

Mud People and Beloved Community (Genesis 2:18-24; Mark 10:2-16)

by Cate Florenz

It always strikes me how very different the second creation story in Genesis is from the first. When I was growing up in the church, I didn't actually realize that there were two separate accounts; they kind of blended together in my mind. But there are ways in which they are quite different.

We find the first creation story in Genesis Chapter 1. This is the one where God is big. God says, "let there be light" and there is; God speaks order in chaos; God brings forth plants and animals in all varieties, and God creates humans *male and female at the same time*, and God rests. In the first creation story, God is huge. Powerful. All-powerful, it seems. God is intentional. God is sovereign. God seems to hover above and around all things. God is big.

Beginning in the fourth verse of Chapter 2 in Genesis, we begin to get another image of God and God's creation. If it wasn't clear that this was a different story, there are some clues that we can find. For one thing, the name of God is different: not God but the LORD God. Hebrew Bible scholars believe this indicates that the second story comes from a different source, different author, than the first. But even if this term doesn't jump out at those of us who are not reading in Hebrew, we can't help but notice that things are happening in a different order. After the first story concludes, the work of creation is done, and God rests. And yet here in Chapter 2 we find ourselves somehow back at the beginning, before the creative work had been done. It's as if the biblical authors and editors have pressed the rewind button and are now giving us another, different narrative about creation and human origins.

If the impression of God in the first creation story is that God is *big*, the impression of God in the second story, here in Chapter 2, is that God is *intimate*. In verse 7, which just precedes today's passage, the LORD God "formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." This isn't an enormous, transcendent, distant God as much as a hands-in-the-dirt, artisan God. A sculptor or a potter. An anthropomorphic God who has hands and feet and makes and forms things and who breathes. Who walks in the garden alongside the newly created human. This is a God of closeness and relationship. An intimate, approachable God. Not a God you might bow down to as much as a God you might get a lemonade with on a Saturday afternoon.

This is where we begin in today's reading, with God and the first human in the garden. I will not call this person Adam just yet, because the word we have here is *adam*, which has the same linguistic root as the word for mud or earth. So the play on words in Hebrew is like mud-person from the mud, or earthling from the earth. *Adam* is a masculine noun in Hebrew, so when you see he and him pronouns here, it does not indicate that this person is a man. People who speak

some other languages have experienced this phenomenon of gendered nouns. In German. For example, a chair is masculine, but a door is feminine. This is what's at play here. The human is not a man but better understood as an androgenous person.

So we find ourselves with God and the *adam* in the garden, and God says in verse 18, "It is not good that the *adam* should be alone. I will make them a helper as their partner." But the writer doesn't seem to mean a servant or a maid or a butler as much as a companion. Another possible translation is "I will make them a fitting partner." This is not about dominance and subservience – the word for "helper" in the Hebrew is most often used to describe how *God* helps and so it certainly doesn't have a diminishing connotation.

I imagine if the God we read about in Chapter 1 of Genesis wanted to make a partner for the *adam*, God would have simply said, "Let there be a partner," and it would be done. In fact that's exactly what does happen in the first story – all we are told in that story is "male and female God created them." There were two, right from the beginning, with neither dominant over the other. But the God of this second story gets their hands dirty. God gets into the dirt and starts experimenting. And together with God, the *adam* is co-creating the creatures of the earth, with God forming and *adam* naming. And just as the *adam* is involved in the creation and naming of the animals, God also assigns the human dominion over the garden, to till and to keep it. Humans are involved in the holy and ongoing work of creating and sustaining.

Despite the intimacy with God that the *adam* experiences, God nevertheless decides that the human should not be alone. Nothing that God forms from the ground is sufficient, though. No "fitting partner" can be found. I find this really surprising, because I can't help but think, surely if God created one human, God could do it again and make a second human from the same raw material that God had used for the first one. And therein, I think, lies the most important thing from today's reading: **aside from the *adam*, the original human, we do not come from raw material. We come from each other.** And moreover, each human who comes into this world, despite being formed literally from pre-existing human bodies, is **a completely unique, whole, and holy individual.**

If God could take the *adam*, slice them in half (which, as a side note, is an equally faithful translation of "took a rib"), if God could slice the *adam* in half and come out with two *fitting, but not identical* partners, that tells us that each human, created from other humans, is a new creation and a new manifestation of God's abundant diversity. I actually know something about this because I have two children from one human embryo, sliced in half if you will, and they are not the same. We are made of each other, but we are not identical. Each is beautifully different. The text calls the two beings that emerge from the *adam* "man" and "woman" and then tells us, "this is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife." **Not because parents don't matter and certainly not because cisgender heterosexual relationships are the only**

valid kind, but because we are made to be together, to bond with one another, and to love and support one another because we are made of the same stuff – even as, at the same time, each is beautifully different.

It is interesting to see what Jesus does with this statement, this description of God's intent for human relationships. When we read Mark 10, we see that Jesus is using this text from Genesis to forbid divorce, even more strongly than Jewish law already limited it. Jewish law said, effectively, if you want to dismiss your wife at least give her a certificate of divorce. This certificate was extremely important because it would allow the woman at least the possibility of getting married again. Effectively, though, a woman who had been divorced was shamed, abandoned, unable to financially support herself and any children, and entirely powerless. Divorced women would be left literally to beg in the streets.

When he forbids divorce, Jesus is primarily concerned with the safety and well-being of women. Marriage was not a romantic institution but rather an economic one. It was about money, power, procreation, inheritance. What Jesus is forbidding is abandoning another person and condemning them to shame, poverty, and violence. What Jesus is doing here is what Jesus always does: he is aligning himself with the powerless.

After his discussion of divorce, Jesus goes on to welcome the children and to remind those around him that it is *to these* that the Kingdom of God belongs. Children were the most vulnerable in first century society, valuable only for what labor they might provide. Even the disciples, with whom Jesus just had this conversation in Mark 9, see the children as a nuisance and “spoke sternly to them.”

But Jesus continues to reprimand the disciples, and Jesus continues to teach us, that the people who don't matter to society matter to him; they matter to God. Women. Children. LGBTQIA+ people. Immigrants. Undocumented people. Jesus uses the Genesis text not only to protect women but to demonstrate that, in general, we are doing relationships wrong. Because of sin, which doesn't come into the picture until Genesis Chapter 3, relationships in this world are based on things like money, power, control, competition, and violence. Here in the United States, our society, in general, has forgotten that we are made from one another and we are meant for one another. Jesus is pointing us back to God's intent for human life – that we should be engaged in the work of creating and sustaining the earth, that we are made of the same stuff, that our diversity is intentional and good. That God is both big and also intimate, walking alongside us on the way.

This call to authentic relationships is the reason that this week, we put out a sidewalk sign on M St. that says, “Building Beloved Community.” Well, because of Jesus' call and also because of Pr. Judith's gentle reminder that we need to tell the community who we are. This is who we are. Beloved community is what we are doing. In the community we are building here, relationships

are not based on money or power or prestige or competition, but simply on our shared humanity, the mud from which we are made and the breath of God that gives us life.

People keep asking me how my internship is going, and I tell them that I have rarely been so excited to be with a group of people. I have rarely felt this close to God. I tell them, these are my people. I belong to them, and they belong to me. They are different ages and races and genders and sexual orientations, each beautifully different, but we are made of the same stuff. We belong together. You are my mud-people, as God intended. And God calls us, together, to protect those who, because of sin, do not experience healthy, sustaining, protective, life-giving relationships. We are meant to keep building this beloved community, until with God's help, it includes everyone.