

April 26, 2020

Genesis 1:27; 2:7–9, 16–18

Mark 10:42–45

Immune to Sin
The Reverend Evans McGowan

When I was a middle school teacher, my students would constantly ask me for certain things, especially where to sit. “Can I sit in the front?” “Can I sit in the back?” “Can I sit outside?” I would usually play along at first, and ask, “Why?” “So I can focus better.” “So I can be with my friends.” “So I can be away from such and such.” “Because he smells.” “Because she’s annoying.” You might say it was an early form of selective social distancing.

Sometimes I heard good reasons, and some... well, not so good. Yet I knew if I acquiesced in any way, I would have ten more students asking for something. (Perhaps the first rule of teaching, and maybe leadership and power in general, is never to give in. Stand firm and hold your ground... lest you be trampled by a horde of precocious pre-teenagers.)

So unless the student’s learning was obviously being impacted, I would usually say, “Let’s try this out for now... Let’s see how this goes... For the foreseeable future...” I wonder if that sentiment feels familiar to all of us today.

I’m reminded of my students’ requests this week as we continue to live under a Stay at Home Order. As people in certain states—including our own—protest the shutdown of so much of our lives, (and) others scold them for daring to put the rest of us at risk. Some governors are deciding to allow businesses to open back up, and others are taking a wait-and-see approach. It’s the beauty and the chaos of these United States. Yet whether or not things go back to normal—whatever that means post COVID-19—will depend on we the people... the other disciples... and how we react to our leadership’s action or non-action.

All of us want to know our place in this big, wide and WILD world... but dare anyone else tell us where our place is! Like James and John, we go to the authorities to adjudicate our claims, but we only listen when they say what we want to hear.

Without knowing our place or where we are, we are lost and unable to find our way in the wilderness. With daily routines destroyed and work schedules out of whack, we long for someone, ANYONE to bring order out of chaos and to calm the stormy seas. And if it’s not Jesus who will be deciding who sits where, then who? Who can we trust when the world is on fire, when everything falls apart?

Before we go searching for answers, let us remember the quest is in the questions. This week we welcomed 11 new members to our congregation, our Confirmation Class of 2020. As their teacher and fellow traveler, we journeyed together this year, always asking questions on our quest to discover what it means to be a disciple of Christ and a member of this congregation. They came up with some creative responses. “Who is Jesus?” “The

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one immune to sin.” “What is grace?” “Grace is Jesus’ superpower.” “Who is God?” “God is all knowing and all being.” Their responses remind us all that we are on this faith journey together, and today our scripture passage reminds us where this journey began: In a garden, in the very soil beneath our feet.

Our translation today calls this soil humus to show the connection to humans. In Hebrew, soil is *‘adamah*, and *adam* means the human, not simply a name. *Adam* is fashioned from *‘adamah*; human from humus. Science reminds us that this humus, this dust, was formed in the belly of stars long ago, who compressed the atoms into new elements before exploding into supernovas that light up the sky. When God said “Let there be light,” God also created the stardust that would one day form the building blocks of human beings.

In the beginning, God’s Spirit or Breath or Wind (they’re all the same word in Hebrew): *ruah* hovered over the waters and all was formless void, in Hebrew the *tohu wabohu*, or as Alter translates, welter and waste, before giving shape to the Earth and separating light from dark, water from land. Now, in the garden, God gives shape to the discarded stardust by fashioning the formless matter into a living being with *ruah*, a breath:

We are mortal mud creatures and also stardust sapiens, crafted from the cosmos to be caretakers of creation, God’s masterful masterpiece on this rock orbiting a star among trillions upon trillions. And how lonely we would be without each other! We certainly feel that more today than perhaps ever before, being alone together amidst this pandemic.

And so God creates a sustainer to *adam*. Other translations use the term helper, and yes helpers are helpful, but what we really need are sustainers, people who not only get things back to normal but keep things from falling apart. Helpers may help someone up, but sustainers give sustenance to others, empowering them to walk on and move forth as co-equals in creation.

Indeed, Jesus reminds us that less we forget our place in the world; we are above all else called to be servants to one another. We who are doomed to die and destined to dust, are also fortunate to be fashioned and graced by God’s breath to be living, breathing, human beings. We are both creatures of clay and beings of blessing.

With stardust in our veins it is only natural we seek the stars above. Oh how we long for immunity, for immortality!! Oh how we long to be lifted up and seated next to the Prince of Peace, the Holy One, God With Us.

But until that day, we continue this journey of faith together, in a world where disease is rampant and we are disinfecting and distancing ourselves from one another, let us remember the one who is Immune to Sin, who was filled with the Holy Spirit and now breathes in us. As we were reminded this week when our confirmands met virtually with our Session, we find our place in the family of faith not necessarily where we are but who we are with.

May we breathe and trust that God has placed us in the garden, and has plans for us. May we share this breath of God with all and not fear contamination. And less we lose our way, let us cling onto the one who is immune to sin, the one who sometimes breathes for us, and may we be born again.

To breathe again.

To believe again.

Amen.