

Somebody Told a Lie, and We Believed It

America's Original Sin

Genesis 3:1-11

Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

Clemson, SC

Thank Mary and Laura (for letting me preach)

Genesis 3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden;

3 but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'"

4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die;

5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

8 They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

9 But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

10 He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

11 He said, "**Who told you that you were naked?** Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

(Gen 3:1-11 NRS)

Romans 12:1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,

so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function,

⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. (Rom 12:1-5 NRS)

It was about 10 months ago next Sunday, on June 17th on a Wednesday night in Charleston, at the historic Emanuel AME Church that we again saw the face of evil. It was manifest in a boy, a young man just 21 years old, a boy next door kind of a young man with an apple pie face, a bowl-like haircut that looked like something a loving mom might have given him, and an apparently affable personality that enabled him to sit through an hour of a Wednesday night Bible study with a group of welcoming strangers.

Then all of a sudden, he pulled out a .45 caliber Glock pistol and in the span of less than a few minutes he had killed 9 faithful, committed Christian people whose only crime was that they wanted to worship God...*oh, and that they had black skin!*

As he stood over his victims, this young man turned race terrorist uttered words that betrayed his intent as he condemned his African American targets and declared that he 'had' to shoot them because "You rape 'our' women, and you're taking over '**our**' country. And you have to go."

This young man, Dylann Roof is a symbol of what racism really looks like. It looks innocent. It is familiar, like apple pie faced boys next door, it is ubiquitous; it is everywhere. It is unthreatening, I think I heard someone call it like "wall paper," always there coloring our world, but often overlooked because we are so used to seeing it.

And what he did is horrible, taking the life of South Carolina State Senator, Rev. Clementa Pinckney and 8 of his beloved members; but it really is not the horror we should resist. It is a horrible offense, but he is not the ultimate problem. Rev. Dr. William Barber, president of the NC NAACP said it this way...”We caught the perpetrator, *but the Killer is still on the loose.*” The real problem is *the lie of race itself* that makes situations like this possible, that fosters systematic injustices that disenfranchise entire groups of people, that perpetuates not just personal prejudice but systemic biases that negatively impact blacks, Latinos, Native American Indians and Others even when no single “racist” person can be found. *The real problem is that “race” itself is a lie that has taken over our world and we, as yet, have done little to stop it!*

Temptation in the Garden: Stories about Race

I have for years compared our acceptance of the lie that is race to the story of the temptation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. In many respects, the stories resemble each other. In the Garden, Adam and Eve *begin in innocence. They are innocent* when they are confronted by a serpent who is wiser than they are, who promises to give them great insight into how the world really is, *who tempts them to do what they know to be wrong.* The serpent ends their innocence and corrupts them by inviting them to taste of the lie that will destroy their world.

This is, in Hebrew, a story with a joke at its heart. The humans recognize that the serpent is wise or cunning (Hebrew *arum*). When they eat of the fruit it is to become like him and like God, to gain power in wisdom of knowing “good and evil” some of everything. But after they accept the serpent’s lie, after they taste the fruit they learn that they are not

arum or wise, but *erummim* or naked. They wanted power but found vulnerability; they thought that they would improve themselves, but found themselves damaged by their new awareness. And that is where we find the parallel to our own experiences with race.

Who told you about “race?” What is your personal story about your own first time hearing about this lie?

Often, when we tell our own stories about learning about “race,” there is the same kind of temptation involved in them too. They are stories about “innocence lost” as we are blissfully unaware of the fact that race exists. They are usually stories from our childhood. They are stories:

- about having a friend of another color,
- about sharing an innocent afternoon playing with a friend with different skin,
- about inviting a friend with a darker hue to our house for a visit,
- or maybe even about having a best friend of a different color with whom we played for years until one day when we became “dating age” and the friendship ***had to stop.***

And then there is that “serpent” figure. Not an overtly evil figure...just someone more worldly, more knowledgeable, more wise about the things of this world than we.

- Maybe it was granddad who told us that we could no longer play so freely with “those people.”
- Maybe it was dear old Uncle Jack who took us aside and warned us about bringing “that kind” of friend to the house.
- Maybe it was our sweet sister Sarah who forced us to consider the consequences of spending too much time with people “like that.”
- Or maybe it was a slightly older more popular friend who wore the same skin, who threatened to shun us if we didn’t shun someone of another color.

In just about all of our stories, there is someone who points out “race” to us for the first time.

That’s when it happens; we who had made a friend in innocence, who had crossed that racialized line in blissful ignorance, now become acutely aware that we are “naked.” By tasting the fruit, by accepting the notion of “race,” we have become vulnerable.

Vulnerable to the critique of our family; vulnerable to the stares of others; vulnerable to the negative judgments of those we hold dear; vulnerable. We have eaten the proverbial fruit, and *now we know! Now we can see!* Now we have become wiser, more worldly, more aware of the way the world sees. Somebody told a lie, and *we have believed it...we believed the lie that is race!*

The Lie that is Race

And race *is* a lie, a monstrous myth, a deception crafted to justify colonialism and slavery, the taking of land from people and the taking of people from land. It is a “legitimizing ideology,” a fiction crafted to justify the dehumanization of some peoples so that *we can use and abuse them!* It is lie created to divide us into groups based on the color of our skin, the shape of our noses, the texture of our hair, the frame of our bodies. It asserts because we are obviously different in appearance on the outside, that we are fundamentally ontologically (in our very being) different from each other on the inside. It deceives us to believe that because of these differences some are better than or worse than others. It has posited that those with lighter skin should be responsible to control the lives, interests, property, land, and labor of those with darker skin. It has posited that those with darker skins are “wild” and in need of control by those who are lighter, smarter, and more able than are they.

It has shaped the world in which we live in extraordinarily unequal ways.

-It is the reason why so many African American men are gunned down in the streets by white police officers. The officers see blackness as a danger to be feared and something to protect America from. They view themselves as those charged to keep dangerous wild blackness under control; ***like overseers on a plantation long ago.***

-It is the reason why so many African Americans suffer the indignities of life in the ghetto and the rest of the nation seems ***to care little and do less*** to change their circumstances. They see horrors of ghettos, failing schools, chronic joblessness, rampant crime as “appropriate,” acceptable, expected for those with black skin.

-It is the reason why we have developed antipathy and hatred of poor minorities as those too lazy to lift themselves up because of their genetic predispositions make them less intelligent, less hardworking, less worthy of assistance; hence we view them as leeches who are draining “our” hard earned resources and wasting “our” hard earned tax dollars!

-Quiet as it is kept, it is the reason why the nation has such a low opinion of the President who has revived a failing economy, saved the auto industry, restored our national image, given 28,000,000 people healthcare, set Wall Street on solid ground, stopped Osama bin Laden, but we have called him a foreigner, a Muslim, a communist, a nigger, a liar, an incompetent, and anything but a “child of God.”

-It is the reason why Dylann Roof could hold such twisted views of the black people who welcomed him into their worship as “rapists” and “interlopers,” how he could turn a gun on those who extended their hands in welcome to him. ***Somebody told him a lie, and he believed it!*** He put on America’s racial goggles as he walked into Emanuel’s doors on that Wednesday night. Through the lenses of race he saw black people as monsters and accepted these distorted images of them as if they were true.

The “race” lie has made us monsters to each other, monsters to be eliminated. The lenses of “race” have hidden our humanity, have hidden the image of God that lingers in each of us, and made children of God look like beasts better off dead and gone.

Somebody lied to us and told us that we were different. Somebody lied to us and told us that some people were better than Others. Somebody lied to us and told us that race was

God's doing, that it was biblical, that it was part of God's plan. ***Somebody lied to us, and what's worse, we believed it!***

You see, race has no power in and of itself. It does not derive its power from its biological validity, its genetic reality, scientific undeniability.

-Anthropologists attest that race is "Humanity's most dangerous myth," a manufactured idea with no basis in reality for people exist not in discreet "racial" clusters, but along a continuum of colors and types. ***Race is a lie!***

-Physicians attest that human beings are fundamentally similar biologically with the same blood types flowing through our veins regardless of our outward appearance. ***Race is a lie!***

-Geneticists declare that there is more genetic variation between two groups of gorillas on one mountain in Africa than between every human being on the planet; that there is more genetic difference within any supposed "racial" group than between any two "racial" groups; that what we look like on the outside says very little about our genetic make up because the genes that govern our appearance are relatively few and transmitted independent of other factors that shape our identities; that genetic difference is not accounted for by differences in color or features but by distance that populations live from each other. ***Race is a lie!***

-And social scientists declare that many of the differences that we imagine to be evidence of "race" are actually attributable to differences in environment, access to power, education, opportunity, wealth, healthcare, and community stability. ***Race is a lie!***

According to the experts in various fields, race is not real. It has no power of its own to shape our lives. It derives all of its power from our consent. ***Race gets its power from us...we believe it.*** We believed that different colors equal different character; we believed that different features equals different facility; we believed that different appearance equals different worth. And as a result, we treat people differently and foster a system that responds to people differently and create a world that perpetuates the very disparities we associate with race. ***Somebody lied to us ...and what's worse, we believed it!***

Race is a lie and its time that we stopped telling it. Stop telling it to our children so we don't corrupt the next generation. Stop telling it in our families so that they won't remain monochromatic reflections of us and those like us. Stop telling it on our jobs so that maybe blacks, Native American Indians, Latinos and other peoples might have a chance to find employment. Stop telling it in our neighborhoods so that some of everybody might eventually live there. Race has no power in and of itself. It only has the power that we give it. When we realize that we are not defined by race, but that we have the power to define those beautiful differences that make for human diversity in positive ways, we will be able to transform this society! ***Race is a lie and it is time that we stopped telling it!***

Perhaps we are all like M&M's; arrayed in a host of beautiful colored shells on the outside, we are all the same sweet goodness on the inside. Only a fool would believe one better than another based on the color of the candy shell!

What will we do?

In the aftermath of this horrific occurrence at Emanuel AME, what will we as a nation do? If history has taught us anything, we as a nation will probably do...***nothing***. That is what we did after the loss of more than 20 children at Sandy Hook. Nothing! That is what we did after the shooting of a U.S. Representative Gabby Giffords in Arizona. Nothing! That is what we did after the racially based murders of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Oscar Grant, Jonathan Ferrell, and a list of extrajudicial executions of black boys and men by white cops that grow longer every 28 days. ***Nothing!*** That is what we are doing about the more than 1,000,000 African American men living in cages in our nation's increasingly for profit prisons. ***Nothing!*** We have a habit of seeing tragedies,

gun based tragedies, race based tragedies, tragedies take place again and again in our country *and doing absolutely nothing about it*...it has become our way...*it is the American way.*

That is the power of the lie, it is so pervasive our leaders think there is nothing they can do about it! So ,perhaps we should stop waiting for someone else to act, and **begin to act ourselves!**

[I watched the news a few weeks back and was surprised to see two good friends of mine, Jibril Hough and Rose Hamid, who had been “escorted” out of a Trump campaign event in Rock Hill, SC. They had gone to the event to “critique” Trump’s anti-Moslem hate-filled rhetoric and to say that Muslims are not the problem. They were yelled at, pushed, roughed up, insulted, abused, just for saying that they were good decent people who did not deserve to be scapegoated for someone’s twisted political agenda.

Their act of defiance reminded me of another friend, young Bree Newsome, who about 9 months ago scaled a flagpole in front of the South Carolina Capitol Building to take down a Confederate flag that symbolized hatred and white dominance, and inspired Dylan Roof to commit his acts of evil. In a statement to Black Lives Matter when asked why did she remove the flag, Bree proclaimed, ***“We can’t wait any longer!”***

That is a message that resonates as we look at current racial disparities like the fact that:

- blacks continue to earn far less than whites (We can’t wait any longer)
- blacks have a shorter life expectancy than whites (We can’t wait any longer)

-blacks are 24 times as likely to be shot by the police as are whites (We can't wait any longer)

-blacks are more likely to live in the ghetto, in substandard housing, receiving a second rate education, subsisting on minimum wage, and end up sentenced to prison for crimes for which whites are excused (We can't wait any longer)

Bree Newsome's words remind me of the words of another great young leader. In his now famous missive, "A Letter from a Birmingham City Jail," Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. argues against waiting for justice to come. After questioning those Birmingham clergy who called on him to wait till blacks received their rights "eventually," Dr. King proclaims that:

We must come to see that human progress *never* rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of [people] willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard wor[k] time itself becomes *an ally of the forces of social stagnation*. We must use time creatively, and forever realize that *the time is always ripe to do right*. *Now is the time* to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. *Now is the time* to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity. (296)

Now is the time! We can't wait out injustice! We can't wait out racist thought!

We can't wait out racial disparities! We have to work with God to bring them to an end. We have to work ***and the time is NOW!***

And there are things we can do to begin to confront the lie that is "race" and begin to find a way forward.

- 1) **We have to admit once and for all that race is not real, and stop living into our fears of Others of different colors!** We have to take off the goggles of "race" that make people look like monsters and hide the image of God in Others!
- 2) **We have to confess the fact that we have often failed; failed to stand up for the equality of all, failed to argue for the rights of all, failed to stand with Others** when they have been victims of the hatred and ignorance, failed to address the issue of race as we have passively condoned if not actively accepted

- it. In part *we have to acknowledge that we have failed so that we can do better this time!*
- 3) **We have to admit that we have been part of the problem. We have not seen this sin for what it is. We have not worked as hard as we could. We have waited for someone else to address it, someone else to fix it,** someone else to be responsible for a problem that we all share a part in perpetuating.
 - 4) **We have to confess that our churches have been complicit in this crime. From the time of slavery until today our churches have justified racial difference, fostered white privilege, served as “sanctuaries of sameness.”** We have to acknowledge that our churches still by and large remain the most segregated spaces in most of our lives, even more segregated than our children’s schools, our neighborhoods, and our jobs. *We must confess the role that our religion has played in the furthering of this lie if we are ever to use it to make a positive change.*
 - 5) **We have to commit ourselves to being part of the solution, to talking about race openly and honestly, to examining the racial disparities that exist in our world and acknowledging where we see privilege and disadvantage working,** and to finally standing up, stepping out, and working to do everything from changing hearts and minds to changing Federal laws and corporate policies to eliminate those disparities that attend to life in a racialized world.
 - 6) **“We who are white” have to begin by examining the privileges that we enjoy and honestly address what are the implications for Others that do not share in our privilege!** As Tim Wise notes in his seminal volume *White Like Me*, “[W]hiteness [is] of benefit in relative and absolute terms...It bestows advantage, no matter how much fog we may try and use to cover up that simple fact (51-52)...”
 - 7) **We have to begin with small tangible acts to confront larger systemic racism. Whatever you think of Jibril and Roses’ protest at the Trump rally or Bree Newsome’s scaling the flagpole to remove South Carolina’s state-sanctioned symbol of dehumanizing hatred, at least they did something!** What can we do? What policies could we change? What systems could we confront? What injustices could we challenge? What could we do to be those agents of change? Like Jibril, Rose, and Bree, sometimes we need to stand up, to step out, and be co-workers with God to create the world we wish to see!

That is partly why I Love Dr. King’s notion of being co-workers with God, because it challenges our assumption that we need not only to wait for the world to change, but wait for God to change it. We’ve been waiting on Jesus through the genocide of

the Native American Indians, been waiting on Jesus through slavery, been waiting on Jesus through civil rights, been waiting on Jesus through the immigrant crisis on our borders, the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, the ISIL crisis in Syria and Iraq. If “race” is the original American sin, **“waiting for change” is the American Christian sin.** I have often wondered: what if the world is in the state that it is in not because we are waiting on God:

- What if there is still racial hatred in our hearts,
- What if there is still a racist system in our nation,
- What if there are still homeless people under our bridges,
- What if there is still impoverished people in Charleston, Columbia, and Clemson,
- What if there is still inequality in our local schools,
- What if there is still segregation in our Christian congregations,
- What if there is still injustice in our nation,
- What if there is still a denial of Medicaid Expansion, and voting rights, and fair worker’s pay, and fair women’s rights by our state Legislatures,

What if there is still evil in this world, not because we are waiting on God, but

because God is waiting on us?!

So Dr. King’s notion of being co-workers with God suggests that God is already there.

It suggests that God is already working to implant that vision of a more just society in our minds. It suggests that God is already tilling the soil into which the seeds of change can be sown. It suggests that God is already at work to bring about a more just society, and ***that God is just waiting on us to finally stand up, step out, and join in the struggle!***

This is the vision that I want to leave with you today.

-It is a vision of us joining God's work to create a world where differences are celebrated not avoided.

-It is a vision of us joining Christ's on-going work to reconcile fractured humanity.

-It is a vision of us joining Jesus' work of learning how to Love everybody regardless of our diverse colors.

It is a vision of us joining our Lord in fashioning a global community where our primary identity is defined not in race, not in nationality, but in Christ. This is who we are and this is the message that we as Christian people should share about differences in appearance. Though we proudly claim our diverse colors and backgrounds; though we boldly Love the diverse skin that God has put us in; we are all of God's One image, recipients of God's One Salvation, baptized with Christ's One Baptism, united in the Savior's One flesh, united with Jesus as One family of Abraham; ***we are One!*** This is our story as Christians!

So we can boldly proclaim against the darkness of this world that, "Race is a lie and it is time that we stopped telling it! That race is a lie, and it is time we stopped believing it!"