

A man is at work one day when he notices that his coworker is wearing an earring. This man knows his coworker to be normally a conservative fellow and is curious about the sudden change in fashion sense. The man walks up to this friend and says, "I didn't know you were into earrings."

"Don't make such a big deal, it's only an earring," he replies sheepishly.

His friend falls silent for a few minutes, but then his curiosity prods him to ask, "So, how long have you been wearing it?"

"Ever since my wife found it in my truck." (William J. Bausch, TOUCHING THE HEART, p. 50)

I'd like to focus on that famous passage from Genesis, our first reading today. It's loaded theologically and spiritually. Now remember this is a symbolic story; let's not think we've got 2 actual trees and a talking snake! Also, it represents an ancient way of seeing the world that is not necessarily the way we still see it. But that does not lessen its deep value for us, and its ability to instruct and inspire us. The two trees are the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Once Adam & Eve had eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God removes them from the garden as the temptation associated with the tree of life still loomed and was a dangerous threat to the couple. Should they eat from that tree, the ancients believed they would live forever, thus making them gods. The story's main thrust, however is on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

To 'know' something in scripture meant to be in relationship with that which was known. Knowledge was not simply understood in intellectual terms – it was also relational. The ancient author believed that eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil allowed the one who ate the fruit to possess special mastery over life and a special independence and autonomy. This was inappropriate for a creature -- who was fashioned from the dust of the earth. It would allow human beings to transcend their humanity – they would become immortal.

The garden was understood as God-space, God's locale. It encompassed the 'totality of the world.' (cf. Richard J. Clifford and Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm., New Jerusalem Biblical Commentary, 12) The humans, made from the dust of the earth, were to till the garden – to be caretakers, stewards. They were not its masters -- so there was a limit placed on the humans – they were to avoid eating the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. To eat of the tree meant death. "To die" meant to be cut off from the covenant relationship with God. But in His mercy, God exiles the man and the woman; they were not killed.

Christian wisdom taught that God's original intention was for men and women to live forever. Death was understood as a result of sin. Only gods were immortal. Thus, God's original intention for human beings was divinity. GOT THAT!? God's original intention for us was divinity!

The coming of Christ restored God's original intention for us, we are offered eternity at the end of our earthly lives. The incarnation elevated us to the status that God intended for us at creation of the world, but lost through sin and death. Christ's ransom for sin, His sacrifice on the cross, restored our divine nature.

In the beginning, Adam & Eve had no knowledge of evil; but after they took what they were told not to take; did the don't they were not supposed to do -- they suddenly became aware of their nakedness. For the first time they knew shame. Once they possessed knowledge of evil, they entered into experiential

relationship with it. They now knew alienation from their bodies (their shame) and God (their fear of Him – they hid).

But there is incredible hope in this story. Punishment was not to have the final word. GOD would have the last word. In a very obscure but significant move, Adam gave Eve a new name. Conferral of a new name in scripture signifies a change in direction or in the essence of the person. Eve would now be called MOTHER OF THE LIVING. The sin would not alter God's intention that human beings have stewardship over the earth or that they would bear fruit. God also put clothes on the couple – another sign of reconciliation. God covered their shame. He protected them from further disaster by removing them from the temptation to eat from the tree of life. Then God sent them out in the world to fend for themselves. The prophets understood that when the messiah came, He would be the restoration of the lost paradise. Christ recalls the promise of Eden and insisted that those who remained steadfast would eat from the tree of life in the new Eden – the reign of God.

Now this rather obscure last verse, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel," is known as the PROTOEVANGELIUM, the first gospel, and is one of the only defined lines of scripture. The Church understands it to be the first proclamation of the gospel in the Bible. Bottom line? Evil will not defeat humanity. Human beings will ultimately win. Christians understand the fulfillment of this to be embodied in the Christ event. We look to our origins with eyes of faith, realizing that seeds of the redemption won for us were present from the very beginning. (all adapted from Mary Birmingham, WORD AND WORSHIP BOOK, Year B, p. 519-521)

OK, I know that's a bit heavy but here's its relevance to us. It's all about nakedness! Prior to their sin, Adam and Eve were both naked, and they felt no shame. No shame or embarrassment. No apologizing for how they looked. No covering up or pretending. No masks or secrets. Total acceptance of each other.

That's what we all want, isn't it? We want someone to see us exactly as we are and still love us. We're all afraid to let people see who we really are. To allow another to see the darkness in our hearts, our bad habits, all of the things we've done in the past that we regret. Our biases, our shortcomings, the things we aren't good at. Being naked is terrifying. What would it be like to be with someone who loves us exactly as we are?

If we allow someone to see what most people never see, will they still love me? It's our question for each other, and really, it's our question for God. Unconditional, absolute acceptance. From a friend or spouse, from God – it's what we all crave. We HAVE that kind of love from God. With other humans – well, IT'S COMPLICATED!

This is why a marriage is always about something bigger than itself. It's 2 people, in their unconditionally loving embrace of each other, showing each other in flesh and blood what God is like. These 2 are naked, and they feel no shame.

There's a progression here, a pattern in this passage for how we're made to connect with another. It's built into the fabric of creation. There's a way for souls to mingle. But so many people in our culture get the progression out of order. We have to understand that we were created by God to live as integrated beings. Whole. One. Not splintered and fractured but one.

The passage in Genesis about Adam and Eve is about whole persons coming together. All of him being given to all of her. All of her being given to all of him.

If he wants her just for her body, that splits her. It means that she is good to him only for a part of her. That's why when she's slept with him, she wants to know where the relationship is headed. She wants to be integrated. She craves it. She wants to know that he will be there in the morning, and the next morning, and the next morning. She wants to know that beyond sex, he loves her, he wants her – all of her. A healthy man wants exactly the same.

The 'naked and they felt no shame' part comes last in the story of Adam and Eve. It's a celebration of all of the ways they've bonded. All of the ways their souls have mingled.

It's easy to take off our clothes and have sex. People do it all the time. But opening up our soul to someone, letting them into our spirits and thoughts and fears and future and hopes and dreams....that is being naked. This is why when people sleep together after they've just met, they're raising the chances significantly that the relationship will not survive. Racing ahead of the progression always costs something.

When there is not common mission, no shared task, no sense of bone of bone and flesh of flesh, no bonds that take years to develop, many end up moving from relationship to relationship, having sex, but never really being naked. Too much too fast rarely endures. (adapted from Rob Bell, SEX GOD, p. 154-157)

And finally, perhaps many of you have had the dream where we find ourselves naked and lost, trying to get someplace safe without being discovered. Psychologists call this an archetypal dream. Interesting that in this year when we are reading the gospel of Mark, that we heard that odd detail in Mark's passion story about the young man who appears momentarily in the Garden of Gethsemane. At Jesus' arrest, the young man did not stand with His Savior, with whom presumably he has just shared supper, his belly still full of the Eucharist. He did not weep over his infidelity, as Peter would. When grabbed by the soldiers, he was so frightened that he pulled his body out of his clothes and ran off naked, putting as much distance as he could between himself and his Lord. We wonder where he went. After he got away into the darkness, where did he hide? While Peter was warming himself in front of the fire, where was he on that cold night?

The church has traditionally presumed the young man to be the gospel writer himself, so perhaps we can also presume that the naked Mark came to his senses, returning to tunic wearing and to his Lord's embrace after the resurrection.

This is great good news for us! If even one who wrote a gospel betrayed Jesus and was welcomed back, we are being told that we can do the same if we have run away from God, run away from prayer, run away from Church practice. Judas' self-knowledge led to suicide, but it can just as likely lead to reconciliation, to a coming to terms with ourselves as sinners who nevertheless have been called to stand at ease before God. To be able to pray in the way we are called as Christians, we have to strip off those fig leaves with which we have covered ourselves, some of which we didn't even know we had and only discovered in a moment of crisis. If we follow Mark's example, we will return to our merciful God.

That's what draws God near – the lure of the naked truth about ourselves. It's what God finds most attractive. To our loss of pretense and mask and bravado and pride -- to our nakedness -- God responds with passionate, spontaneous love. How do we open ourselves to a fuller life with God? By seeking that original intimacy Adam and Eve had with God, allowing us to be spontaneous and dance naked before God like David before the Ark of the Covenant. This leaves us as spontaneous as David, and as relaxed as Adam and Eve once were in the cool of the evening; then we no longer care for a second who sees us naked. Amen. (adapted from THE LOST ART OF WALKING ON WATER, Michael Heher, Paulist Press, p. 29-30)