Two Trees–Two Selves

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Not long ago I was sitting with two close friends, enjoying lunch. Since one is a priest, it wasn't long before he asked the anticipated question, "What are each of you doing to keep your soul healthy?"

Even though the question was expected, my response was not. It came from a place of deep honesty. I blurted out, "I keep screwing up."

I looked up and saw two concerned faces, wearing question marks. Neither knew until that moment that I had been going through a tough period of time. So tough, Saint John of the Cross would've probably labeled it a "dark night of the soul," and a psychiatrist might scribble, "mild depression."

In this case the four-hundred-year-old diagnosis was more on target. I was in the middle of a dark time, and I knew very well what had caused the lights to dim. For several months I had been following the advice of my false self and taking the willful fork in the road, each time moving further from conversation and communion with God. At work, at home, and in all my closest relationships, I had slipped back into old patterns of self-absorption and had become more demanding that I get my way. And in my shame, I had been avoiding awareness of God's presence.

For a long period of time, years before, God had showered me with grace. I think he knew I had needed that to be jolted free from a legalistic background. For more than a decade, his words of love and forgiveness echoed in my ears as his portrait changed in my mind—from that of a cosmic sheriff to the prodigal's father.

But I had left the cork out of the bottle, and the expensive taste of radical grace had begun to spoil. I had allowed it to become cheap and myself complacent. It had become too easy to live by the motto, "I'll do what I want and ask for forgiveness later."

So as mercy eventually demands, justice stepped out of the shadows. God had begun to allow me to experience some of the natural and logical consequences of willfulness—the isolation and despair produced by selfish choices, the crushing weight of trying to be God. These consequences had become very painful, and I was beginning to feel more and more alone.

But I also knew the pain was my friend. Like an abscessed tooth, it was telling me something was wrong, and was reaching the level of intensity that would motivate me to do something sensible. Stop. Turn around. Face God. Drop to my knees and ask for forgiveness, and once again live connected to his love. Within a few days, the pain would cause me to back up and take the right road, back to the Tree of Life.

Willingness Versus Willfulness—The Different Paths of Our Two Selves

For a long while I have held the view that the best images we have for understanding our true and false self are the two trees in the Garden of Eden and the two different options they represent—willingness and willfulness. The stomachache I was experiencing was a result of eating too many apples from the wrong tree—following the advice of my false self.

Scripture repeatedly draws a distinction between willingness and willfulness. Even prior to the first stain of ink on papyrus to form the words, "In the beginning," Satan had already fallen from grace because he chose willfulness—an attempt to seize power, to be as God—instead of continued surrender to the will of his Creator.

In the garden, the fundamental choice given to Father Adam and Mother Eve was a selection between eating from the Tree of Life (embracing willingness and staying connected to God like branches in a vine) and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (a continuation of the willful choice Satan made to be as God). Adam and Eve were to avoid eating—consuming, making a part of themselves—the knowledge of good and evil. But what's so wrong with that, knowing the difference between good and evil?

According to Ted Dorman, in the Old Testament "the knowledge of good and evil" refers to moral autonomy, or the ability to make moral choices without being accountable to anyone else.[1] Initially, small children must depend on their parents to guide them in making moral choices, but as they grow, they should develop an understanding of the knowledge of good and evil for themselves (Isaiah 7:15), since their parents will not always be around. For human relationships, this type of knowledge is desirable.

But the Genesis account does not describe a human, parent-child relationship. Adam and Eve's "parent" is the creator of the universe. To desire moral autonomy in relationship to God is to desire to be like God, to be God. Adam and Eve's disobedience is a matter of unbelief (distrust that God has their best interests at heart) and results in a movement away from living connected to God—in constant conversation, communion, and union.

The motto of the false self is carved into the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: God cannot be trusted, so I must take matters into my own hands.

Arguably the greatest insult one person can give to another is to say, "I don't trust you." Imagine those words in the mouth of your spouse, child, or parent. But this is exactly what Adam and Eve said to God: "I don't trust you to know what is best for me; I must become independent and take matters into my own hands." The "original sin" was a fear-driven incapacity to trust, and resulted in the loss of the willingness to live in a submissive relationship to the alluring Mystery and community that is God. The motto of the false self is carved into the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: *God cannot be trusted, so I must take matters into my own hands.*

Conversely, the Tree of Life, I believe, is symbolic of the willingness to live life connected to God. If you will permit me some license with the symbolism here, the river of life that flowed through the Garden of Eden—the very person and presence of God—is what watered the Tree of Life and became present in its fruit. To eat from the Tree of Life is to choose willingness; it is to choose staying connected to God, keeping God *in* us, like branches into a vine. The water of his presence is to water our soul and cause the fruit of his Spirit to become the character of our life. The Lord's Supper consists of fruit from the Tree of Life—the real and indwelling presence of Christ.

The Garden of Eden and the Garden of Gethsemane are the first and last chapters of the same story. Each describes the two most fundamental choices in the universe. Then, now and forever, the option that faces you and me a few thousand times each day is the choice between willful autonomy from God—attempting to be God—and willing surrender to an on going, organic connection to God. The choice is between the way of the false self and the way of the true self.

The life of every patriarch can be viewed as a parable of God's faithful reward for willingness and his punishment for willfulness.

- Cain made a willful choice and fell even further than his parents into the pit of despair.
- "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches into the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:4, NIV). This was the chorus sung by the willful builders of Babel as apple juice dripped from their lips.
- Abraham became the father of a great nation in the exact moment he stood over his own son, knife drawn, and became willing to say to God, "Your will and not mine be done," no matter how high the cost. This act of willingness made Abraham a Jew. Radical trust in God saying, "As you wish" even as every fiber in his body shouted, "No!"

• Although it was a forty-year journey from the crime scene of his willful murder of an Egyptian, Moses was eventually able to throw down his rod (the symbol of his ability to protect himself) in the very presence of an enemy (Pharaoh) and came to realize that his self-sufficiency really was a snake all along.
• The Israelite's six-month trip across the wilderness took forty years because willfulness was chosen at almost every fork in the road.
• David followed the path of willingness to confront Goliath, but took the willful shortcut to Bathsheba's place.
• Each minor and major prophet pointed out the cost of willful choices and offered an invitation to come back to willingness.
• A young Jewish girl, after being told by an angel that as a virgin she would conceive a baby, said, "I am the Lord's servant ...May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38, NIV). Willingness made Mary God's first communion chalice.
• Jesus began his ministry by drawing nurture from fasting to overcome Satan's temptations toward willful choices. Jesus often taught using sheep as a model of willingness and goats as an example of willfulness. He contrasted the sheep's gentle, compliant character with that of the willful, bottom-butting behavior of goats.
• Jesus entered a garden and reversed the curse of Adam and Eve by choosing the right tree of willingness and trust.
• Jesus' acceptance of the cross became the ultimate symbol of willingness—obedience, even unto death. His sacred heart hung as a picture within a picture at the point of intersection between the vertical (the will of God) and the horizontal (the will of man).

Willingness means learning to embrace a state of continuous surrender to the will of God. It is more foundational to the Christian journey than salvation. It's the gateway to deeper levels of communion with God. In willingness we surrender our separateness from God and resolve to continue on the road that ultimately leads home. Willingness, the character of our truest self, is surrender and organic connection to God. It enables us to splash freely in the river of God's sufficiency on a day-by-day, hour-by-hour, moment-by-moment basis. Willingness says "Whoopee!" to the mystery of being alive in Christ, in each moment. Willfulness says either "no" or "yes, but...."

Willfulness is what sets us apart from God, the fundamental essence of life, by attempting to master, direct, control, or otherwise manipulate our existence. Willfulness says, "I want to be God." It leads away from relationship and to the hell of isolation from the loving community of being (God), meaning (Jesus), and love (the Holy Spirit). Willfulness is another name for our false self.

It is not surprising that the church has prized devotional literature which begins with a declaration of willingness. For example, "The Lord is my shepherd..."; "Our Father who art in heaven... Thy will be done"; and "Jesus is Lord."

But those who join this club pay staggering dues. Members must make a profession of the willing statements: "Jesus is the Lord of my life—I am not"; and "Your kingdom come, and my kingdom go." For most people, it takes a lot of pain to jolt them into being willing to surrender the reins of life to God. For most, the battle is ongoing.

The Great Battle

The longest battle in history rages within the skin of humanity. It is the great tug-of-war between our true and false selves, between willing surrender and willful independence.

The self that I am called to be from the dawn of eternity is the self that I am *in* Christ. It is my eternal self, my real identity, and the part of me that desires nothing more than a relationship of continual conversation, communion, and union with God, to be sustained by the Tree of Life.

But my false self resists Christ's invitation to reign in me. It wants to be the ruler, even if over a tiny kingdom and for a wisp of time. At the core of my false ways of being is what Thomas Merton calls a sinful refusal to surrender to God's will.

The seeds of distrust planted in the souls of my foreparents still germinate inside me. And as they ripen, I am tempted to follow their course: First to *grasp* (the initial act of willfulness) and then to *hide*.[2] In *grasping* from the wrong tree, I vote that control, independence, and self-determination are more cherished than surrender, community, and abandonment to the love of God. In *hiding*, I move into a world of shame and isolation and out of the realm of received grace

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and togetherness. These two themes—grasping and hiding—have soiled the souls of every descendant of Adam and Eve and block us from being in a position for conversation, communion, and union with God.

The refusal to come out of hiding from God and return to willing surrender leaves me separate and vulnerable. And because it is not from God, my false self will suggest pain-killing idols or solace in the form of *pleasure* (how I can be gratified), *esteem* (what others think of me), and *security* (what I have and what I do).

Solution: The Cross of Christ

Most people recognize crucifixion as the most horrible type of death, and the bloody symbol of the cross is the most familiar symbol of the Christian faith. The cross, empty tomb, and the communion chalice are the heart and soul of Christianity. On the cross Jesus demonstrated obedience to the will of God unto death. The empty tomb proved that he was who he said he was and that he had the authority to do such radical teaching. The chalice symbolizes that all he said and did, he can say and do again through us. We too can be obedient unto death. We too can rise from the dead.

The cross plays two roles in Christian theology. It is significant in its necessity for the atonement of the believer. The sacrifice of the Son of God pays the ransom price for the redemption of mankind. The cross of Christ symbolizes atonement.

The cross also graphically reminds us that we are to follow Christ's example and embrace radical willingness. We too are to die to a will apart from the will of God. No desires of the flesh, no desires for independence or autonomy, can stand in the way of our journey to union with God.

The decision of Christ—to have no will but the will of his father—is our example to follow.

If you will humor me for a moment, I'd like to share a secret with you that I've never communicated before. In my private devotion time, I like to imagine that the cross on which Jesus died was taken from the wood of two trees. I envision that the horizontal beam was hewn from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It represents human will—apart from divine will—and the desire for self-rule. It points to the east and west, but not up to the throne of God. I then imagine the vertical beam to be taken from the Tree of Life. It points to the heavens and represents divine will. It symbolizes the ideal of living in union with God—connected, one. The heart of Christ hung over the intersection of the two trees. The decision of Christ—to have no will but the will of his Father—is our example to follow. As we try to follow Christ, we must accept daily that same cross; we must seek to have one will with the Father.

In Christ's acceptance of death on the cross, he modeled for us that nothing, not our deepest fears or our most cherished idols, can come between our heavenly Father and us. Our heart must be like his—dead to this world, alive in the kingdom forever. Finally free from fear and blind to the lure of idols.

The last thing Jesus did before being arrested was to go to a garden for a conversation with his Father. And just like the first Adam, he encountered two trees there. Unlike the first Adam, he ate only from the Tree of Life—willing surrender to the will of God. Staying plugged into his Father like a branch into a vine. His conversation with his father deepened into communion. Home was in view. A garden tragedy has become a garden triumph. The right road—the way of communion with God—was chosen. Jesus demonstrated that saying "As you wish" to God is the best way of saying "I love you." Conversation becomes communion.

Because of the cross of Christ, Eden's gates are open, and I am welcome. But the cross of Christ is also my example of how I am to live.

Father, I pray, *don't take this cross away from me. The pain is of my own making. I want to eat from both trees and feed both of my dual natures. This is not your way. This is not the way to life in full. Thanks you for this foretaste of life apart from you. Because of your example and because of the pain I feel, I reject the fruit that nourishes my false self, life disconnected from you. Amen.*

[i] This article is adapted from *Falling For God: Saying Yes to His Extravagant Proposal* by Gary W. Moon. Forthcoming February 2004. Used by permission of Random House.

[1] Dorman, Ted M. *A Faith for All Seasons: Historic Christian Belief in Its Classical Expressions.* Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001, p.125

[2] Robert Barron. *And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation.* New York: Crossroad, 1998, p. 7