Welcome to Adulthood

March 13, 2011 at Peace United Church of Christ

One thing that Zephan, Zak and I have in common is that the three of us all love myths and especially the Greek myths: Perseus, Jason, Hercules, Apollo, Narcissus, Odysseus, the minotaur, the cyclops, the sirens. As a child I loved the adventure, the quest, the fantasy of it all; as an adult I love the truths to which the myths point.

Consider if you will the story of Orestes and the furies. To make a very long story short, Orestes' mother killed his father. Now in Greek society it was the sworn duty of every son to slay his father's murderer. So Orestes was obliged to kill his mother. But likewise in that society, the greatest sin one could commit was to kill their own mother. Orestes is literally damned if he does and damned if he doesn't. Eventually Orestes decides to avenge his father's death and he kills his mother. For that sin, the gods sent furies, personal demons to haunt him. After being haunted by the furies for years, Orestes beseeches the gods to relieve him of his punishment and a trial was held to determine his fate. At the trial, Apollo, the sun-god, spoke on behalf of Orestes saying that he was responsible for engineering the whole scenario whereby Orestes had no choice but to kill his mother. Therefore, said Apollo, Orestes cannot be held responsible. But at this point Orestes jumps up and says, "It was I and not Apollo who killed my mother." The gods were utterly stunned for they had never seen a mortal willing to accept full responsibility for their actions. And the gods immediately lifted the curse and transformed the furies into loving and wise spirits.

So what does this have to do with the price of tea in China and the first Sunday in Lent. Well let's go forward a few thousand years. Mary Wimbush of Washington D.C., a mother of 4, was killed in a traffic accident last April. The word "accident" however, really isn't an appropriate word. She and her 4 kids were hit head on by Ajene Jones, a man high on PCP, with no license and a history of reckless driving. He never even tried to stop his van from hitting her. He walked away with minor injuries and didn't spend a day in the hospital. Ms. Wimbush died, and her kids suffered injuries ranging from broken limbs & jaws, concussions and internal injuries. The fatal crash was Jones' fifth conviction - 3 for drug-related violations and 2 for driving while impaired. When Jones came to trial this January on 1 count of manslaughter & 2 counts of aggravated assault, he refused to accept fault. Rather he was convicted under an Alford plea. Paula can correct me, but my understanding is that an Alford plea says, the prosecutor has enough evidence to convict me, but the defendant refuses to accept fault, blame or responsibility. In other words, this man is Orestes' opposite.

But let's not turn our attention just to this one individual. In the past 2 weeks there have been two occasions, once in Australia and once in Washington D. C., where victims of an attack died while pedestrians walked by but did not call for help. In D. C. the man was ignored by passer-bys for almost 20 minutes. The man in Melbourne lay dying on the street for 2 hours until someone called an ambulance. How many people walked by those two men? Hundreds? Thousands? Is it just me, or do they all need to be charged with complicity in their deaths? And yet I get this feeling that most would argue that they were murdered by an individual.

In decades past, especially in North Carolina and Virginia, how many times have tobacco companies been sued by how how many complaintants, including attorney generals? And you know, there's a part of me that agrees. The companies knew the stuff was addictive, and inasmuch as someone was handing the stuff out like candy during World War II it makes sense that there is some liability. But I don't remember ever hearing much from Orestes during that time. He certainly didn't work for the tobacco companies nor do I recall him being a complainant accepting responsibility for his own choices.

As an individual who is married to a school teacher, and as an individual who has taken ADD medication as an adult, I have had some great conversations about stimulant medications: Ritalin, Concerta, Adderal et. al. I wholeheartedly believe in the positive effects of such mediation for many kids and adults. But at times it seems like it's being dispensed like candy, and truth be told, as a former therapist I've seen parents more interested in medicating than in parenting. And so I've got to ask: Where's Orestes?

While it's not my style to do a lot of commenting on the current occupant of the White House, the last Republican president couldn't think of a single regret he had after 8 years of office. Wow. As for his predecessor, he could take a phrase like "I did not have sex with that woman" and do semantical wonders with it. There was a reason he was called the Teflon president; nothing would stick. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, President Kennedy went before the nation and accepted responsibility for what happened. That may have been the last time a president accepted responsibility for a mess. After that it was Watergate, Iran-Contra and so on ad infinitum. No, don't look for Orestes in the Oval Office, and Lord knows he ain't anywhere near Capitol Hill.

In Stephen Sondheim's musical Into the Woods, the witch, played by Bernadette Peters sings: "What matters is the blame, somebody to blame." Let's blame the drug or the tobacco companies. Let's blame the ex. Let's blame the feminazis and the liberals who took prayer out of schools. Let's blame Lehman brothers for the recession, or should we blame the people who took out mortgages they really couldn't afford. Let's blame the Muslims and the homosexuals. Let's blame the conservatives. Let's blame the former pastor; let's blame the consistory; let's blame the people who never get involved. Let's blame the old man; just don't ask me to talk about my sin, my guilt, my mistakes. But isn't that the problem? We want comfort when we need to be confronted.

As a theologian, a therapist and a parent I LOVE Genesis 3. Adam, have you eaten from the tree which I told you not to touch? Well... kinda, but that woman YOU gave me, well she hog-tied me and stuffed the fruit in my mouth. What WERE you thinking when you gave her to me? And so God goes to the woman and says, What have you done? Well since you asked, the serpent... you know, the one YOU created, the one You put on the earth and called good... Well that serpent of yours tricked me and it was only after I was deceived that I ate from the tree. What were YOU thinking when you created that thing?

The traditional interpretation of Genesis 3 is based on the work of St. Augustine who said that willful pride led Adam and Eve to sin. I don't buy it, not even for a second. At least for my boys growing up, while their will is mighty, their curiosity is even stronger. Toddlers were created to explore the world which is why they are always sticking things into their mouths: crayons, dog food... an apple. Besides, any parent will tell you forbidden fruit is attractive fruit. In addition, the main tasks of a toddler is to figure out in life which boundaries are rigid, which ones are flexible, and which ones are non-existent. And the only way for the kid to figure out which boundaries really matter is to cross them and then wait to see what Mom or Dad does. Of course you just told them not to do that, but they needed to see if you were serious.

So, my own interpretation of Genesis 3 leads me to see, not the story of humanity's fall, but rather the story of humanity growing up. And growing up is always painful and costly.
It always a loss of innocence which is not necessarily a bad thing. Humanity became more conscious, more aware after leaving the garden. We had to choose whether to be in a relationship with God which I believe to be a good thing. But with maturity & consciousness comes responsibilities and consequences. Genesis 3 reminds us we still have a lot of growing up left to do. Most of us are more like children or teenagers than we care to admit. We are very fond of the word freedom in this country and we, both politicians and the masses, toss it about ad nauseum. But we have very little taste for responsibility and even less taste for self-discipline.

Now women pay attention. St. Paul tells us that one man brought sin into the world. One man? I thought the problem was Eve. But if we are to take Paul seriously, then a man and not a woman brought sin into the world. So why doesn't Paul blame Eve? I would posit that the first sin was Adam's, not because he ate the fruit first, but because he passed the buck first. He was the first human who would not accept responsibility for his actions. And so it was by lying and refusing responsibility that Adam and Eve experience alienation between each other, their God and even themselves.

St. Paul the therapist tells us we have a very dysfunctional family and that alienation and buck-passing in our inheritance. He reminds us we have a lot more in common with our old man Adam than we care to admit. And so he tells us that our hope is found in one who has been grafted onto our family tree; our salvation is found in the one who accepted the costs and consequences of his decisions to dwell with us even though it meant he walks to Jerusalem. Look at it this way folks. If we decide to accept responsibility for our actions and inactions, there will be costs. But if we decide not to accept responsibility for our actions and inactions, so too will there be costs. There are no free rides, so welcome to adulthood. My seminary roommate once defined maturity as knowing the difference between what was done to you and what you have done to yourself. Isn't it time we stop blaming others for where we find ourselves or where we find the church? Isn't it time we accepted responsibility for our lives and actions? Isn't it time we grew up enough to admit we need to get on a different road and that we really do need to stop and get directions? Isn't it time we grew up? Amen.