

A Monthly Message from Pastor Mike and Mandy

The world is topsy-turvy and so has it always been. It is this way because of human sin, a problem since Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden for trying to grab hold of the prerogatives of God.

Outside the Garden things didn't get any better. Cain slew his brother, Abel. As a result, the Scriptures say, "So Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden." (Genesis 4: 16 NIV) How ominous is that " , , , went out from the Lord's presence."

John Steinbeck uses "East of Eden" as a title for one of his greatest novels. In that story, the father and one of the sons, Caleb, are in deep conflict; the mother has abandoned the two boys to be a prostitute; and the two brothers engage in a rivalry that eventuates in the death of one of the brothers, Aron, in World War I. Caleb discovers his mother is a prostitute, tells his brother in anger which sends Aron into a tailspin and off to war, where he is killed on the line. When the father hears of his son's death, he has a stroke.

Steinbeck's book is a version (a much longer version) of the original biblical story of conflict and fratricide. Notice that the sons' names begin with the same letter as Cain and Abel. The father's name is Adam. The novel concludes with an assertion of the important of human freedom and free choice, which the animals do not have. But, for an evangelical Christian, more must be said than we have freedom and free choice.

The evangelical Lutheran confessions and Luther himself have much to say about this theme. While humans unlike the beasts have a capacity for choice and, specifically, moral choice, we are also held in captivity. Our moral decision making is greatly impaired. Regarding the most

important thing of all, our redemption, we have no choice at all. Coram Deo (before God) we are sinners through and through. We have no ability to put ourselves in right relationship with God. Listen to what Luther says in one of his great hymns, “Dear Christians, One and All”, one we have sung:

My own good works all come to naught,
No grace or merit gaining;
Free will against God’s judgment fought,
Dead to all good remaining,
My fears increased till sheer despair
Left only death to be my share;
The pangs of hell I suffered. (LBW, 299)

Before God we must see that we are wretched in our sin. Not our natural powers but God’s mercy is what lifts us out of the predicament of the consequences of sin. For the one who is saved by God’s redemption in Christ, fire becomes a symbol of cleansing, not punishment. Luther writes,

But God had seen my wretched state
Before the world’s foundation,
And, mindful of his mercies great,
He planned for my salvation.
He turned to me a father’s heart;
He did not choose the easy part,
But gave his dearest treasure. (Hymn 299 LBW)

God's dearest treasure is Christ. When it comes to salvation we cannot have both free will and the cross of Christ. Christ did not go to all that trouble so that we could "cooperate" with Him. The false idea would be that Christ did His part so that we could do our part. This idea is not evangelical. God does it all. This thought is evangelical.

The world is topsy-turvy and has always been. Since the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, human beings have been alienated from one another and in conflict as Steinbeck's novel so well illustrates. This human alienation is a fundamental indication that we are alienated from God. On the basis of our natural powers we have a very limited capacity for moral choice. It is faith that comes from the grace of God in Christ that brings us to right and good decisions and choices. Faith, not our own but God's gift, empowers our moral decision making. When we make good choices in faith, we must ascribe them to the power of God working in us. And we must never say to ourselves that we are good. We must humbly accede to God all goodness. Whether we are willing to admit it or not, all goodness is in God and comes from Him. Let us therefore give Him thanks for His goodness.

In Christ,

Pastor Michael Tavella and Pastor Amanda Grimmer