

It was the first day of a new semester. I was already running late for class and then I couldn't find anywhere to park. Finally, I parked my car and I started running across campus. I got to the building and I realized I didn't know my way around and I struggled to find the right room. I finally found the room, and walked into the class 15 minutes late. The door closed behind me with a loud "thud" that caused everyone to turn around and look at me. They started laughing. I looked down and that's when I realized that in my hurry, I forgot to get dressed. There I stood, in front of 100 or so classmates, completely naked. The realization jolted me awake. I sat up in bed with my heart racing and instantly felt the relief that it was just a dream.

Have any of you had that dream or one like it? This type of dream is one of the most common in the human experience. We have a complicated relationship with our bodies and as we read in our text today, this anxiety about nudity and a sense of shame around our bodies goes back thousands of years.

We know that this story is not a factual historical account of two real people who lived in a real place called the Garden of Eden. This story is most likely an attempt of ancient peoples to explain the circumstances of life. Why do humans have to work to make food grow? Why do snakes slither on the ground, if sex feels so good, why is childbirth so painful? You'll notice that nowhere in the text does the phrase "Original Sin" appear. Nor is there any mention of human beings being condemned for all generations to come as the result of Adam and Eve's rebellious behavior. But many scholars reject this idea. The Rev. Dr. Carl Gregg writes that "for the most part, neither Jews, nor Muslims, nor Eastern Orthodox Christians, nor many biblical scholars recognize a doctrine of "Original Sin" when they read the first few chapters of Genesis."<sup>1</sup> Gregg, along with Matthew Fox and other theologians point to the way Augustine, the fourth-century bishop of Hippo, (and later Martin Luther) read these stories as the reason for our tendency in Western Christianity to read these stories as a "Fall from grace." Neither the phrase "original sin," nor even the concept of a sin committed by

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2011/11/embracing-christianity-and-evolution-matthew-fox-original-blessing-and-creation-spirituality/>

Adam or Eve that gets passed down from generation to generation appears in the biblical text. A combination of Augustine's own baggage around sexuality and his faulty translation of the text led to his development of the concept of Original sin almost 400 years after Jesus walked the earth.

Rev. Richard Rohr writes that a more accurate description of this story would be "original shame."<sup>2</sup> God is taking an evening stroll through the garden in cool breeze and calls out to her children. "Where are you?" Many of us might read this question and hear the voice of an angry parent. But there isn't any indication that God is angry. It is just as likely if not more so, that God and Adam and Eve would take these evening walks every night. God desires the company of his children and calls out to them, wondering where they are. Adam appears and explains that when he heard God coming he was afraid because he was naked and so he hid from God. Now listen to God's response. God initial response is not to reprimand or shame Adam and Eve for their nakedness or for their actions. Instead God simply asks "who told you that you were naked?" The underlying meaning of this question might be "who told you to be ashamed?" The implication is that this feeling of shame is not something that God wanted gave to her children.

While the next section is all about the consequences that will come as a result of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, immediately following is an image of a compassionate God. God the seamstress. Verse 21 – "And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them." God's first action after finding Adam and Eve hiding in the garden is to make clothes for them. Not because God wants them to be covered, but to make them more comfortable. Not to agree with their feelings of shame, but to nurture them and help them to feel at ease. This is a portrait of a God who longs for connection and relationship; who holds humanity close to her breast. Walking together amidst God's lush and beautiful creation, Adam and Eve were cherished and beloved.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://cac.org/original-shame-original-blessing-2016-07-01/>

Yes, this is a complicated story. This image of nurturing God is followed by God banishing Adam and Eve from the garden out into the harsh reality of the world. A close reading of the text shows that this expulsion is not necessarily a punishment for eating from the Tree of Knowledge, but to protect them. Verses 22 and 23 read “Then the Lord God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”— therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden. This is a complicated and confusing story, and one that makes a lot less sense when we try to read it as literal history. And we do ourselves and society at large a disservice when we make a concept of Original Sin the starting point for our relationship with God and with Jesus. Theologians such as Richard Rohr, Mathew Fox, and Jay Johnson all propose a shift away from Original Sin (which isn’t based in scripture anyway) to a focus on what they call “Original Blessing.”

Before the story of our naked ancestors, is the story of the creation of the cosmos, the earth and humankind. “God created humankind in his image” “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” This is the heart of our faith. A God who after creating every element of existence, paused to take it all in and declare his pleasure with what he created. In his book *Original Blessing*, Matthew Fox reminds us that mystics like Julian of Norwich and Meister Eckhart have always begun their theology with original blessing and not original sin.<sup>3</sup> He quotes Julian of Norwich who wrote “God never began to love us. We have been known and loved from without beginning.” 13<sup>th</sup> century German mystic, Mechthild of Magdeburg wrote “From the very beginning God loved us. The Holy Trinity gave itself in the creation of all things and made us, body and soul, in infinite love.”

I would venture to guess that at least occasionally, we all experience feelings of what Richard Rohr calls “radical unworthiness.”<sup>4</sup> We experience times or even long periods when we feel stupid, inadequate, dirty, or worthless. A theology of original sin

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (New York: Little, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), 48.

<sup>4</sup> <https://cac.org/original-shame-original-blessing-2016-07-01/>

fuels these feelings. It feeds our insecurities and our shame. But that's not what God desires for us. God's act of creation was an act love. How would your life be different if you really believed, in the core of your being, that you do not carry any generations-old sin, but instead that you are wholly and passionately loved by God. For some of you this may already be your reality and that is awesome. But I am sure there are some of you listening right now that need to hear this and may struggle to believe it. When you feel so unworthy of God that you hide from her, God is calling out "where are you?" When you feel exposed and scared, it is God's desire to clothe you with his love and grace. Our God is a God of nurture, of relationship, and communion who loves us intimately and deeply despite our shortcomings and our self-inflicted shame.

So just for today, I invite you to live as though God loves you like a cherished child. Live like God loves you like a cherished child.

Because it's true.

Hallelujah! And Amen!