

In 1983, a Roman Catholic priest named Matthew Fox published a book called *Original Blessing*. At the time, Fox was a member of the Order of Preachers—a Dominican monk—who eventually left the Roman Catholic Church to become an Episcopal priest. While it has been years since I read that book, I can briefly summarize the main point of it: Fox was directly challenging the narrow reading of the doctrine of Original Sin, widely credited to St. Augustine. Drawing on the mystical teachings of medieval visionaries like Hildegard of Bingen, Thomas Aquinas, Francis of Assisi, Julian of Norwich, Dante Alighieri, Meister Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa, he was reminding the Church that voices other than St. Augustine’s needed to be heard on this subject, and making the point that God’s intent at creation was not Original Sin, but *Original Blessing*.

The Catechism that begins on page 845 of the *Book of Common Prayer* seems to agree with this essential point, in asking:

Q. What are we by nature?

A. We are part of God’s creation, made in the image of God.

Q. What does it mean to be created in the image of God?

A. It means that we are free to make choices: to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God.

I hope you realize that those questions can be answered quite differently. My personal opinion is that both St. Augustine and John Calvin were more nuanced thinkers than they get credit for being and even that Fox paints them out to be. But *some* Augustinians and *some* Calvinists have suggested that human beings are, by nature, morally depraved slimy worms; sinners in the hands of an angry God. Original Sin looms larger in those theologies than Original Blessing. Yet our catechism insists that we are part of God’s good creation, created in God’s own image; and that our nature is good and holy and blessed. Even when we misuse our freedom and turn away from God’s love, that doesn’t negate original blessing.

That is also what the Biblical narrative suggests, as we heard today in those verses from the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. Today’s Old Testament reading takes us back to the opening words of the Bible and seems to back up Fox’s claim that “in the beginning” there is original blessing. As God begins to order the chaos, there is light. *And it was good*. And then land and seas and plants and animals and human beings. At the end of this six-stage process, God takes a little Sabbath rest on Day Seven. But before doing so, God steps back to admire God’s work. “I am really good,” God says. “I certainly don’t make junk!” *Original blessing*.

Sin is no doubt real, but it doesn’t come into the Biblical narrative until the third chapter of Genesis, in that famous scene in the garden with a man, a woman, a serpent, and some forbidden fruit. It only takes another two chapters to get to that story of disobedience and the violating of boundaries as Adam and Eve allow the crafty serpent to convince them to push the limits by doing what God had prohibited. Whether or not we call that story one of “Original Sin” as St. Augustine did (and we should remember that Jews, who have been reading the story a lot longer

than we Christians have, do not call it by that name) it is at least a story about how humans are prone to abuse and misuse their free will. And is there anyone here over the age of about two that doesn't have experience with that?

The theological point that I want to make here is that God's original intent is blessing. Sin and brokenness and disobedience distort that reality, but they don't negate it. The whole point of the Incarnation, of the Word-made-flesh, is that Jesus comes into the world to restore blessing, to save us from Sin and make us a new creation. Sin separates us from the God in whose image we were created, but in the Incarnation what was rent asunder becomes a new creation; *restored* blessing.

Theology can sometimes seem like something confined to dusty old books and seminary classrooms and maybe even EfM classes. But theology shapes what we believe and how we practice our faith. It shapes how we pray. And it shapes our understanding of what it is we are doing this weekend as we remember our Lord's Baptism in the Jordan River and as we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Baptism by receiving Silas and Cameran into the household of faith.

In the vows taken by parents and godparents this weekend on behalf of Silas and Cameran, they are asked about whether they renounce Satan and the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God, and the evil powers of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, and all sinful desires that draw us from the love of God. That is a strong acknowledgement of the power of Sin in our world and in our lives. But the recognition is that Sin is like a magnet that will pull Silas and Cameran away from God's desire for them, away from original blessing. The goal in Holy Baptism is for us to learn, with God's help, to renounce Sin by turning toward the One who restores blessing, the one who is worthy of our trust, the one who offers grace and love, the one who calls us to be his followers and claims us as his friends.

My shorthand way of talking about all of this is to say that the Sacrament of Holy Baptism is most definitely not fire insurance. Sometimes people just scratch their heads when I say that. Occasionally people smile or even chuckle, if they get my joke a bit quicker. But I'm trying to make a fairly serious theological point by challenging the notion that sometimes runs very deep in popular piety. Sometimes people feel that they need to "get the kid done"—*just in case*. We act like if we don't take out that fire insurance policy and something terrible happens...

But that is bad theology! To suggest that would be to imply that God doesn't already love Cameran and Silas even more than we do, and that is just insane! It is God who created them and knit them together in their mother's wombs—the same God who created the heavens and the earth made them who they are. They are God's beloved, just as we are. We baptize them not for God's sake, but for ours. We take water and oil—outward and visible signs—to remind *ourselves* of what God already knows: that they are an incredible blessing created in God's own image.

And yes, as they grow up in this unsteady and confusing world, there will be ample opportunities for them to be drawn away from that love. There will be ample opportunities for them to become

separated from their true nature. You don't need me to tell you about the countless ways that can happen. Life can be hard. What we can be sure of is that no child can be raised in a bubble. And so the work of a congregation like this one is to tell them the story about who they really are, even when the world suggests otherwise. That they are beloved of God; a blessing.

They will have to make choices at two, and fifteen, and twenty, and thirty, and eighty, and while they are free to make healthy and good choices “to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God,” as the catechism says; the truth is that because they are also formed from the dust of the earth like we all are, sometimes they will make choices out of fear. Sometimes they will make bad choices that lead to chaos, for them and for others. Sometimes they will make choices based on old wounds that will take them out of harmony with God and creation and into separation. No human being is ever immune from that, no matter how good the parenting is, no matter how good the schools are and no matter how safe the community is. It is a world where we cannot immunize our children from the experience of being human.

But then, too, there is work we have to do as God's people in this congregation: we promise their families that when they fall down or make bad choices, they can always return to the loving embrace of God's arms and of God's people in order to continue to grow into the full stature of Christ. That forgiveness and mercy and grace make new life possible, and bring restored blessing.

As I told their parents earlier this week, we are not baptizing either of them as Episcopalians. No one is ever baptized as Roman Catholic or Lutheran or Orthodox or Episcopalian. *We are baptized into Christ.* Only later in life, at confirmation, do we pick a lane and (as many in this congregation can attest, including the preacher) sometimes later in life we end up changing lanes again. I was baptized at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Hawley, Pennsylvania and was ordained into the United Methodist Church at Elm Park in Scranton, Pennsylvania in 1988 and five years later I became an Episcopalian at Christ Church Cathedral in Hartford, Connecticut. I'm pretty sure I've found my way home. But in all of that time, I have been a Christian. All of that time what matters most is that I have been a member of Christ's Body.

The Christian journey that begins at Holy Baptism reminds us that in spite of denominational disagreements, there is but one Body, with many members. There is one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one Faith. There is one Baptism. In a fractured Church, that is a powerful reminder and witness. Our unity is not necessarily of belief—Christians across different denominations and within denominations disagree on any number of theological matters. Christians also differ in how we pray, which is why in January I send out confirmands and their mentors to taste and see the diversity of Christian worship: Armenian Orthodox and Roman Catholic and non-denominational chapels where people are waving their arms. I want them to know before they commit to the Episcopal Church that ours is not the only way, and maybe not even the best way, to praise God. It is just *our way*, as a people who find liturgical and sacramental worship connects us to the Holy Trinity.

If our unity is not to be found in theology or liturgical practice, then where is it found? It is found in Jesus Christ, plain and simple. When we renounce Sin and turn to Jesus Christ, we are all seeking him as Savior, as the one worthy of our trust, as the one who offers us grace and love. And then, by God's grace, as we grow into the full stature of Christ, we pray for the courage and wisdom to become more faithful disciples. Baptism marks the beginning of that life-long journey.

In Genesis 1, God creates light and sees that it is good. We are called, as the people of God, to be the light of the world; and to let our light shine. The Season of Epiphany that lies before us is a Season of reflecting on what it means for us to be restored to God's blessing, in order to be light that shines in the darkness, and knowing that the darkness cannot overcome it. That is what we want to teach Cameran and Silas by our words, but more importantly by our actions. We want to teach them that they are blessing, and that all of creation is a gift from God.