

A couple of weeks ago my wife Jessica and I saw an excellent and very important movie called Hidden Figures. It is based on a book which tells the amazing true story of three African American women who were mathematicians and instrumental in the early days of NASA's flights into outer space. In the process they had to fight against segregation, racism, and sexism. It is a reminder of the impact of discrimination and the amazing things that happen when people work for equality. These three brilliant women were able to see and share the hidden figures: the math that made space travel possible and a future where the colour of their skin and their gender would not limit their potential.

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Today we hear part of one of Genesis' creation myths. This one reads like an ancient fable answering life's big questions: why do we need to labour so hard in order to bring food from the ground? Why is birth so painful and difficult? Why do people die? Why don't snakes have legs?

This story has a sharp edge to it. It has been used at different times to talk about the sinfulness of disobedience, of humanity, of women, of sexuality. It has been used to say that humanity is so sinful that God needed to kill Christ in order to set the world right – to balance a ledger. But there is another way of hearing this story, an older way, and one still held by many of our kindred in the Jewish faith. The story of Adam and Eve in the garden is a birthing story, a growing up story.

Adam and Eve cannot stay in the Garden because humanity doesn't belong or exist in the garden. We live a life that is both connected and separate from God, one another, and the rest of creation. Just as the child

leaves the womb, just as the umbilical cord is cut, just as children become adults who create their own lives so Adam and Eve must leave the garden. When we can hear the story this way, we can start hearing its wisdom. This sacred tale speaks into our reality – we are connected and we are separate and this is beautiful and frightening, it can be life-giving and destructive.

In the garden there is a tree – trees in ancient mythology represent the connection between the earthly and divine realms. This tree contains the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil and the first humans are told they can eat of any tree but this one.

In the garden there is a snake. Now, we are hardwired to fear snakes, they can be dangerous even deadly. They leave many of us in a place between fear and fascination. In ancient mythologies snakes also represent knowledge and wisdom because they are earthy, connected to the ground. Snake knows the truth about the tree and says to Eve, why don't you eat the fruit – you'll become like God. She eats and so does Adam who is right there beside her. Their eyes are opened, they see that they are naked, that they are different, and they get embarrassed, so they cover themselves up. They've lost the childhood joy, wonder, and freedom. It then all unravels. Fear and blame take hold: Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the snake. First humans wanted to be like God, the story goes, to be above all others and now they see the differences and they start blaming and distancing themselves. They have grown up and grown out of the garden so God clothes them and like a loving parent and sets them free.

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We live outside of the idyllic and in the real. The reality is that while we are deeply connected to the Divine, to one another, and to the rest of creation, we also know our separation. We are unique, different, and this is wonderful and it is frightening, it is blessing and it is brokenness.

I once had professor who would share stories of his time as a social worker in some of New York's most impoverished neighbourhoods. On several occasions when he went to see people and the door was opened he was met with a maze of newspapers cutting off the doorway and the rest of the apartment. "Why do you think they did that?" he asked us? Now, most of us thought that they must be hoarders, or they didn't know how to clean up after themselves. "No" he responded, "They were frightened" These people were scared of the world outside of themselves. Because of experience or belief they saw the world as a threatening place. Some were scared that others would hurt them and others were frightened that if they got close to others they would lose their identity and independence. So the walls went up and my professor's work was to help them to work on their pain, to trust others, to heal, and to dismantle their walls.

One of the most difficult and important acts of life is building intimacy with others. Intimacy is about coming together in a way that makes us feel connected and understood by another. We know we are in a place of intimacy when we feel as if others 'get' us. Intimacy is more than just something nice to have, we need it. Several studies have shown that not having any close friends can be as harmful to our health as smoking. We are made for and we need intimacy – we need to feel connected to others.

But let's be honest, intimacy is hard work. Intimacy means bearing ourselves to others and building relationships where others feel safe to do likewise. It requires a lot of trust and courage.

Snake-Wisdom-Tempter and the fruit of knowledge linger in our life, chattering in our brains and resonating in our bodies telling us that we are all different, separate from one another and maybe this is something to be terrified of. So we should put up the newspaper, build the walls to protect ourselves. Some of the paper is fear – fear that people are coming to get us, to hurt us, to take away what we treasure and value. Some of the paper is made up of our scars – the hurtful words and abusive actions that made us feel we couldn't trust others or that we aren't lovable. Some of the paper is the junk passed onto us, the prejudice and discrimination that we were told was wisdom – wisdom to keep us safe, wisdom to propel us into the future, wisdom to understand the world in easy convenient categories: some people are more violent, or less intelligent, more sinful, less human - fill in the blank - because of their language, country of origin, culture, religion, gender, sexuality, etcetera. Our eyes are opened and we see the divisions and it can be frightening and can lead us to building the paper walls. Soon it is really easy to justify things like segregation and discrimination, to slip into blame and fear. The wall can get so high and so thick that we can't see the hidden figures – life as possible without the walls.

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The story of the Garden of Eden speaks to the beautiful and painful reality of life – of our connection and separation from the Holy, from one another, from all creation. But it also speaks to who we are born to be. Before the

fruit and the snake the first humans are placed in the garden to cultivate it and to be in relationship with one another, with creation, and with God. This story reminds us that we are born to nurture and cultivate life. We are to garden intimacy within ourselves, with others, with the rest of creation, and with our Creator. We are born to do the work of taking out the weeds and dismantling the paper walls that divide us. When we do this we are able to see the hidden figures, life beyond the walls, to see, as the Christian tradition names it – Christ in one another. We are able to cultivate a sacred place of harmony with God, others, and creation: Genesis calls it Eden, In the Gospels Jesus names it the dominion and way of God on earth, social scientist and healthcare providers call it the way of health and wellbeing, prophets and protestors dream it as the place of justice.

And it all begins right here. We can start this holy act of cultivating life by building intimacy and taking down walls in our community as Grace United. We can work at creating safe place where all feel welcomed, celebrated, loved, and supported. It can start with something as simple as greeting one another, listening to one another without judgement, sharing our lives with one another, and celebrating one another as gifts from God. In this way we experience God in our midst and we are empowered to dismantle the paper walls in our life and our world. We cultivate a life where we know we are blessed in our uniqueness and blessed in our sacred connections.

So come, let us do the holy work together of cultivate intimacy, growing in relationship and dismantling walls for we are part of the holy story. Amen. Let it be so.