

March 10, 2019  
Genesis 1: 26-31  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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## ***Original Blessing***

### INTRO to SCRIPTURE

The Adult Ed. Committee asked me to do a sermon on original blessing as part of our Celtic series this month.

I was first exposed to the idea of Original Blessing when I heard Matthew Fox – at the time a member of the Dominican Order – speak at a General Synod of the UCC event in 1987. He shared ideas about Creation Spirituality from his book entitled *Original Blessing*, published in 1983. In 1983, I graduated from seminary, where the talk was about original sin, not original blessing. Hearing Matthew Fox began to open a whole new world for me within my own Christian tradition.

Those who talk about original sin tend to focus on the creation story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2, where ironically the word sin never appears. Those who talk about original blessing focus on Genesis 1.

As Richard Rohr, a contemporary Franciscan monk, wrote in a daily meditation about a year ago.

*The first image in the Judeo-Christian Bible reveals a creative, compassionate God: "God's Spirit hovered over the water" (Genesis 1:2). The word "hovered" is the same word used to describe a brood hen, lovingly watching over her young, warming the eggs and protecting the hatchlings.*  
(cac.org Richard Rohr, Jan. 4, 2017)

The refrain in the creation story is that each element of creation is GOOD. Let's hear again about the creation of humans.

### SERMON

A week ago, I had the joy of meeting John and Susan Fitzgerald's new grandchild, Elise and Mike O'Connor's child, Harvey. Just looking at him warmed my heart and gave me hope, for in him I see God.

At the sight of a newborn I am awestruck. I am fascinated by what science teaches us about the merging of two tiny cells that then divide and divide over and over again, developing the various organs and tissues that make a human being. Yet, such knowledge can only touch on the awesome miracle of the creation of a new person – in the image of God.

Last week Karin (Baard) suggested that if you would like to know about Celtic Spirituality and the contemporary Celtic theologian John Philip Newell, you might want to read *Listening to the Heartbeat of God*. The first chapter of that book addresses the idea of original blessing.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, there was a Celtic Briton theologian named Pelagius. *He believed that the newborn, freshly come forth from God, contains the original, unsullied goodness of creation and humanity's essential blessedness.*  
Original blessing.

This put him in conflict with Augustine (of Hippo) who was a Roman African. In contrast to Pelagius, Augustine taught that *the human child is born depraved and humanity's sinful nature has been sexually transmitted from one generation to the next, stretching from Adam to the present.* In other words original sin. For Augustine *we lack the image of God until it is restored in baptism.* (John Philip Newell, *Listening to the Heartbeat of God, chapter 1*)

Knowing the licentiousness of Augustine's own early young adult life, you can understand why shame was central to his theology and his profound need to rely on God's grace.

So, there was a personal contrast between their theological perspectives. But those personal got played out on the papal and creedal stage. Augustine won. Pelagius was declared a heretic. Augustine's perspective of original sin became orthodoxy and the consequences have rippled through the centuries, typically leaving women and children at the bottom of the moral order.

It is not surprising that this controversy happened in the fourth century. It is at this time that the Emperor Constantine became a Christian, which is good news in that it stopped the persecution of Christians. On the other hand, it led to unintended consequences in that he co-opted all his citizens to be Christians. Christianity became the state religion and the church has struggled ever since with its entanglements with empire.

When you look at the social dynamics of these theologies, we see...

-Original sin perspectives give leaders power over others. You must rely on the priest (in the sacrament of baptism) to be put right with God.

-Original blessing perspectives call on leaders to empower others to recognize the image of God within themselves.

Lest we think this is all ancient history, in 1993, just six years after I met Matthew Fox, he was expelled from the Dominican Order for his focus on original blessing and his teaching about creation spirituality.

In a 2011 blog posting, Matthew Fox tells a story that illustrates the power dynamics and political implications of theology.

*we had invited a very prominent black pastor, Rev. Alfred Smith Senior to speak to our ICCS class and he began this way: He held up a copy of Original Blessing and he said: "Our people need this more than they need jobs. Because what was ultimately taken away from us by slavery was the sense of our own dignity." I am struck by the bluntness and truthfulness of this observation: That, as I point out in the original Introduction to this book, empire builders (and slave masters) have an investment in original sin ideologies—and still do.* (matthewfox.org, Feb. 20, 2011)

This focus on original sin has driven people out of the church. One such person is Julia Scheeres, who in a recent newspaper article *Raising Children without the Concept of Sin*, (NY Times, January 25, 2019) tells of her own experience of being raised in a religious fundamentalist family.

Now she is raising her own family in a very different way. Recently she was out with her daughter and they overheard a street preacher yelling “Gin is Sin.” Her daughter turned to her and said, “What is sin?” Julia comments on how different her daughter’s experience is from her own, where sin was the central word of the family’s religious experience. She says..

*Sin. That tiny word still makes me cringe with residual fear. Fear of being judged unworthy. Fear of the eternal torture of hell. Fear of my father’s belt.*

Those who speak of original blessing do not deny the reality of sin. They know the brokenness of bad decisions and the realities of systemic patterns that perpetuate brokenness. However, they call us to trust in the original blessing of the gift of life.

*Deeper than any wrong in us is the light of God, the light that no darkness has been able to overcome, as St. John had written.*  
(JPN, pg. 14)

Some people believe Victor Hugo in *Les Miserables* was challenging the church’s orthodoxy when he wrote

*To love another person is to see the face of God.*

To be saved, to be forgiven, is to follow in the Way of Jesus, to be set free to live into who we really are –  
created in the image of God.

So, the next time you are holding a newborn, Who do you see?