

"EXTREME! Sin: Gluttony, Greed and Lust" FUUCW 3/3/02 Carolyn R. Brown

Gluttony, Greed and Lust. Straightforward excesses of desire. Extreme sins. I grouped these three sins together for this sermon because of their similarity. They are all sins of excess. The Seven Deadly Sins, so named by the same sixth century monk who created the Gregorian Chant, are perhaps better described as human behaviors. These behaviors, sloth, pride, gluttony, greed, lust, anger and envy are elements of our daily life that most of us try to keep in control, behaviors we recognize and deal with in deference to the choices we have made for our lives. I spoke of sloth and pride two weeks ago and for those who missed that sermon, a word about them.

Sloth is not mere laziness but a deeper lack of caring. Pride is caring about oneself based on bad information. Both of these lead us to loneliness because with sloth we withdraw ourselves from others and with pride we place ourselves above others, ending with the same result. The interruption of our relationships with others.

Catholic theologian, Henry Fairlie believes all the seven deadly sins can make us solitary. He writes: "This solitude to which the sins condemn us is partly a result of taking something in our lives, which has its appropriate place and value, and then lifting it out of place and exaggerating its importance to us. In the end, it is no longer a part of our lives but takes the place of living. Avarice does this with possessions, Lust with sex, and Gluttony does it with food. But in the process a distortion takes place. Avarice is more interested in possessing than in the possession. Lust in sexual activity than in sexual feeling, and Gluttony is more interested in eating than in the food. It is the appetites in themselves, and their need for gratification, that take over one's life, and the object of each appetite, which might in itself be pleasing, is submerged in the inordinate desire for it. The food on the plate of the glutton is not really the source of pleasure to him."

The significant similarity in these three human behaviors is that all are necessary to the survival of humanity. We all must eat and we need things, such as some protective clothing and a place to sleep and cook the food and

if we have an active libido, it's also nice to have a sexual partner. If there are no sexual partnerships striking up, we strike out as the human race.

So what happens to turn these normal human behaviors into Deadly Sins. It's really quite simple: these needs become objectified. We stop having a relationship with either food, our belongings, or our beloved/beloveds. We become obsessed with eating, possessing, and sexual activity.

I have been most interested in the sin of gluttony. I am familiar with this human behavior in excess, since I have struggled with unhappiness over my body mass for about 50 years. Up and down. And up again. I am the often spoken of "Yo-Yo" when it comes to my weight. I have lost hundreds of pounds in my life and sadly enough have found almost every one of them again. I would like to say that my reading has led me to a deep understanding of the sin of gluttony, but that would not be quite true. What I have learned, however, has been helpful to me and perhaps it will help someone else.

My colleague Scott Alexander preached on gluttony last year. During his sermon he passed several baskets of grapes and had each person take one grape. Then he asked them to examine that grape carefully. Next he said to eat half of it. Half a grape. I usually pull a handful off the bunch and stuff them into my mouth. That's gluttony. I once bought a pound of See's chocolate truffles and ate them within the next two hours, or before I drove from Albuquerque to Los Alamos. That's gluttony.

My relationship with the food was not one of appreciation and taste. It was not one of caring for my body or my soul. It was a deeper hunger that I probably could never fill by any means, most of all not with pounds and pounds of chocolate.

Solomon Schimmel writes "we should weigh the fleeting, transient nature of the pleasure experienced in eating against the extended pain it causes. A few minutes of pleasure produce many days of illness and remorse. Isn't this too costly a price to pay for the ephemeral benefits of inordinate eating?" Well, Solomon, I had the cure for this remorse. More chocolate. More remorse. A cycle of pleasure and pain. For gluttony does not savor. It only devours.

In Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale" we read the following mocking of the glutton:

Alas, the filth of it! If we contemn
 The name, how much more filthy is the act!
 A man who swills down vintages in fact
 Makes a mere privy of his throat, a sink
 For cursed superfluities of drink!
 ---O thou belly! Stinking pod
 Of dung and foul corruption, that canst send
 Thy filthy music forth at either end,
 What labor and expense it is to find
 Thy sustenance!

Moralists make a point of the wastefulness of superfluous food and drink, when so many in our world are hungry. If we let our appetites get out of hand, it is difficult to set limits on them. And that's the truth. The more we desire food, the more anxious and driven we make our lives. We sacrifice the psychological serenity that comes with moderation and simplicity.

Fairlie considers any approach to eating that involves excess to be a sin. Dieters, health food addicts, cookbook collectors, cooking ware collectors. All have an inordinate fascination with food and spend their time thinking about or reading about food. He says "Eating is their one staple of interest and conversation. By giving to food a false value, they also rob it of its real value."

Our gluttony extends to drugs, work, alcohol, all of which cause us to remove ourselves from caring for others. Fairlie's warning to all of us is that "there is a general tedium in the profusion of our affluent societies. We may not all have our faces buried in our swill to escape it, but we all have them buried in some over-richness of indulgence, some activity that will merely take our minds off our emptiness." If our societies are founded on Greed or avarice, the state to which they reduce us is Gluttony. A grim prophecy indeed.

Greed. Avarice. Are our modern societies based on Greed? I have tended to think so for about 28 years. When I was at home being a full time parent

and a part time musician, I saw many young families with both parents working full time outside the home. New cars, new houses, boats. At the time, I, in all my humility, baked my own bread, sewed the boys' clothes, had a huge garden, and helped butcher several deer each season. I enjoyed these activities because I was good at them. I can't say there was much I desired. And desire is the word used to indicate greed. Desire unabated is what becomes greed.

Desire isn't necessarily a bad thing. Theologians, social scientists and philosophers disagree on greed. Some consider greed to be a major source of evil in our capitalist society, and argue that socialist cultures and economic systems discourage and control greed and envy and produce more humane and just societies. On the other hand, proponents of capitalism maintain that greed and envy are engines of social and economic progress. They encourage people to work hard in order to produce greater wealth for the society as a whole. They also say that in the long run this raises the standard of living for all and results in the greater good for the greatest number of people.

Schimmel writes that pursuit of wealth is a dominant value in our society. The Savings and Loan scandals of the 1980s and the recent Enron bankruptcy indicate there some truth in this. We are aware that the cutthroat competitor, the workaholic, the swindler, the miser and the gambler are all greedy. Sometimes even the spendthrift is guilty of greed. Greed is the inordinate love of money and of material possessions, and the dedication of oneself to their pursuit. The paradox of greed is that its apparent aim is to increase pleasure through the purchase of goods and services, but often does so at the expense of pleasure and happiness. The person working 80 hours a week doesn't get to watch too many movies in her home theatre.

As I mentioned above, it is not the enjoyment of using the object of greed, but rather the ability to acquire the object that is important to the avaricious person. When we think of King Midas, we have the classic example of the loss of relationship caused by a deadly sin. Dionysius gave him the ability to turn everything he touched into gold. He turned his wife and children into gold. But look at the gold he had. No one to share it with. A very sorry result of greed.

Our culture encourages some greed, in euphemistic terms of such as the value of financial success, the good life, having it all. When does this become something you and I need to worry about. Henry Fairlie writes: "Avarice is, not so much the love of possessions, as the love merely of possessing. To buy what we do not need, more even than we need for our pleasure or entertainment, is a love of possessing for its own sake. We may think we do not know any misers, since we do not come across people fondling their coins. But we all know people whose homes are so filled with possessions that there is scarcely room to turn in them. They do not love their possessions for what they are—no one can love so many objects—they love the fact that they are the possessor. This is a miser." The difference that makes the difference is between possessions and mere possessing.

The difference that makes the difference with lust is between "love" which dies at the next dawn and "love" that includes the idea of its continuance. I love Henry Fairlie's introduction to the subject:

"Lust is not interested in its partners, but only in the gratification of its own craving, not in the satisfaction of our whole natures, but only in the appeasement of an appetite that we are unable to subdue. It is therefore a form of self-subjection, in fact, of self-emptying. The sign it wears is: 'This property is vacant.' Anyone may take possession of it for a while. Lustful people may think that they can choose a partner at will for sexual gratification. But they do not really choose. They accept what is available. Lust accepts any partner for a momentary service; anyone may squat in its groin. It has nothing to give, and so it has nothing to ask."

You might respond, well, that's pretty harsh! And indeed I agree. But doesn't it sum up the difference between an irresponsible fling and a relationship based on mutual trust and attraction, one we hope will continue to grow and deepen as the days, months and years go by. A relationship based on getting to know you, on caring deeply for you, on getting past our conflicts and giving and taking in the process. Schimmel defines lust as the unrestrained and unethical expression of the sexual impulse.

Aristotle made the distinction between licentiousness and temperance with regard to our sexual pleasures. Believing this impulse was powerful, he thought it could be controlled by reason. The Old Testament stories of untamed sexual appetites, David and Bathsheba, the rape of Tamar by her half-brother Amnon, indicate to me that the people of the time had problems. These writings served the purpose of setting some guidelines for sexual expression. The message overall in the Old Testament is that sexual relations when morally appropriate are good – a gift to be appreciated and enjoyed. But the warning is to consider the ethics of our sexual expression.

Certainly our standards have changed since Biblical times. But Schimmel writes that “sex is far less important than many in our culture would have us believe.” We are bombarded with sexual titillation in the media, in advertising, everywhere we look we see sexual appeal used to encourage us to participate in greed, buying that motorcycle that we really don’t need. Have we all become voyeurs?

Perhaps we are still recovering from the Victorian period when sex was repressed. Finding balance is important. Yet, how much do we need in order to find balance in our lives. How can we seek legitimate means of satisfying our sexual needs without doing harm to others. How can we avoid the widespread misrepresentation and exploitation of sex, the severing of sex from love, and the encouragement of selfish sexual indulgence. In our culture, it’s tough.

As with other sins, lust is often the attempt to fill a terrible hollowness at the center of life, for which we have no spiritual resource to fill. Fairlie writes that we suffer from sexual commotion, excitement which is unfulfilled. In our culture, some of us are in a continual state of commotion, partly because our society is in commotion, and has no spiritual resources on which to call. Since religion has been displaced, sex can be made the opium of the masses.

As with all the “deadly” sins, our sexual appetites are normal human behaviors that have a good and proper and life-giving place in our living and in our relationships.

The key is to make the best choices we can every day. As with the appetites of eating and acquisition of our earthly goods, we are well

meaning and creative creatures. We might keep in mind that we are all subject to the foibles and excesses of human nature.

I close with words from my sermon two weeks ago. We all sin when we fall short or go too far, when we miss the mark in our relationships with life and other persons.

We need to consider our capacity for error and evil, in order that we take seriously our capacity for good.