

Rev. Danny Mackey
Seventh Sunday after Trinity
July 15, 2018
Genesis 2:7-17
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

The LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Churches are getting political nowadays. You may have heard of Christ Church Cathedral on the Indianapolis Circle and its protest against, as it's been reported, "Trump's immigration policy." The church erected a chain-linked fence, topped by barbed wire, around the Holy Family. Their point is that "every family is holy," and that we need to pray for families separated at the U.S. border and work to change the policy.

We're not going to be political this morning. (In case you were worried.) This sermon isn't about immigration policy; rather, it's about how God established the garden of Eden and what that means for us, as we learn from Genesis 2.

What's the point of our lesson? It's got three parts.

First, the LORD God forms the first man from the dust of the ground and breathes life into him. We're even given the detail that God breathed into his nostrils! That man becomes "a living creature." And then we're given a description of the trees and their fruit. In particular are mentioned two trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Second, we have four rivers: Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates. The land beyond the garden is good. But why mention these rivers? Is this a geography lesson? Not really. What we see is that Eden had boundaries and borders. Water separates the garden from the rest of the world. Water often symbolizes separation in the Scriptures, whether it be a river or sea that keeps one people from another, or it signifies the distance between God and His human creatures, or it not merely represents but actually separates—just as it separates sins from sinners in the waters of Holy Baptism.

Third and last, we have God's commands. The man the LORD God formed is placed in the garden to tend and work it. He's designed to labor; and his labor is a joy. The LORD God also commands the man not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. With the word of command, God also gives the reason: "For in the day that you eat of it you shall surely

die.” God sets up another boundary, another border, doesn’t He? “Eat of any tree you like, except this one.”

We are thus given two boundaries in our lesson. The first is the border formed by the four rivers. The second is set by the LORD God’s command. And what’s the character of these borders? Are they a good or a bad thing? When God said that His creation was “very good,” did that include these borders? It most certainly did.

Why are these boundaries good?

The first establishes the specialness of Eden. Before the Fall, humanity is given the blessing “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and so on.” So, the four-river-border can’t be about keeping them located in only one place. Rather, I think it’s because of the very special nature of Eden. It’s where humanity was formed—and formed from! It’s where the LORD God walked with His creatures during the cool of the day. It’s where the animals would be named. And it’s where the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil were. Pretty special, indeed. Holy man has a holy place where the most holy of works happen. He was given to go beyond those borders, as we have the clear command to do so—but, as we learn in Genesis 3, unholy man won’t be allowed into such a holy place.

The other boundary is around that tree of the knowledge of good and evil. I’d argue that our first parents already knew what good and evil is. The tree gave them that knowledge—just by its existence. Good was to know the LORD God and do His will, namely, refrain from eating of the tree. Evil was to disregard God’s command and trespass the boundary, namely, grasping the tree’s fruit and biting into it. What they sought to gain from the tree was to be “like God” and possessing “wisdom” to determine good and evil for themselves. And what did they get? Just what the LORD God had warned: death. Now, they didn’t drop dead, with their heartbeats stopping and their brains quitting. The death they received was a spiritual death—which, by the way, is the true and greater death. God put up that boundary so that they wouldn’t harm themselves. Sounds like a good thing, right?

What about our boundaries and borders today? Are they good still?

Well, before you begin looking south toward Mexico or north toward Canada, look here, at our sanctuary. Do we have boundaries? We most certainly do. The very walls of our building are a boundary, a border that separates what goes on here from the world.

When we enter the front of the church (or, for most of you, the bell tower door), we come into a space before we enter the holy place that is our sanctuary. Sanctuary means holy place. It might be a few steps or a narthex, but that space is for our gathering and visiting. (Since most of you don't use the front doors, the back of the church kind of serves as a narthex, delineated by the end of the pews).

But then we are in the main part of the church, what we call the nave. Nave is for "boat." If you look up, our ceiling is supposed to look like the bottom of a boat. The words nave and navy have the same root. The nave is where God's people gather, safe in the ark of Christ's church, preserved from the raging world outside our walls.

The boundaries don't stop there. Betwixt and between the nave and the chancel is the baptismal font. We gather as the Baptized, and we can enter closer to the LORD God through the waters of Holy Baptism. It's pretty easy to make a connection to the bordering rivers in Genesis 2 and Baptism. After all, didn't the Israelites pass through the Jordan River into the Promised Land? And wasn't Jesus baptized in the same river?

The closer place to the LORD God is the chancel. Chancel means crossbars or, as I like to think of it, the place of the cross. If the sanctuary is the holy place, the chancel is the most holy place. It's like the garden of Eden. We are allowed to enter the chancel as the Baptized. Those who aren't baptized aren't given Eden and the promises of God, though they can behold it from afar and hear the same offered to them. First, they must come through Holy Baptism because only those made holy are allowed to enter this most holy space.

And then we have one more border—the rail. The rail separates those serving at the altar from those being served by it. Think of it like waitstaff and patron. The waitstaff go to and from the kitchen, but the patrons don't ever go back there. In fact, if the patron speaks with the chef, the chef comes out to them. In any case, for us the altar is the holy of holies because we receive from it what only our LORD God can give. If our chancel corresponds to Eden, as I'm suggesting it does, then the altar is the where the tree of life was planted. The tree of life and the cross of Christ become one and the same. We feast from the altar to receive the meal of life and salvation. Likewise, our first parents were given to eat of the tree of life so that they would feast and thereby live forever.

Instead, our first parents chose to trespass the boundaries the LORD God set in place. They violated the border established by God's Law. They sought to be both lawmakers and

a law unto themselves. They had no regard for God’s command—even if that boundary was put there for their own good. Ultimately, it didn’t matter to them what the LORD God said was good. The only things that mattered were what they thought was right or wrong. They resisted and rebelled against the LORD God’s clear Word. We, their children, are still paying the price for our first parents’ trespass.

Since they trespassed His boundaries, they no longer knew the LORD God and His will. Therefore, He wrote the Law on their hearts, which we refer to as the natural law and the conscience. But still people ignore their consciences, hardening their hearts; so God became more explicit and gave the Law to the Israelites through Moses. The Ten Commandments serve as a curb, that is, a boundary between humanity and sin. That’s what the Law is—the command of God and a boundary between us and sin. But we thrill to break the Law and trespass the borders of God’s Word.

That’s why Jesus’ teaches us to pray for ourselves and for those who don’t know the LORD God and His will: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Again, boundary language, right?

How has the LORD God answered this prayer? He observed our trapped condition—because the boundaries only became dangerous to us. Why? Are the boundaries the LORD God set bad in and of themselves? No. They only become bad when one trespasses them, right? Right. Therefore, God doesn’t violate His own boundaries; He doesn’t illegally cross the borders He Himself established. Instead, He put Himself in our trapped condition. He did so by crossing legally, that is, He crossed the boundary without a trespass.

The LORD God accomplished such a feat by His Incarnation. He was made man in the person of Jesus Christ, assuming our humanity into the divine Godhead. As the LORD God, He could go wherever He wanted—because all places were made by Him and therefore belong to Him. But because He needed to make His dying creature into a living creature once more, the LORD God entered His creation. If God had simply brushed aside the crime of our trespass, He would’ve gone against Himself and ceased to be holy and just. Therefore, He needed to become man in order to rescue us from our trapped condition.

As one of us, Jesus kept the Law perfectly, not once grasping for equality with God and trespassing the divinely set boundaries. He knew what such a trespass earned: death. Yet, even though He didn’t earn such a punishment, Jesus took the legal punishment our first

parents earned—and we ourselves have earned countless times with our trespassing of God’s lawful borders. Jesus took our death. What did this mean? It meant that He was separated from His mother, arrested by the Jewish religious authorities. From a distance, kept away by the Roman soldiers, she watched as her Son was crucified. From an even greater distance, a distance that couldn’t be crossed except by one way, the heavenly Father beheld His Son, hanging on the cross. And Jesus cried out in His agony, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In Jesus’ death on the cross, the God of gods and Lord of lords became the Trespasser of trespassers.

Because He has fulfilled the legal requirements, Jesus crosses the boundary and border that separated us from the LORD God. By becoming one of us, He brings us with Himself in His crossing. He makes it so that we can enter the LORD God’s holy presence by making us holy once more. He gives us His Word to give us true knowledge of good and evil. He gives us His Sacrament so that we can partake of the forgiveness of our trespasses—and where there is forgiveness, there is also life and salvation. And He gives us our sanctuary with its narthex, nave, chancel, and altar—He gives us such a place so that we might learn from its boundaries all that He has crossed—and continues to cross—to draw us closer to Himself.

In Jesus’ name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in + Christ Jesus.