

Genesis 3:8-15*Third Sunday after Pentecost (Series B, Proper 5)***Lessons for the Day: Genesis 3:8-15; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35****Passing the Buck***June 10, 2018*

“And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

Dear friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Watch any western movie, and sooner or later, there is likely going to be a scene in the saloon, as cowpokes and gunslingers gather around a table to play poker. Of course, someone will be cheating, and that will erupt into a barroom brawl or a gunfight.

That scene may truly be descriptive of reality in the old west. In the late 1800's and early 1900's, poker became popular, but it does seem that players were highly suspicious of cheating or any form of bias and there's considerable folklore depicting gunslingers in shoot-outs based on accusations of dirty dealing. In order to avoid unfairness, the deal changed hands during poker sessions. The person who was next in line to deal would be given a marker. This was often a knife, and knives often had handles made of buck's horn, so the marker became known as a buck. You can find a definition of 'buck' in the dictionary as an article used in a game of poker. When the dealer's turn was done he 'passed the buck'. (silver dollars were later used as markers and this is probably the origin of the use of 'buck' as a slang term for dollar.)

When we think of "passing the buck", it really has to do with shifting the blame to someone else, or skirting our responsibility for something. Every parent understands passing the buck. All children do it. No one ever does anything wrong, so someone else must have done it. It's someone else's fault. I always liked the way cartoonist Bill Keane, the creator of *Family Circus* demonstrated this. Whenever mom or dad would ask who was responsible for some mishap in the house, everyone would blame "Not Me", and Keane had this roly-poly shadow with the name "Not Me", who could always be seen running away from the scene of the crime. But it's not just children who pass the buck. Almost everyone will try to shift the blame to someone else when they are confronted with something they have done that is wrong. We don't want to be held accountable for the things we have done, and so we pass the buck, seeking to put the blame on others, seeking to avoid the consequences of our own actions.

It has been that way right from the time of the fall into sin in the garden of Eden. God had given Adam and Eve the freedom to eat and enjoy the fruit from any tree in the garden except one—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God commanded them not to eat of that tree, saying that the day they did eat from it, they would surely die. So what happens? The devil persuades them that God is holding something back from them; that He isn't being fair; that eating of the tree is actually a good thing. Now Adam and Eve do the one thing that God commanded them not to do. They sin by eating of that tree. We are told that when they did eat that fruit, their eyes were opened so that they knew both good and evil. Instead of the good the devil told them this would bring, they found that their perfect world was gone forever. The innocence of their lives, the special relationship they enjoyed with God—their paradise—it was all destroyed. Now they knew they were naked. Now they were afraid of God, and when they heard Him calling to them they hid because of what they had done.

We cannot hide from God. We cannot keep our sin from Him. Yet because He loves us, God seeks us, to confront us with our sin, as He did for Adam and Eve. But what do they do when they are face to face with their sinfulness? They do what people so often do today—they pass the buck. When God asks Adam, "***Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?***", Adam quickly says, "it's all Eve's fault. She gave me the fruit, and I ate it. And remember, God, that you are the one who created her in the first place. You have to take some of the blame." Eve does the same thing: "it's the serpent's fault", she says. "He tempted me, and I ate it." But passing the buck just doesn't work before God. We are not fooling God when we try to avoid the reality and consequences of our sin. Adam and Eve couldn't do it, and neither can we. That doesn't keep people from trying to excuse their actions. Criminals say that they are just victims of society, that really it is our fault that they are the way they are. A husband is caught in adultery, and he says it is his wife's fault, because she just doesn't understand him. Someone has too much to drink at a party and gets into an accident, and then sues the host for giving him the drinks in the first place. We like to think it's always someone else's fault that act the way we do—be it our boss or our parents, our teachers or our society. Our friends mislead us, so it's their fault that we do what is wrong. My parents don't care about me, so it's their fault. The devil made me do it, so it's his fault. You really can't blame me. It's definitely not my fault, even if I have sinned and done what is wrong in the sight of God. We pass the buck, rather than face the consequences of our actions.

When Harry Truman was president of the United States, he had a little sign on his desk at the White House which said: "*The buck stops here*". It was his way of reminding himself and others that he himself was responsible for his actions. He couldn't escape the consequences of his actions by trying to blame others; by trying to pass the buck. When it comes right down to it we all need to remember that we are the ones who are responsible, and we are the ones held accountable before God for those things which we do and say and think in our lives. We may not like it, but sooner or later we must all face the consequences of our own sinfulness and realize that the buck stops with us.

That leaves us in a very dangerous and uncomfortable position, for God's word clearly says: "***For the wages of sin is death.***" (Romans 6:23, ESV) God pulls no punches: "***the soul who sins shall die.***" (Ezekiel 18:4, ESV) Since God also declares that "***no one does good, not even one.***" (Romans 3:12, ESV) We all must face the worst of consequences, namely eternal damnation, suffering forever and ever in Satan's dark domain. If it were not for the gracious actions of our loving Father, this would be our fate, and no amount of buck passing would ever change it.

Thankfully, God steps in to do what we cannot do for ourselves. Right there in the Garden, when sin destroyed His perfect world, God made a promise to Adam and Eve. As He passed judgment on the serpent (aka the devil) He said: ***I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.*** God cannot ignore the sin of His people, but He did promise to send the One who would set us free from the devil and his power of sin. And God kept His promise. He gave us His own Son, to be the one to bear all the sin and guilt and shame of our lives. We cannot escape from our sin by trying to pass the buck, but God Himself—Jesus Christ—takes all the blame we bear in our lives. The Father passes the buck from us to Christ, so that Jesus suffers the punishment that we deserve, dying in our place upon the cross, so that we would not die in sin, and so that we would not have to spend eternity in hell. He died for us, and that cross on which He died is just like the sign on Truman's desk. The cross says to us: "The buck stops here." Jesus says, "You do not have to be afraid any more. Come to me, and I will lift your burden from you. Pass the buck, pass all your sin to me. I will take that sin from you. I will give you my forgiveness, and I will bless you with new life, free from the power of sin itself."

God has made us alive, by passing the buck for us, by passing the punishment we deserve to His Son. That does not mean that our sin does not matter. Sin is serious business, and we still have to take personal responsibility for our sinfulness. Yet God does give us the opportunity to pass the buck—not to avoid sin, but in order to be forgiven for our sinfulness. We are told: "***If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.***" (1 John 1:8–9, ESV) Yes, God forgives the sins of all those who come before Him, confessing their sin and seeking His forgiveness. He passes the buck for us, so that we will not die in sin. He passes our sin to His Son, and says: for those who believe, the buck stops here. It is gone forever. All that is left is the forgiveness and life that I give through the resurrection and life of my own Son.

Do you want to pass the buck? I don't mean, do you want to escape from personal responsibility for your sin. We all must stand accountable for our deeds and actions. But if you realize that you are to blame for those things that you have done that are wrong in the sight of God, then pass the buck to Christ. Remember the promises of life and forgiveness He has given you in your baptism and then let go of all the sin, the blame and the guilt of the past, as you pass it to Christ and let Him take it away forever. This is the only way we can really pass the buck, and thankfully, it is the way that gives us life. Amen.