

December 31, 2006 **Pride: The Specifically Christian Sin** Luke 18:9-14

#### THE INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

This is the beginning of a seven week series on the seven deadly sins.  
I have long wanted the chance to think aloud with you about those sins:

*what they are,*

*why it is helpful for us to understand them,*

*how an awareness of that ancient wisdom can instruct us that we can be deeper, stronger, wiser Christians able to live virtuous lives.*

Each week we will take up another of the seven mortal sins:

those sins considered for the past fifteen hundred years to be of such *magnitude* that none of us can conquer them,

and which are so *pervasiveness* that none of us escape them.

In taking up these sins it is not Mary Jane's or my intention to send anyone on a **guilt** trip,

to tell us how **wicked** we are,

or how **unworthy** we are of receiving God's graces and mercies.

Those matters belong to **God**, not to us.

#### THE INVITATION TO SHARE

The Sunday School class that Mary Jane and I lead will take up the sin to be addressed in worship the following week. I invite everyone to the group.

The discussions are energetic as people ponder together. As Mary Jane and I listen to and learn from you we are better equipped to preach the following Sunday.

Don Gustofson's book study group is beginning a new study using an excellent book which Mary Jane and I are using: *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins*, by William H. Willimon. It's another way for us to have a congregation-wide deliberation on issues which beset us all so that the good news of Jesus may come alive more profoundly in us each one. And, we invite you to share your opinions at the GOT THOUGHT link from the church's web page listed on the bulletin cover.

#### THE INTRODUCTION TO THE SINS

One of the things that can relieve us all is that there are so *few* sins on the list. Why not ten or twelve? After all there are Ten Commandments. Surely *seven* isn't so horrible. And, the list does not even come from the Bible. It comes from early Christian theologians who studied human nature and the nature of Christ very carefully and compiled, over time, the list which we have today.

It's an interesting list. *None* of the sins seem so *terrible* in and of themselves. None are so dramatic as to make the headlines. **Murder** is not there, nor **genocide**, nor any of the **addictions**. These are the *familiar* sins which we understand all too well: **Pride, sloth, anger, gluttony, lust, envy, and greed.**

- Why worry about gluttony when the *child abuse* is what it is?
- Why concern ourselves with envy when there is *racial hatred*?
- How can Pride be worse than *adultery* with its destructive effects on marriage and family?

Yet, there they are: the **mortal** sins,

the sins which lead the soul straight to hell.

Some of the ancient thinkers called these the **cardinal** sins:

- the basic building-block sins
- the sins which begin in the mind and show up in behaviors
- the root sins from which all of the other sins arise.
- the sins we know because we want the wrong things more than we want God.
- they will not be cured with moderation, wise planning, or some opposing virtue summoned up to rally the cause of righteousness.

In fact, these sins are all the more dangerous because of their familiarity. The line between vice and virtue thins. Healthy self-esteem crosses the line over into Pride and we don't even notice. Prophetic indignation at injustice becomes anger. Sabbath rest comes to look like sloth.

The sin for today is Pride. If Pride is a sin it is a *specifically Christian sin*. The world doesn't consider Pride as sinful. It has become a most attractive virtue. We take *Pride* in our work. We want our children to have a sense of *Pride* in themselves. The world says: the great problem is not Pride, but low-self esteem. Somehow Pride and its cousins - arrogance, egotism, vanity, and conceit - got trumped by self-respect, self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-ascribed dignity. Jesus' teaching to love our neighbors as ourselves has been changed to "love yourself." There is something pitiful in modern, twenty-first century North American people telling ourselves that our greatest need is for more self-esteem, more self-respect, more self-

confidence, more self-assurance. The world considers Pride as an essential characteristic of the well-functioning personality. Pride may make some people difficult, annoying, in need of some good-natured deflation - but it's not a sin potent enough to put your soul in hell. Christians are taught that Jesus has a better take on the situation.

The only thing a Christian can really say is wrong with Pride is that Jesus was against it. The devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness where there are no clear paths, where you have to make your own way without walls and protections in the solitude where the inner voices fill our heads and the temptations were all to do good things: address the sorry political situation, feed the hungry, prove to the masses that God is present. At the root of each of the temptations is Pride: to take the place of God, to attempt to run the world better than God runs it, to fix things in a way God has not done. Pride.

Is not Pride a relishing in our own power?

Is not Pride our attempt to be like God?

Pride is the oldest sin.

The serpent in the Garden appealed to the Pride of Adam and Eve.

Did not the serpent in the Garden offer unlimited, unrestrained wisdom?

You will be like God!

You will know the difference between good and evil.

You will be powerful.

It was the Pride of Cain that led him to resent Abel and kill him.

It was Pride that led people to build the tower of Babel.

But when Jesus refuses the devil his journey ends hanging in shame and disgrace on a cross. "Jesus," says Philippians, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:5-8). Seeing him there like that, we are shocked.

Pride is the most difficult sin of the seven to avoid.

Pride is something we feel before it is something we do.

Pride can transform the most noble virtues into sin.

Pride is misdirected love: insidious, subtle, not self-evident.

Paul urges us to renounce **selfish** ambition that we may have within us, the mind of Christ.

Pride is the problem of good people.

Pride shows up in church among righteous, decent people.

Jesus addressed those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: telling them a story about two men who went into the temple to pray.

One was a good-for-nothing tax collector, swindler who prayed, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." He wasn't acting humble, he was publically humiliated.

But the other man an outstanding righteous Bible-believing man who prayed, "God, thank you for not making me a rogue. Look what I do. I fast twice a week and tithe even my garden produce."

Do you see Pride here?

How do we live with that? We can't pump up our humility, that would be just another form of Pride. So what can we do?

- We can know that the struggle with evil begins in our own souls.
- We can affirm that it's not the Pride of anyone else that's our problem, it's our own Pride that is.
- We can say that for people who don't follow Jesus, Pride may not be a problem, but for we who do, there's a spiritual way of moving forward that sees Pride as misdirected love and an attempt to take over God's role, which is dangerous to the soul.
- We can confess that, despite how impressive our lives may look on the outside, that we have much in common with the tax collector in the temple, that we have open hands and tender hearts needing the mercies of a gracious God.
- We can trust that when we come to communion we have sins to confess and self-examination to perform and a rigorous honesty to belabor before we receive the broken body and shed blood of a savior who'd rather die than fall victim to Pride.
- We can know that the ancient wisdom of the church is correct in reminding us, as it does each Lent, that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

- We can bring our brokenness, our sin, and our dismay to the altar of forgiveness and trust God to redeem.
- We can thank God, walk humbly, mindful that we are not God, and grateful that we are created who we are.

January 6, 2007

Matthew 1, 14-30

**Sloth: sin against time, potential and self**

If you ask most of us to define sloth we'll say it's laziness. Perhaps it is. But I think laziness is to sloth the same way that ice cubes are to icebergs. Sloth is not caring about things we ought to care about. It's apathy in the face of virtue.

Mary Jane and I will preach on each of the sins between now and Lent. We think those of us in the church can be stronger, wiser Christians because we've explored the thinking of those who've gone before, and because we've looked at our own hearts and lives, prayerfully, humbly, faithfully.

Sloth. Today's sin is sloth. The desert fathers in Egypt some 1,500 years ago compiled this list of seven deadly, root-cause, first-order sins from which spring all the other sins that separate us from God. These are the more-difficult-to-uproot-than-the-dandelions-which-take-over-the-front-lawn-in-spring sins. They saw sloth as an outrage against the goodness of God, a growing slackness, the sin of slackards, the people who know they should get up and got on with things but settle back into the hammock with a sigh and a fluttering of eyelids. They called it the noonday demon, the dried-up lassitude which comes over us when the sun is hot and high and our life seems insubstantial and inconsequential.

Those 4<sup>th</sup> century monks got up at 4:00 a.m. for prayers. They ate lunch at 3:00 in the afternoon. By about noon they were getting hungry. It was easy to be distracted from the rigors of prayer. Hunger and boredom team up with the question: "What's the difference? It doesn't matter anyway!"

Sloth: demon of noontime, eating away at the soul, wearing down the character degree by slow degree till the fire of faith becomes a flickering flame. Sloth. We come to believe in nothing much. We are left with cold despair.

I have come to believe that on the path of spiritual maturity there are temptations which pull us to the right and temptations which pull us to the left. On the right is the temptation to just get the answer. Leave the questions and struggles and doubts behind. Just believe it. That is the path to legalism and death.

The temptation to the left is to simply quit doing the work of spiritual growth, which is, after all, difficult work, to be distracted from that which is important. There lies waiting like an alligator in the sun, the sin of sloth.

- "We don't really have to pray today."
- "There are too many other things to do."
- "It doesn't make any difference anyway."
- "I won't fast now, I'm hungry. Maybe later."
- "Enough of this journal writing with the incessant harping on how far I have yet to go. I'll just stop, just for a little bit."

The noonday demon comes skulking up and has got his fangs in us before we even know. Torpor, tedium and weariness, with a profound sadness which we cannot shake off,

like a depression,

like a albatross around the neck,

like a sullen apathy which just can't even rouse itself enough to care

overtakes us.

The French call it ennui.

The poets called it the slough of despond.

When sloth settles its morose shadow over us joy is gone.

Attentiveness is gone.

Energy is gone.

The will to set things aright is gone.

We can't read.

We can't pray.

We can't do good deeds.

We are adrift like a slip without a rudder.

What we do see is our own ugliness and fatigue and uselessness. It's a bleakness of soul like a stain that colors everything else.

Sloth: who wants that?

Yet we all know its power. It's a power that grows as age advances and our powers diminish. But it comes to the young, the bored and the restless as well. It steals their potential, wastes away their time and consumes their vitality. No wonder the ancients called it a deadly sin, a sin that sends the soul to hell, a despairing inability to even begin the good we want.

The third slave believed his master to be a cruel, hard man who took what did not belong to him from those who could not resist him. He took the safe course with the huge sum of money entrusted to him. In a day when there was no FDIC to ensure the safety of the bank, at a time when investment was dangerous and crooks lie in wait on every hand, in an uncertain time when no one could tell when the master would return, he took the secure path. He was afraid. It seemed the sensible thing. He buried it, hid it away, kept it safe.

And the master, on returning and demanding an accounting of his property, looked at that slave and denounced him. "You wicked and slothful servant. To the outer darkness of weeping and gnashing of teeth with you!

Hardly seems fair does it? He was just afraid. I wonder if, at the heart of sloth lies fear, and more, a deep settled despair that we're just not worth much. It's a denial of God's mercies and tender graces, for God created us as treasures and honored us with glory. Sloth denies that and steals our future. While we are out skulking in the back yard with shovel and napkin burying the treasure others are out making investments, making deals, moving forward. The desert fathers called sloth an excessive self-pity, a sad self-centeredness of the heart all curled up in itself.

So, what are we do? We don't want to be slothful, wicked people. No one chooses this sin or enjoys it in its fearsome power.

The advice of the desert fathers was

- to talk it through with trusted friends,
- to pray even when we have no assurance that anyone is listening to the prayers or cares,
- to follow the routines of discipline even when it is an effort and feels like futility, for sloth does not have the final word.
- Look for joy. Sloth cannot breathe in the presence of joy.
- And look for beauty in the little things. Thank God for the joy and the beauty. Talk with friends.
- Most of all - Pray. Trust God even when you don't want to. If we read the Bible and no longer believe it is talking to us then sloth is not far away. Take courage and engage with God who demands our best, our all, our passions and our energies for that God will drag us out from under the deadening weight of sloth out into the sun where love shines and hope breathes and faith calls us impatiently forward.

Envy: Taming the Green-Eyed Monster  
1-14-07

Sin. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, the prayer Jesus taught, we pray, "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." But what are we really talking about. In these times, when churches are divided over what is and is not a sin, some people think there is too much talk about sin and that we really need to just focus on God's love and grace, while others may think we've lost our way and don't give sin its proper place. One challenge in talking about sin is that it is tempting to name the sin of others and not be self-reflective. And so often sin is talked about in ways that are trivializing, moralizing, or too simplistic.

Maybe you think it's odd that David and I would choose to preach on the seven deadly sins. But we thought it could be good to look at a very old concept with fresh eyes in order to help us think about our own lives and faith journey. There is an ancient inscription on the Oracle of Delphi which says, "Know thyself." Understanding ourselves,

we know both the good and the shadow, and we can look honestly at our own attitudes or emotions or actions and discover those things that lead us away from God.

That is what sin is really about - that which leads us away from God. It is absolutely true that God loves us. It is true, as the psalmist says, that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. But it is also true that sometimes we take a wrong turn. It may not be committing some terrible offense or evil, but it may lead us away from being the people God created us to be.

Have you noticed that the human capacity for self-delusion is nearly limitless. We've all seen people claim great spirituality but who do bad things and then ignore or rationalize them. None of us are immune to this phenomenon. That is why self-understanding is so important to our faith journey. That is why looking at our own hearts can bring us closer to God in a way that simply won't happen when we focus on the faults of others.

This is the third week of examining the seven deadly sins. These

sins are considered deadly, not because they actually kill you, but because they are the root or the beginning point of so much of the conflict and strife in the world. They seem small and mundane. Not really anything to get excited about. Pride, sloth, and today, envy. Those really aren't so bad. And that is, to some extent, what makes them so deadly. They can start out looking almost like virtues and end up slowly crossing over into thoughts and behaviors and actions that keep us from living up to our God-given selves. Slowly, instead of being salt and light to the world, we become part of that which we are fighting against, and we are so often blind when that happens.

Some years ago, a gallop poll named Envy as the worst of all the seven deadly sins. In fact, of all the seven, it is the one that is least likely to be admitted. Maybe because to admit you have envy is to admit you are mean-spirited and ungenerous. And who really wants to admit that? Envy is the only one of the seven that isn't ever fun. There might be a certain satisfaction in pride and a temporary

pleasure in lust or gluttony and there is rest in sloth, but envy is just awful. There is no fun, no satisfaction in it at all.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines envy this way: to be gripped with "the feeling of mortification and ill will" in thinking of another person's life when compared with your own. Mortification and ill will! That's just no fun at all. Envy is so gripping and awful that it, according to Ecclesiastes (30:24), shortens ones very life. Envy seems to be its own punishment as it slowly erodes a person's sense of abundance and grace, focusing on what one doesn't have instead of one's blessings.

Envy goes all the way back to the beginning of humanity. Remember the story of the sons of Adam and Eve? Cain and Abel. Cain and Abel each gave an offering to God. But God apparently liked Abel's better, so Cain killed him. Envy is often present in siblings and is an emotion that most generally gets felt or expressed toward those who are on the same level as we are. For instance, we tend to envy our brother or sister or co-worker who get something we want or think we

deserve, but don't really compare ourselves so much with someone like Bill Gates or Prince Charles.

Jesus spent much of his life on earth trying to teach a new way of looking at things. The good news of God's kingdom is a leveling. In God's abundance, there is enough for all. There is no need for comparison or ranking. For we have all been created by God, we are God's children, beloved. There is no shortage of love and grace; no need of envy. And yet, what happened. Look at the Disciples. Jesus, can we sit on your right and left sides? Can we get the places of honor? Can we be the ones who stand out as just a bit more special than the others?

It seems to be part of our nature to compare ourselves to others. It seems normal to desire to be recognized and esteemed and rewarded. And, in fact, those things can actually compel us to better ourselves and to work hard. But, as I have read about envy and looked at it in this last week, I've come to think that looking at what someone else has and being inspired by that isn't quite the same thing as envy.

William Willimon says, "Envy is rarely a positive motivation because it usually ascribes someone else's accomplishments to fickle fortune or to their schmoozing up to others in order to get rewards, rarely to the other person's innate abilities or hard-won achievements." And writer and theologian Dorothy Sayers said, "Envy is the great leveler: if it cannot level things up, it will level them down." At its worst, she said, envy is a destroyer — "rather than have anyone happier than itself, it will see us miserable together."

And Thomas Aquinas, Medieval theologian said: "Envy ...is contrary to charity, whence the soul derives its spiritual life... Charity rejoices in our neighbor's good, while envy grieves over it." (2, 36, ad 3) Dante calls envy perverted love, because it loves what other people possess rather than what is Beautiful and Good and True. As the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, "Love is patient, love is kind...it does not rejoice in wrong, but rejoices in right" Love actively seeks the good of others for their sake. The sin of envy flows from the lack of faith and trust in God's goodness and graciousness

toward me. It is a sin against both God and self since both are inadequate in envy's eyes. Envy has been called the green-eyes monster which ravishes upon one's spirit.

Okay, so I think you get the idea. Envy is the root of much trouble and resentment and dissatisfaction in the world and in people's lives. That's probably why it is such a prominent theme in movies and soap-operas and commercials. We see its destructive power all over the place. Yet it is also a normal, human emotion. It is with us from very early on and it is all too easy to hide or disguise. And, it is the opposite of what Jesus taught.

So, as ones who follow Jesus, what do we do with envy? How do we tame the green-eyed monster in our lives? While there are no easy answer; we can't just ignore it or pretend it doesn't exist. Rather, we can look for it. If we can see our own envy, there is a chance we can deal with it. Since envy is ungracious and unloving, practicing love and gratitude can be antidotes to envy. Focusing on God's love for us and taking an attitude of abundance can do wonders to warm the heart and

starve the monster. God has given us life and continues to bless us. As Sir Philip Sidney says, "Those who have true worth in themselves can never Envy it in another." May you experience the love and grace of God in your life and in your spirit. Amen.

**Anger: Passion to Motivate, Power to Destroy**  
Mary Jane Button-Harrison 1-21-07

The deadly sin of the week is ANGER. I guess you probably figured that out when you looked at your bulletin cover this morning. Anger is such a common, human emotion. It is one that I think most of us can relate to and have experienced many times in our life (some of us more than others, I'm sure). So, what makes you angry? There are some things, more like pet peeves, that are generally not so serious.

Some years ago I clipped out the profiles of graduating high school seniors that were printed in the Grundy Center newspaper. One of the sentences they were to finish is: "I get peeved by people who..." and they responded with such things as "people who complain, who drive slowly, who look at the negative of everything, who feel sorry for themselves, who pass while you're turning, who drive farm machinery down the middle of the highway, ...." Now most of these are just life's little annoyances, probably not of much consequence.

But there is a big spectrum of things which can anger us; everything from little things that don't really hurt anyone, to grave injustices that cause serious harm to many people. Anger comes from a sense of loss, a sense that you or someone has been wronged... it comes from a sense that we have lost something of our humanity or a sense of control in our lives. So, what makes you angry? Are you quick to anger? Or slow? Do you mostly get angry at the little inconveniences that come your way like someone who cuts in front of you in the checkout line or that your spouse always leaves the lid off the tube of toothpaste. Or do you reserve your anger for the big things, like being falsely accused of wrong-doing or bigger, yet, genocide in Darfur. Anger is so much a part of life. It is a power and a force that all of us have to deal with, at least to some extent. And if we don't deal with it, it can take hold of us and control us in a way that is very destructive. That is why it made the list of seven deadly sins, after all.

Just as there are many things that make us angry, there are also many ways of dealing with our anger, and we probably respond differently in different circumstances. Sometimes we may give a hot-blooded reaction when we experience anger, responding with angry words or accusations. Sometimes we may keep our anger inside us and allow it to simmer and grow stronger, but not express it directly. Maybe that's more of a cold response that so often leads to bitterness. Sometimes we may try to deny our anger or blame ourselves for feeling angry in the first place and then turn our feelings in on ourselves. This can result in depression. Sometimes we may blame a third part for our feelings when we don't want to acknowledge the true source of our anger. We've probably all been on the receiving end of someone who was angry with someone else or some circumstance and that anger got directed at us instead of the source of the problem. (And if we are honest, we can probably confess to times when we've done that as well.)

Anger is a very human emotion. It is a cue that something is wrong. And it deserves some attention so that it doesn't take over our lives. The apostle Paul, in speaking to new Christians, spoke about the different kind of life for those in Christ. As followers of Jesus, Paul says, go ahead and "be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger and do not make room for the devil." Be angry, but do not sin. Those words suggest that the feeling of anger in itself is not a sin, but rather what we do with our anger. So Paul tells believers to deal with their anger quickly and appropriately so that it does not become the seed for sin; so that it does not turn into destructive thoughts and actions which take us on a downward spiral away from the love and grace of God.

But anger is quite paradoxical. At the same time anger can be the source of great destruction, it can also be the motivation for much good. In his book, Sinning Like a Christian, William Willimon writes, "Much of the greatest good worked in the world is through Anger. You

can't say that about any of the other Sins." That's because anger gets us in touch with something that is terribly wrong and gives us the passion to act to right the wrong.

Jesus most definitely got angry. True, there is no evidence of him flying off the handle over small matters of personal inconvenience. Rather, Jesus was passionate about sharing the good news of God's kingdom. And that kingdom was often in conflict with the ways of the world. It was at those points of conflict, it was in the face of injustice and pettiness that Jesus' anger became demonstrative. Like the time he was in the synagogue to worship God and he saw a man with a withered hand in need of healing. The Pharisees watched him to see if he would heal on the sabbath (which was against the religious law). Jesus knew what they were up to, so he asked them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" Or, in other words, come on guys, can't you see what the greater good is here? But they were silent and Jesus looked at them in anger as he healed the

man. The Pharisees used this incident to conspire against Jesus.

Another time, when Jesus entered the temple in Jerusalem and saw the money changers there, he overturned the tables and the seats and drove them out. Jesus' anger was not that he had been wronged, but that people were using the place of worship as a way to make money. This system and the laws were a hardship on those who traveled from afar and those who were poor. There were those in the temple who were making money in the name of God in a way that distorted the true nature and meaning of worship. This, too, served as evidence against Jesus.

The passion of anger can certainly motivate us to action. And there are times when action is what is needed. Early church father, John Chrysostom said, "He who is not angry when he has cause to be, sins." A lack of anger at injustice would probably be considered sloth, don't you think, David? For it means you just don't care about something worth caring about. But anger can just as easily be self-

centered, about our personal feeling apart from anything of God. That is why we are warned in scripture that vengeance is God's and God's alone. We simply cannot be trusted with such a powerful thing.

The power of anger rather than vengeance, can be channeled into acts to change systems of injustice, acts to change ourselves, or acts of love and compassion and forgiveness which can transform the hearts and lives of ourselves and others.

In his book, William Willimon tells the story of a woman he had met who was from Belfast, Northern Ireland. This woman's husband had been gunned down in front of their home while she watched from a window. She and her daughter ducked in time to miss the bullets coming into the window in an attempt to kill them as well as her husband. Willimon asked the woman how she was able to go on after that, to which she replied, "Well, that very moment, as I stood there over his horribly bloody body, I started saying the Lord's Prayer. I got as far as 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive the sins of others...' And I

said at that point, 'Lord, you have forgiven so many of my sins, so I guess you expect me to forgive others of their sins. I will try to do that, but you'll have to help me every day not to be destroyed by anger. Every day.' And the Lord gave me that wonderful gift. I was able to forgive. I let God be angry with them, or punish them, or forgive them, or whatever the Lord chose to do with them. I chose to forgive. The gunmen killed one of the most wonderful men in the world, and none of them was ever convicted of the crime; but my anger was no match for God! God wouldn't let the anger of it all kill me!"

This story almost seems unthinkable, until we are reminded just who is this Lord who taught us to pray. You see, Jesus himself, though he got angry at the injustice he saw around him, he did not allow anger rule his heart. As Jesus hung on the cross, a victim of injustice and mob rule, he could have yelled at his accusers, he could have cursed them or said all kinds of terrible things to them and who would have blamed him. But because of his love for and devotion to God, because

he did not want to imitate the ways of the world, but rather emulate the ways of God, Jesus, on the cross, said, "Father, forgive them....*forgive them,*" and in that act brought hope and life to all who will receive it. God in Jesus has loved us and shown us how to love and revealed a better way; a way that leads to life. Let us follow. Amen.

January 28, 2007

II Samuel 11:27b-12:9a

**Greed:** the sin where our desires get the best of us and bring out the worse in us

All the deadly sins:

those building-block, cardinal sins that lie at the base of things;

those soul-destroying offences against God, neighbor and self;

those corrosive needs that erode our lives are the subject of this series in worship.

We talk about them to know them and resist them.

We turn to God in trust to meet our weakness with strength.

Pride knocks us down.

Envy steals our joy.

Anger erupts and disrupts.

Sloth eats our energy and fixates ourselves on ourselves.

But Greed - ah, nasty greed separates us from our neighbors,

from our best selves

and from God who created us for abundance and joy.

- Greed is a solitary, self-seeking, self-centered miserly sin that is never satisfied.
- Greed says life will be good if we get and get and get.
- In Greed we build and build and build bigger barns to hold all our stuff. But Jesus looked at the man who did that and called him a fool.
- Greed is ambition gone amuck.
- Greed is the pavement on the road to hell.
- Greed promises abundant, happy, secure life but delivers only richness in things but poverty of soul.

- Greed is the father buying himself a new car when the family's house needs a new roof.
- Greed is the little boy, having dropped his candy bar down the sewer grate, reaching down and grasping it, discovers that he cannot get his hand back up through the bar while clutching the candy - so he remains stuck there, holding on to but not enjoying his prize.
- Greed is old Scrooge as described by Charles Dickens: "Oh! But he was a tightfisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster."
- Greed knows only one prayer, a best-selling book made from a single, obscure line from the Old Testament: "Lord, increase my holdings."
- Nothing of gratitude gets into Greed.
- Nothing of giving back gets into Greed.
- Nothing of liberal generosity lives in Greed.
- The open hand is shut and the well springs of compassion are stopped.
- Greed is constipation of spirit.
- Greed becomes matter over mind.
- Greed's unrestrained desires inflame and consume us till there is nothing left.

Thank you who joined in the Sunday School discussion last week when we talked about Greed, and you who wrote into the FCCAmes "Got Thought? Let's Talk!" e-mail group. You have thought deeply on how Greed corrupts.

We are up to our eyeballs in a the greatest culture of Greed since the Roman Empire, which no longer calls us citizens, but consumers, and measures the worth of our character by the capital we accumulate. Our culture thinks it's cute for children to cry, "I want it... all!"

In the 1987 movie, *Wall Street*, Gordon Gecko delivers that oft-quoted, much-believed speech in which he declares:

"The point is, ladies and gentleman, that greed -- for lack of a better word -- is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms -- greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge -- has marked the upward surge of mankind."

Christians reply: "Baloney."

Last Tuesday, CBS devoted a good portion of its morning programing to parents who spend \$10,000 on their children's birthday parties and on children who will not accept a party invitation until they can see what the party favors will be. Some people in Minnesota have formed an organization to help poor parents in California learn to say "No" to the greed that has corrupted the souls of their children...for a fee.

Okay. We know grubby Greed burrows down so deep and we cannot tell where the line between healthy desire and noble ambition crosses over into luxurious Greed. We know that, alone, we cannot recognize Greed in us and that we require the help of God to root it out from us. We must begin with

seemingly small, mundane, daily acts of defiance and resistance. A beginning ought to be made, and one way of attacking Greed where it is most vulnerable is in open-handed gratuitous giving, practice in the art of letting go.

Here are some things to think and do in the battle against Greed:

1. Worship God faithfully in church. Recognize that church is a schooling of desire. Church is not about meeting all our needs, making us happy, giving us more of what we want. Church tell us to tithe because tithing makes us confront our greed. Church reminds us we are sinners in need of redemption and that Christ meets our need with compassion. In church we hear that Greed is not good, that we are more than consumers, and that an upright and generous character is more precious than all the dream vacations, creature comforts, and material blessings that our money can buy.
2. Decide to tithe. Giving a set percentage of everything we have to God that it may do the work of justice and compassion will change our lives. When we give our money our hearts will follow. Tithing is a way we take a stand. It is one of the most radical, counter-cultural, defiant acts of compassion we can possibly do.
3. If you're not ready to take the leap of faith into tithing 10% of your treasure, at least cultivate giving. Greed says "fill my need." Greed would gobble two of the last three pieces of pie and then, being full and on a sugar high, would hide the third piece for later. Love is a mother who gives those last three pieces of pie to her family, claiming she is not hungry. Greed stores up treasures in the bank. Love stores

them in heaven.

4. Remember that we follow Jesus and not Donald Trump. Trump builds towers so the rich and famous can look down on their neighbors. Jesus had no place to lay his head and told us to give our coat and our jacket to one in need. Trump fires those who displeases him and breaks relationship. Jesus dies for those who hate him and wins them over in loving relationship. Trump amasses all the money he can gain. Jesus gave away everything he had and gained the whole world.
5. Live with gratitude and compassion. Gratitude destroys Greed. Compassion creates neighbors. Greed separates us from others because we use and abuse them. Gratitude and compassion draw us closer to others because we appreciate and enjoy them. Greed says, "I want more." Gratitude says, "I have more." Compassion says, "I will share more."

*Greed: the sin where our desires get the best of us and bring out the worse in us. By ourselves we cannot eliminate it from us. With God's help it will never possess us. Then the bad of goods gets to us, let God come and give to us that inheritance that will never fail us. This, my friends, is the gospel.*

February 4, 2007

II Samuel 11:2-5

## Lust: the Secret Sin of Love Gone Wrong

Pride, sloth, envy, greed anger... all deadly, all sins. We are come to that sin in the series on the Seven Deadly Sins that we've either been dreading - or waiting for: Lust - dripping, drooling, turgid old Lust. Lust is a craving, a strong sexual desire, a sensuous appetite that consumes.

Every one of us knows Lust firsthand. In adolescence Lust comes on us like a tsunami, when every thought, it would seem, is tinged, singed, hinged, or binged on Lust. For many it never gets better.

Acting on Lust will get you in prison and keep you there for a long time.

If your Lust involves children, while you are in prison you will be in danger from other inmates who will despise you as the lowest of the low.

Not every sex offence is a direct outgrowth of Lust.

Even so, Lust is there, one card in the deck of the hand played out in those persons locked up in special prisons for crimes with pornography, abuse, incest, or rape involving abuse of both power and sex.

Lust is the most secretive of the Seven Deadlies and the least creative. It is, along with gluttony, a sin of the flesh that eats its way into the spirit, while pride, anger, envy, sloth and greed start in the spirit and eat outward.

Our culture rather *enjoys* Lust, confusing it with arousal and pleasure - tells jokes about it, counts as a normal, healthy thing,

Simon Blackburn, a professor at Oxford, writes that Lust is a *good* thing, something essential for life, which would be fine except that Christians, with all their glum and gloom have got everybody all anxious about it.

"After all, what's so wrong with getting and giving a little pleasure?", he asks.

"Sexual arousal is common to all. It's what keeps the race going.

"If everybody would just relax," he notes, "there'd be no problem."

Who needs a bunch of prudish Christians muddying up the happy waters of hedonism?

If it weren't for religion people wouldn't have such troubles with sex whether it's homosexuality, extra-marital infidelity, or promiscuity.

The old desert fathers 1,500 years ago, probing like a surgeon through the human character said that simple sexual arousal is not the same as Lust.

Lust is selfish and unkind.

Lust is consuming and possessive and dominating.

Lust insists on its own way; it is irritable and resentful;

it rejoices in wrongdoing and cannot live in the presence of truth.

Lust pushes people away. Love pulls them closer.

Lust always ends and it ends badly with relationships in tatters.

We can have Lust for power, bloodlust, and goldlust. None of those are pleasurable or pretty. They consume and devour. They consort with greed and envy to destroy. But usually, we reserve the word Lust for things sexual.

Lust, the desert fathers called *luxuria* - rankness, lechery.

They defined it as being "put out of place."

To Lust is to riot, revel, live luxuriously in debauchery.

Lust destroys. It turns God's great gift of sexuality into a curse of abuse. Lust is love gone bad. Lust destroys the creative energies that make life enjoyable and interesting.

Greed robs the joy of ownership of possessions.

Lust robs the joy of partnership in relationship.

Lust is more than a cocktail of hormones plus desire plus imagination. It is

an iron grip on the soul that colors every relationship,  
and calculates the desirability of people by whether or not they would  
be interesting sex partners.

Lust is about satisfying the desires of the Luster,  
it does not care about the well-being of others.

King David walked on the roof of the palace and spied out Bathsheba.  
He inquired about her and knew who she was:

he knew the name of her father.

He knew the name of her husband.

He knew not one thing about her character, what she liked, what she  
wanted, what she prized.

He didn't care. He called her and took her.

In his Lust he had his way with her.

In the aftermath he would kill her husband, disrupt his kingdom, anger his  
God, and plant the seeds of destruction that would devastate his family.

Lust is a liar: promising pleasure but delivering destruction.

Shakespeare got it right:

So lust,

thought to a radiant angel link'd,  
will sate itself in a celestial bed,  
and prey on garbage.

There is a different way, and it's not to repress Lust or become dried-up old  
prudes who have no pleasure in life. It's the better way of love.

Listen to Peter:

<sup>4</sup>Thus God has given us... precious and very great promises,  
so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the  
world because of Lust,

and may become participants of the divine nature.

<sup>5</sup>For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness,

and goodness with knowledge,

<sup>6</sup>and knowledge with self-control,

and self-control with endurance,

and endurance with godliness,

<sup>7</sup>and godliness with mutual affection,

and mutual affection with love.

<sup>9</sup>For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind,  
and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins.

2 Peter 1:4-9

Lust cannot live in the company of healthy relationships as Peter taught in the church. William Willimon says:

"We are called not only to name and to confess our sin but also to be free of our sin.

By the grace of God we can get better.

The Christian faith claims not only that we can be honest about our Lust but also that we can be free of our Lust.

We can be free,

not only by focusing our thoughts and desires on higher things,

not only by having Jesus transform our practice of love into all that

God means it to be,

but also through discipline.

God wants for us an awareness that we are *claimed and commandeered* by God for good outside of ourselves.

Lust is not in the desire but rather in having an improper; false object of our desire.

Christianity is not about extinguishing desire

but rather about training in hungering and thirsting after God who has created us for communion.

## 2 Samuel 11:2-5

<sup>2</sup>It happened, late one afternoon,  
when David rose from his couch  
and was walking about on the roof of the king's house,  
that he saw  
from the roof  
a woman bathing;  
the woman was very beautiful.

<sup>3</sup>David sent someone to inquire about the woman.

It was reported,  
"This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam,  
the wife of Uriah the Hittite."

<sup>4</sup>So David sent messengers to get her,  
and she came to him,  
and he lay with her.  
(Now she was purifying herself after her period.)

Then she returned to her house.

<sup>5</sup>The woman conceived; and she sent and told David,  
"I am pregnant."

**Gluttony: From Blessing to Obsessing 2-11-07**  
by Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Jeffrey Kaplan, Director of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, says, "Obesity is an epidemic and should be taken as seriously as any infectious disease epidemic." "Overweight and physical inactivity account for more than 300,000 premature deaths each year in the U.S., second only to tobacco-related deaths." Over the last 30 years obesity in adults age 20 - 74 has increased from 15 to 33 percent. But it is not only adults who are being affected. In that same time period, the percentage of children who are obese has increased from 5 % to nearly 17  $\frac{1}{2}$  % of the 12-19 year olds and to nearly 14% of the 5-11 year olds. These are alarming statistics! With all of our advances, our health as a nation is declining, due, in part, to our obsession with food.

Now before I go any farther, let me say very clearly: not all overweight or obese people are gluttons. There can be a variety of

other reasons for these conditions. But these other conditions probably do not account for our increased weight as a nation. Let me also say that a person can, at least for a time, be quite gluttonous without being overweight or obese.

Today, we have come to the seventh and final Deadly Sin: Gluttony. Gluttony is a sin that has been around for such a long time, but the conditions for rampant, on-going gluttony are relatively modern. Think about it. It used to take a lot more effort and energy to grow and cook food. Oh, the wealthy, the ones with lots of slaves, might be able to be quite gluttonous at times. Records from ancient Rome suggest some of the banquets were an like an orgy of food and drink. To the point that in a few instances, people were known to have thrown up so that they could continue to enjoy the lavish table. But it is really quite a modern thing to be able to consume so much food with so little effort.

In our supermarkets, we can buy just about anything we want, any

time we want. And if that seems too much trouble, we can simply drive up to a fast food restaurant, order and pick up a meal all without ever leaving the comfort of our car. Gone are the days of the hunter/gatherers. Well, we still have some hunters and we still have some gatherers, but they are definitely the exception and no longer necessary to survival.

At the same time that obesity rates are going up, there is a glut of diet books on the market. I did a Google search on the internet for "diet books" and came up with 40 million, 800 thousand hits! With all those books on how to loose weight, you'd think our collective weight would be going down, not up.

The online encyclopedia defines gluttony as the "over-indulgence and over-consumption of food, drink, or intoxicants to the point of waste." Early church leaders such as Thomas Aquinas argued that gluttony could also include an obsessive anticipation of meals, and the constant eating of delicacies and excessively costly foods. In fact,

Aquinas thought, there were five ways to commit gluttony:

Eating too soon, eating too expensively, eating too much, eating too eagerly, or eating too daintily. In that perspective, gluttony is not simply eating too much, but rather giving too great a focus to what we eat and drink - whether it be a lot or a little or has to be just so.

Gluttony is when, rather than eating to live, we live to eat. It is taking a blessing given to us to sustain our lives - a good thing; something which deserves our gratitude - and turning it into an obsession that consumes our energy and focus and detracts from God's blessing.

The problem with gluttony is that we really do need food in order to live. Unlike some things, we cannot simply eliminate it from our lives. If we have a drinking or smoking problem, we may be able to go cold - turkey and stay away from it all together. But we simply cannot do that when it comes to food. We can't stop eating. We have to eat to live. But if we start living to eat then our lives and priorities get all screwed up. And how do you know when you've crossed from one to the

other, anyway?

Apparently some thought Jesus was a glutton. I don't think he appreciated that designation. Jesus said, "John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" But there's a reason why he was so accused. Jesus ate all kinds of meals with all kinds of people. Eating was an important part of his ministry. He wasn't all gloomy and serious and not able to enjoy life. On the contrary, Jesus, as a way of giving thanks to God and sharing the good news of God's kingdom, ate and drank with people, even some he shouldn't have given his place in society.

Jesus used meals as teaching moments about the love and grace and bounty of a gracious God. He ate in community as a way of bringing together people who otherwise might not be sharing bread. Eating is a good thing, meant to nourish the body, but when done in community

also nourishing the soul. This is so important to the message of Jesus that on the night he was betrayed, he took a loaf of bread and blessed it and broke it and told those gathered around him to continue to break bread with one another after he was gone. Eating and drinking together can be a sacred act out of which life and love and reconciliation can flow, especially when done in gratitude for the blessing that it is.

We were created to be nourished from the bounty in creation. We were given the blessing of creation and the company of one another to sustain and enhance our lives and so that we might know more fully God's gracious love. The problem of gluttony is a problem of taking that which is blessed and which brings life and using it in a possessive, self-centered way. The problem of gluttony is it forgets gratitude. It forgets the life-giving love of God. It doesn't see those around who are hungry. And it strives to satisfy a hunger that goes so deep that no material thing can reach, and only God can fill. It, as

Philippians says, "makes a god of the belly."

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses the proper place of things when he says, "Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear, is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ... But strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

That is Jesus' diet plan. It doesn't tell you what to eat or how much. But it does suggest a relationship and a way to approach food. God gives us good things to sustain our lives. We respond in gratitude. That is a starting point, anyway. The point where we stop and think about our food and our relationships and all our blessings and remember who is the source of all things. The point when we stop thinking about what we want and see what we have received. That is why offering a blessing before we eat is so important. Offering thanks for our food is a spiritual discipline practiced throughout the

centuries to help us put things in proper perspective. We eat to live; our food and our fellowship a blessing from God.

David and I have now preached on all of the Seven Deadly sins. Our intention in preaching this sermon series was not so that we could induce guilt. Guilt often isn't that productive. It was also not to give us ammunition to point fingers at others. Rather, we believe that as people of faith, as ones who truly believe that we are children of God and loved by God, that we can take an honest look at ourselves and reflect upon those things which get in the way of our relationship with God and others.... to see what may be keeping us from growing in faith and practice.

Both David and I have found it difficult and challenging to preach on these sins. For one thing, it gets so personal! It isn't always comfortable to stare at your own sins and foibles and weak places and to try to speak to our humanity while also inspiring us to grow deeper

as we face the often hidden places of our lives. But we must face ourselves in order to allow *God's* light to shine upon our lives and into our soul. William Willimon writes, "God is still working on us, still transforming us, still holding up the mirror of truth to us and making us look at ourselves....there is also a quiet conviction that gradually - day by day, little, by little, decision, by decision - *God in Christ* is leading us, coaxing us, sometimes dragging us kicking and screaming - home." (p.150) Thanks be to *God!* Amen.

*Go, Bless and be blessed.*

*Go. Love and be loved.*

*Go. Renew and be renewed.*

*Go. With God's blessing for the world.*

*Amen.*