

Ceasing from Seizing Genesis 3:6-9

There are some sermons that hurt the preacher more than others. There are times as I write a sermon that I realize I really exposed, way out over my skis, with credibility really, really limited.

Today is one of those days.

I am a person who does not take the word “No” well and I don’t care for limits, boundaries and restrictions. I am the kind of person who believes that nothing is impossible, especially with a little hard work. Run out every ground ball as they say. Explore every possibility. Never give up. Never surrender. “Success is 10 percent inspiration, 90 percent perspiration,” “If it is to be, it is up to me” kind of person. I learned early on, that the worst thing in the world it to look back and say “If I had only tried harder, I would have succeeded.”

That is how I am wired and I am not alone.

A lot of our culture, our national identity is based upon this very idea. There may be no more American quote that Walt Disney’s, “All our dreams can come true if we have the courage to pursue them.”

That most American of poets Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Without ambition one starts nothing. Without work one finishes nothing. The prize will not be sent to you. You have to win it.”

And the front man for the band KISS, Gene Simmons put it like this: “I’m from Israel. So America has no limits.”

And it has taken me decades to learn, this is not a Biblical idea. Hard work has its place. It is a virtue. God is not opposed to hard work and we are made to dream dreams and have visions, and aspire to greatness.

But we are not made to live without limits and the idea that we have no limits is now eating away at American’s soul. And for that matter, its eating away at the soul of the Church where we absolutely hate to hear and are even afraid to speak the word “No”

We are not made go beyond God’s intent and we are created to live with margin in our life, to allow Jesus the space to work because we are made to be with Him and in the end it is His work in our life that makes the difference not ours.

And this idea of honoring and respecting God-given, Divinely-mandated limits is something humanity has struggled with from the very beginning. The hands seize what the heart wants—regardless of what Jesus tells us.

Even if this is your first time in Church or the first time you have ever heard a sermon, you probably know this story.

Genesis tells us that in Garden of Eden, there was a tree called, “The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.” It was alongside another tree called, “The Tree of Life.” God created Adam and Eve and let them live in the Garden, which was a paradise. It was a place where every need they had was met.

There was work, an act for which we are made, but there was no toil, no drudgery. There was no pain. There was no death. And most importantly God was with them. The Garden is intended to give us a picture of what heaven will look like.

There was one rule—only one rule. Adam and Eve were told not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam and Eve were given paradise on a platinum platter.

But they wanted more.

One day Eve was near the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil when the serpent, who most theologians take to mean Satan, tempted Eve to take from the tree and eat.

He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’ ” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

Genesis 3:1-6

Let me offer a brief side note a little off-topic but one some of us need to hear. Sometimes Eve criticized because she was the one that Satan tempted and she was the one that pulled the unidentified type of fruit of tree. And then she gave some to Adam who, I have even heard some theologians say, didn't know where the fruit came from, that Eve tricked Adam.

Untrue. Genesis 1:6 is very clear that Adam was with Eve. “Her husband was with her,” it says. So, Adam was not just some innocent bystander, caught unaware, off working the land or naming some more animals when Eve approached him with a half-eaten piece of fruit. Wrong. Adam failed at his job of being a husband to Eve. He didn't help Eve. He didn't speak truth to Eve when she was being tempted. When Eve was weak, God's intent, was for Adam to be her helper. Instead, he left Eve alone and on her own.

So Adam failed at his basic job of being a helper. I know today that husbands are portrayed as knuckle-dragging, mouth-breathing Neanderthals who are lucky to find their pants in the morning. And we are told that our job is to keep our head down and defer to our wife who is all wise and all knowing. And we are just lucky that she can stand our presence for ten consecutive seconds. It has been beat into men that are man job as husbands is just to keep our wives happy and try not to mess anything up.

One thing we can learn from Adam and Eve is that our wives need us—just like we need them. They need us to be their helper. They need us to speak truth into their lives. They need us to hold them accountable because husbands and wives both are sinners. And love without truth, love without accountability, love without honesty does not create intimacy. It creates dependency that eventually turns adult men into adolescents and the women we are called to cleave to and cherish into our mothers.

God's intent for marriage is for a man and a woman to be equally yoked, partners in covenant with Jesus Christ designed to draw them into ever-increasing intimacy with each other and God.

And one of the things we are most tempted to do, one of the areas where we need a helper in our life is speak God's truth to us when we are enticed, allured to cross one of God's bright red lines, to grasp, to seize something God has placed within our reach.

This is a temptation common to all of us.

When I was in seminary, I house sat one summer for a few weeks. Some married friends of mine asked me to stay in their apartment and take care of their dog while they went back home. They told me that I could eat any food in the cabinets or refrigerator. They let me sleep in their king-sized bed. They said watch any of our movies—back when we kept copies of movies on the shelf. They said I could even have friends over or take the dog for a walk in the park. I was given free reign and after having lived in dorms for five years and even recently living out of my truck for a week parked at various places on campus an around the city, staying in their townhouse was an Eden-like paradise.

But as the husband was wrapping up his instructions, he took me over to a hallway closet and said, "We just have one rule."

He opened the closet door and moved some towels and bedsheets out of the way and even a couple crates. And I wondered what he was doing. He pulled out a hinged box. It was made of plain wood stained dark. It was about 16 inches wide and eight inches tall and deep. It had a brass handle on it with red ribbon tied around it.

"There is just one thing we ask you not to do," he said. "Don't open this box."

So, I agreed and he quickly stuffed the box back in the closet and piled everything back on top of it.

But guess what I immediately wanted to do. And guess what I wondered about every single day that I lived there and still wonder about today. I wanted to open that box so badly just out of sheer curiosity. And if he hadn't said anything I would never had dug around deep in a linen closet to find it. Even without seeing that mysterious box I was so very tempted by the sheer knowledge that it was there.

And in case you are wondering, no, I did not open the box—as far as anyone knows.

We are told that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was not hidden. Instead, Genesis 2:9 tells us was right in the middle of the Garden. So so Adam and Even would have been very aware of its presence. They likely saw it every day. You have to ask why God would make something that appeared so delightful, as we are told the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was, and then place it not behind a wall or a hedge or down in a valley somewhere out of sight and out of mind—but right in the middle of the garden.

Why would God do that? It wasn't on accident. God doesn't have accidents.

Our Heavenly Father is after something—your heart.

The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil fits a pattern for God's love for us of showing us possibilities, showing things within our reach, that He commands to remain beyond our grasp. God gives us choices—between the way of the world and His way. The Lord respects our freedom—which is what loves does. God limits His power to allow us the power to act and make choices. God does not

remove the temptations from this world. And God did not make us mindless automatons, blindly doing His will-like Divinely tuned robots. Our Heavenly Father does not dominate us—even though He could—because without liberty there is no love.

Temptations remain as does our freedom to choose them. Os Guinness put it like this:

(insert quote)

For the past few weeks we have been looking at this illustration about the Sabbath. We have said that God's intent for sabbath is for us to cease from creating, to rest from our striving and straining and struggling to make something from our world to simply commune with Him. And then in that time of communing with Him, that time of fellowship, the Holy Spirit re-creates us so that we might create things worth creating.

When we seize those things that delight us, when we cross God's bright red lines, or even his pink lines of salmon-colored lines, to grab whatever is a delight to our eyes, we do damage to our relationship with God. And the progression goes like this.

We seize.

And then we sever our relationship with God.

And then we suffer.

This was the way it went with Adam and Eve.

After Eve took the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, while Adam stood idly by, and then gave some to him, we are told that life went from paradise, a real vision of heaven, to cursing themselves and the rest of humanity. After Adam and Eve reached out and seized a fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, we are told that their lives, the earth, their lives and our lives were forever changed. They severed their relationship with God and they suffered. And as Genesis Chapter 3 describes it, here are just a few of the words that describe the world and humanity after seizing the fruit. After God completed His creation and called it very good, this is what creation became: cursed, dust, enmity, bruise, pain, desire, contrary, rule, thorns, thistles, sweat. Adam and Eve went from eating of any plant in the Garden to this:

Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Genesis 3:17-20

And here we see a pattern—seize, sever and suffer.

We see this pattern elsewhere in Scripture. In fact, we see it often. We could be here all day and most of tomorrow talking about

In Genesis there was a man named Abraham. Abraham and his wife Sarah were promised by the Lord that He would make of them a great nation—as many people as the stars in sky or the sand on the seashore. This was despite having no children at all and they were well past the age when people are usually able to have kids. Sarah told Abraham that he could conceive a child with her handmaiden—an Egyptian woman named Hagar.

And Abraham, rather than waiting on the Lord to be faithful to His promise, instead reached out and seized the opportunity to conceive a child with Hagar, a woman who was not his wife. And this caused tremendous suffering when Abraham and Sarah eventually did have a child and Hagar and their son were sent out into the wilderness to survive on their own.

There is a story about a man named Achan. Achan was part of the army that marched around the ancient walls that surrounded the city of Jericho, blowing their trumpets and shouting. The walls fell and Israel sacked the city. But God commanded them, not to take anything, no gold or silver or spoils of war from the city. God wanted that wicked city blotted out entirely from the earth. Instead of listening to that command, Achan reached out and seized a beautiful cloak and 200 shekels of silver and a bar of gold that weighed 50 shekels. He hid them under his tent.

And in the very next battle, Israel was routed by a lesser nation because of Achan's sin and Achan was found out and he was stoned.

A King named David, late one afternoon, while his armies out to battle got up from his couch and he went up to the roof of his palace to look over his kingdom. And he saw a beautiful woman taking a bath. She was the wife of another man, one of the captains in David's army. And David seized her as his own. He had messengers come and bring her to his palace, where he laid with her, making her pregnant and then David schemed to have her husband killed. But David was found out and this began a series of events that resulted in David nearly losing His kingdom.

In the early days of the Church people were selling everything they owned—their homes, their goods, everything in their possession. And a couple named Ananias and Saphira sold everything they possessed and laid it at the feet of the leader of the Church, a man named Peter. Except they kept some of the proceeds for themselves, they seized it for their own while they made it look like they gave everything they had. And they were struck dead and fear spread through the Church.

There is a pattern here. The same pattern established by Adam and Eve.

We seize something that God does intend for us to have. We cross a boundary.

By doing that we sever our relationship with God. We cut God off although He never gives up on us, Jesus never abandons us, we take the step of attempting to sever our relationship with God.

And the result of seeking to sever our relationship with God is we suffer and we often create suffering

for others as well because we are made to be with God.

Reaching out seizing what God does intend for us to have, those things which He has placed beyond our grasp, ultimately leads to a place we don't want to go.

James 1:14-15 teaches us:

Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

What is the alternative?

Paul wrote to the Philippian Church while he was under house arrest in Rome, not long before he was put to death for sharing the Gospel.

You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:10-13

Paul learned something very valuable that comes from intimacy with Jesus Christ—that we can be content—even when our desires are not being met, even when we are facing desperate times, even when our work is undone and we are face to face with our limits.

We can look again at this threefold cycle.

We can be content.

Contentment leads to communion.

And communion with God leads to being made complete.

Lots of theologies, even un-Christian theologies, like New Age or some Eastern religions talk about being content and complete. But they do with the idea that we should adjust our expectations. We should be content and complete in what we have and who we are and from that simple act of giving up.

That's not what Paul said. The secret of facing plenty, hunger, abundance, need of running up against our limits, of honoring God's commands when we really don't want to, refraining from seizing something that we know we should not is communion with Jesus, intimacy with our Savior and Lord who not only gives us the strength but meets our deepest needs, the cry of our heart of hearts. Paul closed his letter to the Philippians with this promise:

And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:19

We can everything but not Jesus and not have enough. And we can have nothing with Jesus and be lavished with absolute abundance.

(story)

What is the thing you so desperately want to seize? What is fruit dangling in front of you that is a delight to the eyes that you are willing to cross Divine boundaries and barriers and limits and lines in order to grasp? It masquerades as life but in reality, it is death.