

I wonder if I may ask you a few questions about yourself this morning? If you are comfortable answering out loud that would be welcome, but you can also just bring an answer to mind. Here's the first one...

1. Who taught you your A-B-Cs?
2. Ok, here's the second, who taught you what it means to be kind?
3. Alright, and finally...Who taught you how to fall?

Obviously, this last question is the one I am hoping might catch you by surprise. Learning how to fall is not something we typically think about or prepare for. Most of us fall without much thought at all. During a fall, the thoughts go something like this "oh no. No, no. This isn't happening!" Especially if you're carrying a plate of delicious tacos in a restaurant and then fall in front of a bunch of strangers, as happened to me not too long ago!

- Stunt people for movies, of course, learn how to protect themselves when they're acting and have to fall off a horse or down a flight of stairs, but that's not really falling; that's pretending to fall.
- Some will tell you that to fall carefully you shouldn't put your hands out in front of you because you might break a wrist or an arm. Better to roll into the fall, which is much easier said than done.
- One thing I imagine we can all agree on, is that falling is usually not an option. It's not something we decide to do, it kind of happens to us.
- A physical fall can be painful, and dangerous as many of us know, but an emotional, psychological, or spiritual fall can be just as difficult. And very few of us have learned how to manage those falls well.

I'm reading a book by Father Richard Rohr called Falling Upward in which he explores what he calls "the two halves of life." The first half, which doesn't necessarily end at any particular age, is about building identity. The second is about spiritual awakening. And in order to move from one into the other, Rohr argues, there must be setbacks, failures, and

difficulties. Personal growth and transformation requires falling and learning from the experience.

This story of Adam and Eve and the serpent in the Garden is often referred to as humanity's Great Fall from Grace. It is THE Judaic-Christian story used to explain the presence of sin in the world, and it very clearly articulates who is to blame and what the consequences are of their actions. Or does it?

Let's deconstruct this a bit, beginning with the setting. All we're told is that God created, among other things, trees including the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Interestingly, it says that God only required that they abstain from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. "*Beware: the day you eat the fruit of this tree,*" God says "*you will certainly die.*"

I'd like to point out that God *assumes* the day *will* come when they will eat the fruit. It's not if, it's when. And as soon as they do just that, it says "their eyes were opened and they knew they were exposed". One translation suggests that they became aware of *a reality previously unknown*; they sense *their vulnerability or susceptibility*, and they try to cover it up and disguise it. Eating the fruit did not literally kill them, but something in them definitely changed.

Here's where the falling comes into play. It was disobedience that pushed them out of paradise BUT without that falling they probably wouldn't have matured much as human beings. Their psychological and spiritual growth would have been stunted if they had stayed in the garden forever. I am not saying, we should go make intentional mistakes, sinning as much as we want, as long as we learn from it. No. What I'm saying is that while eating the fruit was wrong, the wisdom that came as a result was not.

I heard a song recently that suggests that Eve was simply “chasing after wisdom” when she reached into that tree, and that she somehow intuitively knew that there had to be more to life than naming animals and plants and hanging out with Adam. It is a shame that the “more” she sought came at the expense of not following God’s instructions, but again, even God knew those instructions would be left unheeded. What if, instead of being a jealous god, or an angry god, God was actually trying to protect Adam and Eve? Knowing about good and evil is a heavy burden because such knowledge demands a response.

Father Rohr likens the process of struggle, falling, learning, and getting up again to the cycle of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection. Jesus did not disobey. On the contrary, his falling was the exact opposite. It was a letting go of divinity, and a learning of the true nature of love. Jesus embraced that love even though it led him to his death. And he was transformed, resurrected into a new life in God.

Jesus embodies the standard that we all are invited to follow. He teaches us how to fall. We too must let go and leave behind all of what we think we know in order to experience transformation. We must step out of our naive paradise and accept that there will be pain; that wisdom requires sacrifice; and that there are wounds life will impose upon us that will definitely change us.

This is something I have to constantly remind myself of every single day because I don’t like letting go. I don’t enjoy leaving things behind. I don’t want to suffer, or fall, or make mistakes. But transformation means that I must pass through death again and again.

This process sounds grandiose, but it happens in the smallest of ways sometimes. We’re given opportunities to practice this re-birthing on a daily basis, but we often miss those opportunities. Let me give you an example of how this played out for me just this week.

When I arrived at FCC I was tasked with developing our children and youth program, and to my great surprise, the folks who were already responsible for this ministry were willing to try something new. And so we moved away from the “Sunday School” classroom model toward an “Intergenerational” model gathering kids AND adults together, every 2nd and 4th Sunday for hands-on learning. Well, after doing this for 2 years it has become apparent that our approach is not working. We thought changing the curriculum would appeal to families. We thought changing the time would bring more kids to church. We thought right after coffee hour was perfect for bringing people across the age span together. But none of that has proven to be true. Granted, we’ve had some terrific programs that have been fun and inspiring, but the number of kids that participate remains very very low.

So Elizabeth, as a good leader, suggested we go back to the drawing board. And I am all for it. But when she insisted that we needed to change the name of the program I had a moment of resistance. It wasn’t until sometime after we had met to talk about all of this that I realized what was going on in me. My ego did not want to give up something that I had created, a name that I had come up with. To let it go felt like admitting I had failed, and I did not want to do that.

I am still learning to recognize when the falling is happening, and I try to challenge myself so I can attempt to fall well. This is what I mean by “falling into wisdom”. We fall into wisdom by letting go of the need to control the outcome, and if we can roll into each fall with care, we just might learn something. We just might grow.

Eve and Adam may or may not have learned how to fall well after that first big mistake, but I’m sure they had plenty of opportunity to perfect their practice. Let’s help each other as we do the same. Amen.