

From Genesis: Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and covered themselves. (Gen 3:7)

I have just returned from Confirmation retreat, so today's sermon is about adolescence. I am no expert. I failed it the first time. But I love working with the young people of our church. And people like to bring up adolescence with me. Usually, in conversations about Ella, people like to remind me how unprepared I am for her to be a teenager!

Most dictionaries agree that the word adolescence is made up of two Latin roots, *ad* meaning "toward" and *alescere*, meaning "to grow." That is to say, adolescents are those who are growing toward something. That is what we tell them and quietly hope that it is true, that they are growing toward something. And I suspect that is why we hold out hope for them, because we believe that they are growing toward something. And of course there are points along the way when we realize there is still more "growing toward" to be done. God is always

calling us to become something more, so perhaps in that we recognize how we too all share in growing toward.

One of my favorite authors, a Presbyterian minister named Frederick Buechner, has suggested a totally different meaning of the word adolescent. He suggests that the word adolescent should be based instead on the Latin words *ad*, again meaning "toward," but this time, *dolar*, the word meaning pain. (*Secrets in the Dark*, "Adolescence and the Stewardship of Pain")

Using his etymology, *adolarcents* are those who are in a process of moving toward pain. They are in a process of discovering pain itself, coming to terms with it, understanding how to deal with it, and God willing not just learning how to avoid it or survive, but how to learn from it; and, because of it, to become more human. Using this second definition, we can imagine how we are all *adolarcents*, who learn through pain how to become all that God created us to be, to be perfectly human.

It is that process of becoming more human that we want for them and also for ourselves, to learn when to rely on ourselves, and of course when to rely on God, and how sometimes in life we have to learn to put the pieces back together even when it isn't really what we want to do.

"Adolescents," Buechner writes, "are Adam and Eve in the process of eating the forbidden fruit and discovering that in addition to good, there is also evil. In addition to the joy of being alive, there is a realization of what their lives really mean. And of course, there is that realization that they are going to have to do something, even though they cannot make up for what they have done."

We begin Lent every year by remembering Jesus' forty days in the desert because he fasted and faced myriad temptation, but today I would like to suggest something different. Think of it as the story of Jesus' adolescence.

In the desert, we find him gone from home and its safety and having to deal with all the existential questions and

nagging fears of life. He once said elsewhere that his time had not yet come, but here he faces what he came to accomplish in being human, and what it will cost him. This is a story of how he became perfectly human.

I remember a friend of mine who worked both as a parish priest and as an ethics teacher at the school that belonged to the church. He used to go on and on about the fascinating discussions he would have with his teenage students, how deep they could be, and yet also so very shallow. "Well," he would quip, "they are teenagers... they are still becoming." He was like that.

He recounted to me that he had taken his ninth grade class to lunch one Friday. While they were there, they acted like teenagers. They were loud; they were rowdy; they were messy and rude. When they got back to the school, he began to lecture them on all that they clearly had not yet become, and then he stopped. He realized it wasn't working. He paused and asked them plainly,

“What is keeping you from being the human being you were created to be?” They said nothing. “How could they?” he wondered; they were adolescents who knew no pain, who had everything in life they would ever need. That’s why they were at this school. They lacked nothing and wanted for nothing, but part of being human is to lack and want and to become something. When we have too much, we make up unreal needs and worries and contrived fears.

So he went in a different direction. “Tell me what about life frightens you.” Finally, one young student offered this. “I’m afraid of being like that Mexican lady.” “You are afraid of being like a Mexican lady?” He didn’t have a clue. “Yeah, the one at the restaurant picking up after us. She never looked at us. She never said a word. Her whole life is spent cleaning up after people who don’t care about her. It’s almost like she doesn’t matter.” One said she was afraid of having a job where people see her picking up trash. This litany of fear continued for a

minute. “I’m afraid of telling my parents where I really want to go to college.” “I’m afraid my life isn’t really going to be very meaningful.” “I was so happy,” he said, “in that moment of facing fears, they were finally on their way to becoming human.”

I remember one afternoon when I was still working as a youth minister in Atlanta. I usually walked to the church because it was so close. One day I was running late when a homeless man stopped me. He wanted me to be more interested in his plight than I thought I could be. I explained to him my own dilemma in being late, but he wasn’t persuaded, so finally I just kept walking.

I decided to tell my youth what had happened. And they didn’t miss an opportunity to criticize me! They quoted the Bible to me; they reminded me of the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan and how he was too busy because of religious obligation to help. I never knew they were so proficient in Scripture! One girl sounded

just like her mother, “we’re just really disappointed in you. You of all people should know better.” I suspect they were right in ways they didn’t yet understand.

That day, though I never told them, I was so proud of them! I was so proud that they were disappointed in me! How terrible would it have been if they had taken my side over that poor and homeless Samaritan, if they had just excused me and said it didn’t matter?

“Then the eyes of both were opened,” Genesis tells us, “and they knew they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and covered themselves.”

You remember that there are two stories of Creation in Genesis. The first is in Chapter one, of God who speaks and the universe is created, and the day is separated from the night, just as the dry land is separated from the sea. But in chapter two comes the personal story. It is our parents, *the human* and *the one who gave us life*.

That is what their names mean in Hebrew, Adam and Eve, *the human* and *the one who gives life*.

As the Hebrew people must have noticed so long ago when they preserved this second story of Creation, there is something so true about this other story, and that is not just what happened to *the human* and *the one who gives life* so many years ago, but how it repeats itself again and again, so much so that we ought to understand how this story is about us, too. Theologians have called it the story of “the Fall,” saying this is how original sin came into the world, about how we share with Adam and Eve in that pattern of sin. That is true. There is also something familiar about their story, about the story of adolescence and of growing through pain and of becoming something more. It is what some of the church fathers once called “original righteousness.”

Original righteous is the other side of the coin called original sin. If original sin says in Adam all have died,

original righteousness remembers that in Christ all have been made alive. If original sin recognizes adolescence as pain and not yet being, original righteousness hears in it God calling us to something new. If original sin realizes we are naked, original righteousness sews fig leaves together. Both sides of the coin are important. Original righteousness looks beyond death to resurrection. And it transcends the grace that saves us, and it asks what exactly God has redeemed us to be.

It is what we have learned from Jesus, that despite the pain of being human, life is not a journey toward death; it is a pilgrimage toward resurrection. I suspect that is why he went into the desert, and why we go to the desert with him; we remember that it leads to the mysterious hope of an empty tomb. That's why we all deal with pain and with becoming, why we learn to do something even when we cannot change what we have done, why we sew fig leaves together, why we go into the desert and stare down the Devil. Because, despite

how awful it sounds to repeat adolescence, we are God's beloved adolescents. We are always becoming. And Jesus has taught us that the pain and the becoming are how God makes us like him, how God makes us more perfectly human.