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Genesis 3:1-9  
**Grateful for the Limits**  
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The first two chapters of the Bible are incredibly important because they reveal what God had in mind for us from the beginning. Before sin entered the world and before we started making our choices, God made clear what his choice was for us. And it was paradise. (The rest of the Bible is essentially the drama of God's recovery plan after we started making our choices.) We can only imagine the beauty of the Garden of Eden. The language of the text is not scientific or historic, but poetic and metaphorical. So the garden was not so much an actual place as a relationship with God and all creation that was in the right place.

The verse of the poetry tells us little about the garden. Frankly, most of what we are told is focused on the limits of this paradise. The one thing described in considerable detail is the tree in the middle of the garden whose fruit Adam and Eve were forbidden to take.

The placement of this tree, in the midst of the garden, is incredibly significant. Had it been located on the distance fringe of the garden, they could have ignored it. But no, every day they had to walk by this tree that was not theirs for the taking. Remember this is before the fall. It's the garden God created and called good. So there is always something missing in paradise.

In every garden of life, God has placed something that is beyond our created reach. It is something we can see, but we cannot have. For some it is a better past, and for others it's a desired future that God has not created for you. It may involve work, health, a relationship, or an achievement you desperately want. I don't know what the tree symbolizes in your life. I know what it is my life, and with some reflection you will remember what it is in yours. It isn't hard to find because, remember, it is in the middle of your garden. In some way, you pass by this tree every day.

Our text today finds Adam and Eve staring at the tree. They have to wonder what is so special about this fruit? Why can't they have it, too? Our theologians can tell us exactly what is special about the tree. It is the mark of God's grace upon their lives. This is the grace of limitations. It's a grace that reminds them they are creatures and not creators. Only God creates life. In spite of all our hard work, we don't create our lives or really even "make a living." We receive life as God's unfolding drama. And this created mark of limitations is a grace because it reveals God's insistence on dignifying humanity with the freedom to make choices.

Every time you confront this thing that is missing from your life you have to decide how you will respond to it. It will either become the altar where you kneel in prayer before the God who alone is whole and complete, lacking in nothing, or it will drive you crazy as you obsess over how to find what you do not have. It's your choice. This is how God honors humanity like no other creature on earth.

There is quite a bit of bad pop-psychology today that tries desperately to make you feel better by claiming that you are not to blame for your choices. But all that this really does is rob you of your created dignity. "You're a victim," some claim. "Blame your employer, your spouse, your environment, or best of all, your parents." But that is not what our most primal poetry claims. Adam and Eve had a wonderful environment, and they had no parents to blame for their problems. Imagine that. Still, they chose to reach beyond their limitations. I'm not claiming we are not sometimes victimized, but we are still responsible for our own choices. Never let anyone take away your created dignity to choose.

The most fundamental, primal, choice we make is how we respond to created limits. In the words of theologian Karl Barth, all sin begins with ingratitude. Even though God has created our garden and already called it "good," we take a hard look at what is missing and say it isn't good enough. Judging the work of the Creator in our lives to be too slow or too fast, too dull or too frightening, or simply too limiting, we reach for something more. We reach to become gods who can recreate life the way we want it. We try to recreate not only our own lives, but also our spouses, children, employees, friends, anyone whom we deem not good enough. Who do we think we are? We are ungrateful. That's who we are. Gratitude always embraces limitations.

This is not to say that we should not try to make improvements in the garden of life. Of course we should diet, save, work hard, and strive to be all God created us to be. But there's a big difference in doing some gardening and in becoming obsessed with a different garden. When we are grateful for the life we've been given, we look around and realize that even though something is missing, it's still a pretty incredible place to live. When we are not grateful, we ignore the thousands of fruitful trees we've been given and we pitch our tent under the one tree we cannot have. But when we reach for this one thing that's missing, it is then that we lose the garden. And on the way out of the gates we realize that it was paradise. Only now it is paradise lost.

A man flies in from out of town to bury his father who died suddenly. The son wanted so much to become somebody important in his career, so there wasn't time for a lot of visits home. On the plane ride to the funeral, the son decides to cope with his grief by writing a letter to his father. The letter essentially says, "I've always loved you, Dad." As the tears stream down his face, he curses himself for not writing sooner.

A woman sits in the first pew at her daughter's wedding. She's overwhelmed by how beautiful the bride is. Then she remembers all of the terrible arguments that drove them apart for so many years. She just wanted her daughter to be better, but now it all seems so meaningless. She wishes, desperately, that she could take back all of the harsh words she said. But as she watches her daughter take the hand of her groom, she knows those years are forever gone. Again, it is not until the garden is lost that we realize it was paradise.

According to our text, we had help in losing our good gardens. We were tempted by the serpent. But the Bible doesn't blame Adam and Eve's fall on the serpent. It blames Adam and Eve for choosing to believe his lie. Temptation is always a lie, and it's the exact lie we want to hear. The serpent tells us we can be like God and have it all. All we have to do is reach for more. But the only thing we really grab is regret.

As the sacred poetry continues, in the cool of the day God came looking for Adam and Eve. When he found them hiding, he killed one of his animals to cover their naked shame. And so in Jesus Christ, has God come looking for you and me. He finds us busily sewing together fig leaves of excuses and blame. Then he sacrifices his life on the cross to cover our shame and restore our dignity. Why? Because God loves us too much to abandon us to our bad choices.

If human dignity begins by the grace of taking responsibility, which is what we call confession, it ends by accepting this even more amazing grace called forgiveness. I am amazed at how many people can make it through the first part and take responsibility for their actions, but they cannot accept grace as forgiveness. There is no dignity in simply claiming to be a sinner. It doesn't matter how desperately we try to atone for our sins, we will never climb our way back to the Garden. This is the ultimate limitation – we cannot fix what we have broken. Paradise is recovered only in being forgiven.

On this side of the cross and resurrection, the time has come to recover created dignity to life. The time has come to stand tall again and rejoice. And the time has come to be grateful and let go of the guilt — because God has. But you have to choose to believe that. It is the choice of your life. Amen.