

- Back in the '70s, Annie Dillard spent a couple of years on an island in Puget Sound and there was only one church on that island. So she went and worshiped there every Sunday, and the priest would pray the prescribed prayers from his prayer book; prayers of confession, petition, and thanksgiving. It went week after week and one Sunday he was kneeling at the altar praying the prayers and he stopped in the midst of the prayers and he looked up to the ceiling and he said, "Lord, we say these same prayers to you every week." And then he resumed his prayers. And Annie Dillard said, "Because of this, I like him very much." We say the same prayers every Sunday. One of the prayers we pray each week is a prayer of confession, and you would think this would be more effective. By confessing our sin week after week that we would make a dent in our sinfulness, that sin would somehow yield to such persistence. Praying, kind of like riding a bicycle, you fall off a few times, but after while you get the knack of it and then, you're a holy person. But sin has this persistence. It would be easier in a way if we could adopt a child's view of sin, that the world was manufactured with 14,782 rules, and a sin is an infraction against one of those rules, but over time we could practice and get it down pat and not sin as much. Or it would be convenient, indeed, if the attitude that many people have were correct that God, in his old age, has become a little more relaxed in his demands upon us. God's mellowed out a bit. God is now grading on the curve, if you will. We're not doin' so good, but relatively speaking, B minus. You pass. The mess that we're in is huge and we need not be naive about it. Naive, I think, like Lancelot Du Lac. In the musical, Camelot, he's heard the summons to come to King Arthur's roundtable, and in what I think is the funniest part of the musical, along the way, he sings a song called C'est Moi when he's boasting of his great prowess, his strength, his holiness, and above all, his unsurpassed humility. And in the course of that song, the funniest moment comes when he sings: ♪ Had I been made the partner of Eve ♪ ♪ We'd be in Eden still ♪ And the problem was, he became the partner of Guinevere, who already had a partner, King Arthur. And so the roundtable was fractured. Through the history of the church this doctrine has been called the Doctrine of Original Sin. It's almost as if genetically we become sinners, it's passed to us automatically by our parents. Not many people in the '90s want to buy into this, but I would suggest to you that the apple does not fall far from the tree. I was at a nursing home recently out of town. One of our members went elsewhere, so I went over to visit her. There were some of us sitting around in the common room, and we hadn't exchanged names or anything, and the conversation drifted toward where are you from. And there was an old man standing there and he said, well, I'm from a place that probably none of you've ever heard of. I'm from Oakboro. And I said, Oakboro? Man, my dad grew up in Oakboro! I've been there 1000 times. This guy leaned in and he looked at me and he said, "Are you Artis Howell's boy?" And I said, I can't tell you how glad I am that you asked. I'm not Artis Howell's boy. Artis Howell's boy's 75 years old. I'm Artis Howell's grandson. My dad, Cecil, is Artis Howell's boy. This man said, oh yeah. Artis used to deliver my mail. I know all these people in your family. I know Ray Dean and Thamine and Cropsy and Zulna and Nezy. We have great names in the Howell family. I've tried to get Lisa to use some on our children, to no avail. He saw something in my face. It would that it were only appearance that gets passed on. You see, my father also is, he's this really stubborn creature. I've always been exasperated with his stubbornness. His stubbornness is only matched by the stubbornness of Cecil Howell's boy. And I think there's this darkness at the back side of my soul that comes from my mother's side of the family. Far

from all the stuff that we get from our families, we find ourselves enmeshed in this culture. We live in a culture that is materialistic and cynical, and if you're breathing, you just got it. You can't shake it. You can leave church today and say, I'm not going to be materialistic any longer. You're not gonna make it 'til one o'clock. (audience laughs) We've just got it. Sin. The complexion of this thing. God puts Adam and Eve in a garden that is called Eden. The word Eden means bliss, or paradise. And they've got the full run of the garden, but there's one tree that they're supposed to avoid, and the lure of that tree is that if you eat of its fruit then you will be like God. And that's what we very much want to be like. We want to be immortal. We want control. Even if we believe in God, we tend to want to use God to get what we want so that we can still be at the center of the universe. Maybe it's like Prometheus scaling the heights, stealing the fire of the gods. Or as most common students learn the line from Milton's Paradise Lost, "Here we may reign secure, and in my choice to reign "is worth ambition though in hell. "Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven." We've heard all that 1000 times. What we don't pay as close attention to is how Milton describes what life is like when we choose to reign instead of to serve. He describes it as "hideous ruin, "a dungeon, horrible, "darkness visible, "regions of sorrow." It's almost as if, in life, we get some little bit of paradise, but then we discover that it is so fragile. You're feelin' fine and you go to the doctor for your annual checkup and before you know it, you're being bounced from pillar to post in the healthcare system, and you're scared to death for your life. Or you're drivin' down the road one day and just for a second you look the wrong way and your life's never the same. One day you're under stress and you say somethin' that you don't even really believe, but you can't take it back. Or in a weak moment you indulge in desire that you normally would never have dreamed of indulging. And then your marriage is in shreds. Our own Reynolds Price, when he discovered that he had cancer in his spinal cord, had a dream or a vision, in which Jesus appeared to him by the Sea of Galilee. And Jesus came to Reynolds and said, your sins are forgiven. Reynolds said, well that's not exactly what I was worried about. It's not so much that we are great rule-breakers. It is rather that we find ourselves in this predicament in life. It's right there in Genesis chapter three. It says that human life is one of fatigue, and mortality, and frustration, and maybe we are not so much like Prometheus scaling the heights to steal the fire of the gods, but rather we are more like Sisyphus, condemned to push a stone up a steep precipice only to get near the top and have that stone roll back down so that we may start all over again. The question remains, why do we say these same prayers every Sunday? Couple years ago, late in August, I got a phone call from a man in another state. He says, is this Dr. Howell? Yes. He said, my kid is entering Davidson College this year. I want you to get to know him. I said, I look forward to meeting him very much. He said, I want you to be sure that he's in church. I said, I hope he comes. He said, no no no, you don't understand me. I want you to be sure that my kid is in church. This is gettin' on my nerves a little. So I said, well, at our church we're not very good at insuring church attendance. This made him kind of mad. I asked him, I said why do you want your kid to be in church? He said, 'cause I want my kid to behave. And I said, well, at our church we're not very good at behavior control either. And this made him really mad, and he said well then what the (grunt) are you good at? And I don't know, I was in kind of a cheeky mood, and he was getting on my nerves, and so I gave him a smartalecky answer. I said, we're not good at insuring church attendance, and we're not very good at behavior control. What we are good at is capturing imaginations and setting them on fire. The guy hung up in a harrumph. I thought about it later and I thought that is what the church oughta be good at, capturing imaginations, setting them on fire, helping all of us, above all, to hear God's call. One of the reasons Adam and Eve wind up at the wrong tree is that they are neglecting their vocation. God put them in the garden with a task, to till it, to take care of it, to make it fruitful. God calls each of us to

something in life to be here instead of there, to do this instead of that, to engage in what we do in a special kind of way. My grandfather was a rural mail carrier, but he carried that out as if he were on a mission from God. I used to ride around with him when I was a little boy. He would deliver medicine to shut-ins. He would pray with people who were sick. This man I talked to in the nursing home told me he had been the recipient of one of my grandfather's prayers. God calls each of us, and everything depends on whether we hear that call, and respond. I remember when I was in college, I was an engineering major. I was good at science. My father was an engineer. All the men that I knew primarily were engineers. In the midst of college, I got involved in a church. This is always risky business. And as I was involved in the church, I heard the call to be a minister. The hardest person to tell, clearly was my father, because he not only dreamed of me being an engineer, but he was not a churchgoer. He couldn't imagine why somebody would want to go to church, much less spend their life in it. So the day came we were driving down the interstate, and I said, Dad, I've decided what I'm going to do after graduation. He said, what is it, son? I said, I'm gonna be a minister. I nearly wasn't a minister because we nearly crashed right out there on the highway. There was this long argument ensued. I'll never forget one thing my dad said, which I thought was crazy at the time. He said, son, you've got a chance to be somebody, don't waste it. I think that's God's very word to each of us. You've got a chance to be somebody, don't waste it. Oh, they're the sirens of our culture. They poke out that finger. They seduce us toward what glitters and what has a stack of money on the top of it. Our only hope to keep from shipwreck against those rocks is to hear the sweeter song. There is another song, it tells about a little boy who was born, he came from his mother's womb as naked as Adam and Eve. He grew. He shone light into our darkness. He went into the wilderness. He was tempted to seize that power of being like God, but instead, he refused it and took the route of obedience to God. He came to another garden, and in that garden he prayed, "Not my will, "but your will be done." And that landed him on a tree, an olive shaft, on which Jesus was crucified to bring life and hope to all of us who are fatigued, who are lost, who are sinners, who find ourselves headed toward hideous ruin. And on that cross, he looked to the sinner next to him, and said, "Today, you will be with me in Paradise." And that is why we say these same prayers every week.