

April 30, 2017
Psalm 19:1-10
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“The Big Book and the Little Book”

Good morning! I want to ask you a question this morning. It’s a question which theologians and scholars have written about, argued about, and excommunicated folks about. But for all that, it’s not a complicated question. If you’ve been paying attention to what’s been spoken and sung already here in the worship service, you might not know the question, but you can probably guess what my answer is going to be. This is something I feel pretty passionately about: I have prepared a 60 minute sermon, but decided to cut it back a bit.

Here’s the question, ready? Are people basically good or basically evil? It’s an important question, because our answer determines our world view: not just our view of people, but how we see God and God’s creation. I bet some of you are thinking right now that this is a trick question -- you can’t answer this yes or no, because every human being, with the exception of Jesus Christ, is both good and evil: we are capable of doing good, but we often fall into bad behavior: not just the bad things that we do, but the good things which we fail to do. This is true, and we don’t have to look any further than ourselves in order to confirm this.

I don’t mean this to be a trick question; my question about good and evil is meant to go further back than what we do or intend to do on any given day. My question is about how we were created: not only me or only you, but humanity in general. I know what my answer is, but I want to give you a little background--how this conversation came about in history in the Western Christianity. It was because of a fight between the Christian Church in Rome, and the Christian Church in Ireland -- or Celtic Christianity. In the fifth century, Christianity was adopted by the Roman Emperor, Constantine, and the church and state became joined at the hip. As soon as babies were born to

Christian families, they were baptized and registered as members of the church and citizens of the state. Many churches, the Roman Catholic Church being the largest, still practice infant baptism.

But this practice of infant baptism raised a question for fifth century theologians: if one of the biblical reasons for baptism is for the forgiveness of sin, what sin did these infants commit? This is a good question, but the answer got pretty complicated. Essentially, the baby's sin was being born -- or more, accurately, being conceived in a sexual act. Since that's how all of us got started -- again, with the exception of Jesus Christ -- we are all born sinners and in need of forgiveness. This is the Catholic doctrine of original sin.

If that doesn't sit comfortably with you, you're not alone. This idea of original sin never really caught on in the Celtic Christianity of Ireland. This is partly because of the Celtic concept of creation and the relationship between creatures and Creator. Creation, as God proclaimed at the beginning of Genesis, is good. And human beings are not separate from the rest the created order, we are a part of it. Human beings have a special place in creation because we are made in the image of God. This doesn't necessarily mean that we *look like* God, but some part of God is also a part of each one of us. And whatever part that is, it is good.

In fact, Celtic Christians and other Christian contemplatives and mystics like St. Francis of Assisi believed that God was revealed in creation. That someone who had never been exposed to the holy writings of the Bible could still sense awe and power and reverence in the grandeur and intimacy of creation. Celtic Christians talked about the big book and the little book: the big book was God's work written on the world around us; the little book was God's work and the salvation of Jesus Christ written in the Bible. There is support for this understanding in the Bible itself: in Romans chapter 1 where God's truth is plain since the creation of the world, and in the psalms which extol God's creation. My favorite of these is the one you've heard this morning, Psalm 19. I'd invite you to turn to Psalm 19 if you have a Bible with you; I won't re-read it here, but it is a wonderful illustration of the big book and the little book: I especially love verse 3 and 4 which says there is no speech and no words, yet somehow the heavens tell the glory of God throughout the world. Through verse 6

the psalmist is talking about the big book of creation, and then suddenly switches gears in verse 7 and says “The law of the Lord is perfect.” Now we’re talking about the little book. For the Hebrew writers of the psalms this would have been the Torah, the law. Christians have a slightly bigger little book, which includes the law and the prophets and the psalms, but also the gospel and the letters of the New Testament. Creation gives us the big picture of Creator God, and the Bible fills in the details of how we are live and act in order to honor the image of God within us. The Bible tells us the story of Jesus, the only person to perfectly represent the image of God in human form.

Speaking of Jesus . . . I would be remiss if I didn’t present the other side of this theological debate about whether people are basically good or basically evil. Here’s the downside to all this Life is Beautiful talk: if people are basically good, then why do we need Jesus Christ as our Savior? And if people are basically good, then why is the world such a mess? These are fair questions. No world view can last for very long without acknowledging evil and pain and suffering. These are realities we cannot avoid. And that, sisters and brothers, is precisely why we need Jesus Christ as our Savior. God’s truth is out there proclaimed to the ends of the earth in the big book of creation; we have the law and the gospels in the little book of the Bible, and there are people committed to taking that book to the ends of the earth, too. The problem is that even though that truth is revealed to us, or at least available to us, we often ignore it. Sometimes we intentionally act in ways which we know to be wrong. Sometimes we act in ways which we know to be wrong and blame it on someone else. I could go on and on -- I won’t. I trust it’s enough to say that despite the image of God within us -- what I believe to be the deepest core of who we are -- we are constantly going off the path of God’s law, and we can’t get back on track by ourselves. It is only through the grace and salvation of Christ that we can walk in the way of God’s will for us.

I heard an interview this week with Sheryl Sandberg. She’s the CEO of Facebook, and her first book was called *Lean In*. This interview was about her second book, *Option B*, and her experience three years ago. She was on vacation in Mexico with her husband and two children, and her husband, Dave Goldberg, who was 47 years old,

climbed on the treadmill at their exclusive resort and had a fatal heart attack. That experience of losing a spouse and having your world turned upside down is something that I know resonates with some of you. If you haven't heard your world upended by suffering or grief, you surely know someone who has. How can we possibly acknowledge, let alone celebrate God's goodness and Christ's salvation in the presence of evil and suffering? *Option B* is not a Christian book, but Sandberg offered some wisdom that I'd like to share with you:

First of all, resilience -- the ability to become strong, healthy and successful again after something bad has happened -- resilience is not something you either have or you don't. It turns out that resilience can be cultivated. We can practice resilience; and like physical recovery from an injury or surgery, we can strengthen our emotional and spiritual resilience over time. And do you know what builds spiritual resilience? The bicep curl of emotional recovery? Gratitude. It may sound ridiculous to be grateful when your world has fallen apart, but here was Sandberg's example: a year after her husband's death a friend was asked Sandberg to think of what she could be grateful for and Sandberg's response was "Are you kidding? My husband died suddenly from a heart attack; what could I possibly be grateful for?" And her friend said, "Well, he could have been driving in the car with the kids when it happened." Realizing that her children were still alive and safe allowed Sandberg to focus on her loss differently, and see a bigger picture.

Which leads to her second point: be grateful for the small stuff. There may be big realities in our lives which we cannot change -- the death of a spouse, serious illness, a bad financial situation. We cannot wait for those things to be fixed before we practice gratitude; there are things in lives which can never be fixed. But we can still notice and give thanks for the little things -- the beautiful blossoms on the crabapple tree out there that I passed to and from work a dozen times this week, the Easter greetings in my Creekside mailbox, a good night's sleep -- expressing gratitude for small things adds up. When we share gratitude and express appreciation to other people, it multiplies. When we share gratitude for God and God's creation, it's called praise, and praising God is a powerful thing. We don't praise God because life is easy. We praise God because life is difficult and

God never leaves us and God never stops loving us. We praise God because sometimes we make life even more difficult than it ought to be, and when we really messed it up, God loved this world so much that he sent his Son to save us. Even when life is difficult the crabapple tree blooms and spring comes and God gives us the gift of each new day.

God the Creator is the author of the Big Book, the book of creation which reveals God's glory and power. God is also the author of the little book, the Bible which reveals God's truth and the truth about ourselves, the truth about our need for Jesus Christ and his grace and salvation. All praise be to God the Creator, Christ the Redeemer, and the Spirit who is at work among us. Halleluia! And all God's people said Amen.