

Sermon: Bookshelf Gems: #2 Original Blessing Text Genesis 1: 20-31 August 4, 2024
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Part of the movement towards retirement for people in my profession is dealing with books. After decades of accumulating books, what now to do with them?

Some books do not hold their value. Scholarship progresses, statistics become dated, ideas become stale, the way we use language evolves...

Some books improve with age. Some may have been ahead of their time and with the passage of years, what may have seemed speculative becomes topical, what may have seemed on the edge comes into the center.

In the weeks of summer, from now through Labour Day, I would share with you each week something rediscovered on my bookshelves, a book or an author who has something to say to us in our present moment.

This morning I would share one author re encountered from my bookshelf reviewing: Matthew Fox and his 1983 book - Original Blessing.

Matthew Fox wrote a book called *Original Blessing*. This faith statement that I will share records the doctrine of **Original Sin**.

From the 20 Articles of Faith of the UCC, from 1925:

We believe that our first parents, being tempted, chose evil, and so fell away from God and came under the power of sin, the penalty of which is eternal death; and that, by reason of this disobedience, all men are born with a sinful nature, that we have broken God's law...

Original Sin, articulated in this statement of doctrine, is the theological idea that says: since the first people, Adam and Eve committed the first transgression against God, we and all their descendants have now fallen from grace. We collectively bear the guilt of their first sin.

Original Sin put a huge emphasis on the sinfulness of all people and of the fallen nature of all that God made.

Original Sin first was popularized by an early church writer, Augustine of Hippo. It began to become a mainstream theological construct in the 4th Century.

We can note that Jesus never spoke of original sin.

The Jewish tradition, the first interpreters of the story of Adam and Eve rejects the idea of inherited sin.

The early creeds of the church, the Apostles Creed from the 3rd Century and the Nicene Creed from the 4th and the Athanasian Creed of the 6thC may speak of forgiveness but do not promote anything like original sin.

Some parts of the Christian movement have never entertained the doctrine of original sin. The Eastern Churches, Orthodox and Catholic, and some Protestant movements such as the Disciples of Christ have never embraced it.

Original sin as a fully articulated idea is not found in Scripture. Only through a particular interpretative lens might its Biblical roots be vaguely glimpsed. And there are lots of Biblical verses that suggest a contrary view.

"God said, let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness...And God saw everything that he had made, and...it was very good." Gen. 1:26

²⁰ The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. Ezekiel 18

"Human beings...are the image and glory of God." I Corinthians 11:7

In 1985 Matthew Fox published *Original Blessing*. He was a Dominican priest, a teacher at Loyola University in Chicago. His critique of the doctrine of original sin drew the attention of the Vatican. His Dominican colleagues were asked to investigate him twice, for heresy. They exonerated him.

The Vatican forbade Fox from teaching and writing for a year in 1988. He soon moved to the Episcopalian church where he resumed his writing and teaching career.

Why the doctrine of original sin took hold in the 4th Century is open to speculation. Perhaps it is one way to reflect on a world that is sometimes violent, cruel, and plagued by war and inequality.

Fox points out some of the problems that come from embracing the Doctrine of original sin.

- First, it reduces Jesus to a sacrifice, when he is so much more Richard Rohr has written:

Genesis began with six clear statements of original blessing or inherent goodness (Genesis 1:10-31), and the words "original sin" are not in the New Testament. Yet the Church became so preoccupied with the fly in the ointment, the flaw in the beauty that we forgot and even missed

out on any original blessing. We saw Jesus primarily as a problem-solver rather than as a revealer of the very heart and image of God (Colossians 1:15f).

- Secondly, the doctrine can lead to a moral fatalism. The monk Pelagius, in the 4th C, reflecting on the “original sin” informed morality of his time wrote: “The excuse was “I can’t help it, this is just the way I am”.”
- Thirdly, original sin diminishes people, gives permission to treat them poorly. If a person is fallen from birth how might we treat them? If a person is cursed by God from the moment of their creation, what then do they deserve from others?
- Finally, what perhaps makes Fox’s writing so important for our time is his emphasis on the sacredness of creation and of our role in it—He emphasizes what the mystical tradition calls the Via Positiva, the path of joy and delight, awe, and gratitude. In a blessed Creation, we might see the presence of God, the Creator revealed in the goodness that God made.

With original sin as our background, we might ask how do we live in a fallen world? Does the created world even matter? At times, the Christian tradition has overlooked this world that God made, in order to focus solely on the world to come.

Fox emphasizes the original blessing, given by God in Creation. In the first story of Creation, in Genesis 1, God made the world and everything in it, including us, and called it very good.

How do we live in a world that from the beginning holds the blessing of God? How do we relate to and treat a blessed Creation?

How do we live with others who hold the Creators original blessing? How do we live knowing that we bear the image of God?

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In the Celtic Christian tradition, which never embraced the doctrine of original sin. We hear the concept of original blessing, we see fox’s Via Positiva, the path of joy and delight, awe, and gratitude in their blessings and in their prayers:

*There is no plant in the ground
but is full of God’s virtue.
There is no form in the strand
but it is full of God’s blessing.
There is no life in the sea,
There is not creature in the river,
There is not in the firmament
But proclaims God’s goodness.*

Amen