the farthest planets?

Coronation or crucifixion of creation – that is the question here. And we understand why God pauses and hesitates, for he is facing a risk. What a breath-taking thought! Is it not almost blasphemous even to think of such a thing?

And this is the way it was. In setting over against himself a being to whom he gave freedom and power he risked the possibilities that the child would become a competitor, that the child would become a megalomaniacal rival of the Creator.

This venture of God in which he bound himself to man – and exposed himself to the possibility of being reviled, despised, denied, and ignored by man – this venture was the first flash of his love. God ventured, as it were, his own self. He declared himself ready to suffer the pain the father endured when he let the prodigal son go into the far county, when he allowed deep wounds to be inflicted upon his heart, and still would not give up his child of sorrows. This line reaches its end in Jesus Christ. There God exposed himself to his rebellious children, put himself at their mercy, and let his most beloved die by their hand but for them.

6. Another clarification In God’s command we are not confronted with a choice between good and evil. It is one tree, “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”. Not two trees, a tree of good and a tree of evil. God does not create something evil and then place it alongside something good and call us to make a choice.

“If God had created an evil tree”, wrote Francis Schaeffer, “then we would have here a concept like the Hindu idea that eventually both good and evil, cruelty and non-cruelty, spring from God and thus are finally equal.” (*Genesis in Space and Time*, 71)

7. One final clarification. The prohibited tree is not called “the tree of knowledge.” A lot of confusion has been caused by carelessly referring to “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” as “the tree of knowledge”. Even as brilliant a thinker as Eric Fromm

read it incorrectly, and held the view that Genesis is teaching us that God does not want humanity to know, to think, to use our brains. Goodness gracious! God is not afraid of human beings gaining knowledge! What are we going to discover that could possibly surprise Him or threaten Him? What are we humans going to learn that will throw God into a tizzy? God delights in our discovering truth...in learning all about the created order. God finds great joy in our finding out how the universe works, how our bodies and minds and hearts work. God wants us to know as much as we can about His handiwork. I know I delight in the knowledge so many of you in this congregation have been given! I stand in awe of you carpenters and bakers and geologists and financial analysts and chemistry teachers and psychologists and mothers of little children. God made us to know! God wants us to use our brains. It is a false spirituality that asks us to stop thinking in order to believe. "Stop thinking as much, just believe" is not Christian spirituality. "Stop fretting," yes! But not stop thinking.

The prohibited tree is not "the tree of knowledge." It is "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." "You shall not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

Only one command. Only one.

The phrase, "the knowledge of good and evil," refers to a particular kind of knowledge. Trace how the idiom is used in the rest of the Bible and we understand why God prohibits it. It turns out that only God has it ... the knowledge of good and evil. Only God can have it and live.

Now, the idiom is used in reference to human beings; it is used of children and of the elderly. Children are said not to have it. Deuteronomy 1:39, "your little ones ... until this day, have no knowledge of good and evil." Oh, children have knowledge! We have had our little grandchildren with us for over a week ... they know a lot! They know good and they know evil. But they do not have "the knowledge of good and evil" (Isaiah 7:15). And elderly people, according to the Bible, have lost it. 2 Samuel 19:35 – "I am now eighty years old. Can I know good and evil?" Oh, eighty-year olds have knowledge! Knowledge that needs to be shared. Eighty-year-olds know a lot. Ninety- year-olds know a lot! Know good. Know evil. But what eighty and ninety year olds are beginning to lose is "the knowledge of good and evil."

So what is this idiom all about? Children do not have it...the elderly have lost it...and those in between think they have it!!

Daniel P. Fuller, the first Biblical theologian under whom I have the privilege to study...over 40 years ago now...has done the most complete work on the phrase. After working with every use of the idiom in the Bible, Dr. Fuller wrote: "... it would appear that to the original readers of Genesis 2, the expression 'to know good and evil' signified the possession of that maturity which frees one from being dependent on someone else for guidance on how to act wisely." This is what little children do not have, and what we lose as we age. "To know good and evil" signified the capacity

to live independently, without anyone else to help make our way through life. So Dan Fuller concludes: “The command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would thus mean that Adam and Eve were not to aspire to that maturity possessed by God himself whereby they might consider themselves to be free from dependence on God and able to achieve the harmony they now enjoyed by taking matters entirely into their own hands.” (*Unity of the Bible*, unpublished syllabus, viii-2.3)

Only God has that kind of knowledge. Only God can live independently of another.

So this is how I paraphrase the only command God gave in the garden. “Adam, you are what you are because of me, your Creator. You are a glorious creature, magnificent beyond what you yourself know. I have made you to be dependent on me for life. All I ask of you is that you be you...a creature, a human being. You are free. But do not use your freedom to try to be other than you are, a dependent creature. Do not try to be your own god. For all your magnificence you cannot be your own god. You be you, and I will be me. Do not try to be what I am. I tell you this for your own sake. Because if you try to be me, if you try to be an independent being, you will ruin your world. You will die.”

Oh, the love in that one command! God wants us to truly live. God is warning us that should we sign a declaration of independence from God we are signing our death certificate. Only one command: “do not try to live apart from me, do not try to live without me.”

It is the one command that he is speaking to every human, every moment of every day. “Do not aspire for the knowledge that makes you think you can live without me. Stay dependent on me.”

But Adam did not believe God. Adam and Eve thought they could make it on their own. They “took and ate” (Genesis 3:6). They “cast off all dependence on God” (Fuller) and took upon themselves the responsibility of making life work. They discovered they are not able to make it all work. They discovered that when they ate the fruit of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” they did not then obtain “the knowledge of good and evil,” they were not now independent. They were now dependent on drives and forces beneath their dignity. They discovered that they are, after all, not God. And instead of becoming more like God they became less like the humans God made them to be. (James Dunn, *Christology in the Making*)

But the Creator did not give up. God went after Adam and Eve. God comes after us. God comes all the way down, .. into the Garden that became a cemetery ... and calls us back to the original intent. Jesus, the one true human, calls out to us “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3) Why become a child? Because they are incompetent to make life work on their own!

And Jesus, then says to us: “I am the true vine” – referring to the tree of life? “I am the true vine, you are the branches. Abide in me and I in you; for apart from me you can do nothing.”

Only one command. Only one. All other commands are variations on the theme. “Trust me,” God is saying. “I will be God, you be human. I will be the Creator, you be the creature. Live in intimate dependence on me.”

Eve “took and ate.” Adam “took and ate.” Adam and Eve’s children “took and ate.” And all their children, and all their children’s children “took and ate” I “took and ate.” You “took and ate.” And we all began to die.

We do not hear those words “take...eat” again in the rest of the Bible, in the story that makes sense of our stories. They do not appear (together) again. Until that night, when the incarnate Creator gathered his first disciples, who were becoming like children, around a table in an upper room. Jesus lifts up a loaf of bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples, saying, “take, eat.” “I am the bread of life, whoever eats this bread...this fruit...will not die. Whoever eats this bread shall live forever.”

Only one command. Only one.