

**Sermon: Homo Incurvatus In Se****Scripture: Luke 4:1-13****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: March 8, 2019**

---

The 7 Deadly Sins. This is our theme for the next six weeks of Lent. Since there are 7 of them and only 6 Sundays of Lent, today we are doubling up and considering two of the sins, greed and gluttony. Before you say “actually, I think I have somewhere else to be” I hope you will keep an open mind and come to see how rich some meditation on these themes can be. Lent has always been known as the penitential season for Christians, which means a season for recognizing how we’ve gotten off-track and need to take steps to turn back to God... and we all get off-track.

First, let’s get clear on what we are talking about when we use the word SIN. The best definitions for sin that I have heard in our Christian tradition come from the 4<sup>th</sup> century church father Augustine and the 20<sup>th</sup> century Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. Augustine said sin is “homo incurvatus in se” which means sin is “the human being curved in on itself”. We are made as human beings to be turned outward towards God and one another. Our being fully human necessarily means being connected, and we become less than we were made to be when we distort that movement, that connection and become turned in on ourselves. Paul Tillich said quite simply “sin is separation”. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by the devil he was tempted at each step to turn towards himself, to curve inward and in each response he turns back outward toward God. That’s our work for Lent to notice those

places we are curved in on ourselves and to take steps to open back out to God. The 7 Deadly Sins are an effective tool for that purpose. We have to recognize the sin before we can root it out or address it.

The list of 7 sins that mar our beautiful human souls do not come as listed from the Bible but were developed by the ancient desert dwellers of our Christian tradition who went into the desert, some for 40 days like Jesus some for 40 years, to enter into a severe discipline of addressing the sinful of their human nature and come closer to God. It is believed that Evagrius of Pontus, one of the desert fathers, was the first one to put them into a list in writing in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and then they were further developed from there by Augustine, John Cassian, Pope Gregory the Great and Thomas Aquinas.

The list of 7 deadly sins was not to drive home just how depraved and lost the human being was, that we are hopelessly greedy, gluttonous, lustful, prideful, envious etc... but the list was developed as a tool for self-examination and spiritual growth. It fell out of common usage especially after the Protestant Reformation when *techniques and practices* for growing more Christ-like were largely dismissed as works-righteousness. However we hope you'll see by the end of it all how effectively these 7 sins articulate the struggles that we face in being human as we reach toward the divine but so often fail to reach high enough...to put it gently. We are made for God's love but we fall short of living in and living out God's love and God, in Jesus Christ, wants to love us into doing better.

The only other thing I want to say to set the stage for this is that as we consider these sins it's worth noting that everyone of us have some

manifestation of all of these sins but depending upon our personalities there are certain sins that beset us in particularly devilish ways to turn us inward on ourselves. So as we consider the 7 Deadly Sins, it could be worth taking particular note of a sin that grabs you by the throat, that either makes you really uncomfortable or angry or defensive and then maybe to give a little extra attention to that one cause that could be your very own special besetting sin... although again there is room in all of us for all of them. One thing we should definitely resist doing is thinking of other people we know who are particularly good exemplars of a given sin... cause then inevitably we'd be looking past the log in our own eye, as Jesus taught, to address the splinter in another's. One of the presenting characteristics of sin is the slippery hiddenness of it - that the sinner often doesn't recognize or see the sin that causes them the most curvature.

So what better place to start than with the sins of GLUTTONY and GREED... because if ever there were human states of being that turn us in on ourselves it is when our drives distorted by these two sins. They each certainly deserve their own Sunday at least but since these two relate quite nicely to Jesus' temptations in the wilderness we decided to consider these two together. Sorry for the short-shrift if these are particularly dear to you!

First up - gluttony. The writer Frederick Buechner referred to a glutton as "one who raids the refrigerator for a cure for spiritual malnutrition." The sin of gluttony leads us to turn to food or drink in an effort to fill a deeper emptiness inside. Gluttony is when we seek our own pleasure, especially as it relates to food and drink, to the exclusion

or detriment of other important things in our lives. In the desert, it wasn't unreasonable that after fasting for 40 days Jesus would be hungry and desiring food and the devil goes right after that desire with his first temptation, to draw Jesus' focus more completely towards his desire for food. But Jesus wasn't out there to be focused on food and to obsess over how hungry he was and ways to satiate his hunger. He was out there to listen for God in his life. This is why Jesus says in response to the devil something that someone beset by the sin of gluttony does not want to hear – "a person does not live by food alone." In other words there's more to me and more to what I'm doing than what I'm consuming and the pleasure derived therein.

Eating is of course pleasurable and made to be so. But it becomes a sin when our pleasure seeking through eating becomes an end in itself that supersedes relationship or our higher purpose. The parent gobbling down a huge chocolate bar in a locked bathroom while his kids are knocking on the door – daaaaad, what are you doing? – is one example of eating that's become gluttony. As the writer and seminary professor Rebecca Deyoung writes in her book "Glittering Vices": "gluttons judge the world from the perspective of satisfying their own desire for pleasure." She suggests a good indication that we are being drawn into the sin of gluttony is when we cannot easily and uncomplainingly choose to give up what we are eating if and when duty or necessity or relationship requires us to.

The early church fathers who wrote on the 7 deadly sins made the point that the sin of gluttony could be eating too ravenously, excessively, hastily or get this... daintily.... They made it clear that gluttony can be

operating in any instance when your pleasure or satisfaction becomes more important than those around you. Take the person who is eating out and returns their plate to the kitchen for the third time because it is not exactly and perfectly how they like it or the person who demands more from a generous host because of their fickle dietary desires or the person who feels superior to others because of their strictness of diet – that’s all gluttony of the “dainty” variety.

The church father Augustine of Hippo of the 4<sup>th</sup> century sums this all up by offering 3 guidelines for us to use when assessing whether we are falling into gluttony or not. First, are we eating in a way that contributes to or at least maintains our overall health and well-being? We all know those gluttonous impulses that press in on us despite the fact that we are completely full or have not fed our bodies with enough nourishing food! Secondly, are we eating with regard for those around us? Is their good in any way compromised by our cravings? If you haven’t been able to identify your own place in this sin, there it is on a silver platter for you. I don’t know if any of us are not guilty to some extent of gluttony in an economy where some can get an \$80 plate of delectable while others a few blocks away are starving to death. And thirdly, is our eating not just ruled by pleasure but regulated also by other important considerations for us as moral spiritual beings? In other words there might be times when we should fast to become more conscious or turn more fully toward God. This is why fasting has always been one of the central spiritual disciplines of Lent – to put some breaks on our pursuit of everything for ourselves and to turn us again to God. There might also be times when we should opt to not eat certain things

that are doing damage to our planet or acquired immorally or by companies that mistreat their employees, for instance. Simply put if it's all about our own dietary pleasures to the exclusion of everything else, then it's becoming the sin of gluttony.

Gluttony though has close cousins in two other sins on the list which are also about seeking our own pleasure or benefit regardless of the cost to others - lust, which we'll get to in a few weeks and - the sin of greed or avarice. Greed is the desire for more and more without limit, usually an excessive desire for money or the things that money can buy. For Jesus in the wilderness, the temptation towards the sin of greed looked like the devil offering him the glory of authority over the kingdoms of this world - "worship me and it will all be yours!" So a key concept for this sin of greed is ownership, what is mine... in the word's of Gollum from Lord of the Rings "it is mine, all mine, my precious!" And Gollum is the perfect example of how the human being can be distorted, turned in on itself by greed, which then leads to all sorts of accompanying sins of deception, violence, betrayal, thievery, lack of generosity, and so on.

Those who developed the list of the 7 deadly Sins believed that there was one sin that gave rise to all the others. Pride. So whatever sin we are talking about, will in some form or another have it's roots in pride. For greed, the over-identification of ourselves with things and money as our own is a particular distortion of the reality that everything - in fact our very lives themselves - are God's, not our own. We'll sing a hymn to close our worship service entitled "We Cannot Own the Sunlit Sky" and in our capitalist, consumerist, greed-culture, that is a radically

counter-cultural little tune. Tell Dasani that they cannot own the source of water. Tell Exxon that they cannot own the hidden materials of the earth. Tell the resident at 28 Prince Ave in Winchester that he doesn't own the earth under and around his house and see how quickly greedy hackles are raised.

But the problem with the sin of greed is not just that it turns us inward to feed our own desires, but it does so at the detriment of others. Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century said "greed is a sin directly against ones neighbor, since one man cannot over-abound in external riches without another man lacking them." Gandhi said "Earth provides enough to satisfy every person's need, but not every person's greed."

So the probing questions for examining ourselves around the sin of greed might be: What honestly is needful for my life and what do I just want, what's pure luxury? How much stuff is enough? Do I experience a quick fix sense of relief when I shop and buy and consume? Does earning more money or acquiring more things offer me a sense of power over my life? How much of what I have and want comes at the expense of others? What is the bottom line in our businesses, our churches, our homes? Is it profit over people, endowment over ministries, things around us over the souls around us? Greed distorts our priorities and places us and us alone at the top.

The countervailing virtue that roots out the rot of greed in our souls, is the practice of generosity. That's why one of the traditional practices of Lent has always been almsgiving. The practice of giving is not intended to make us feel good about ourselves - that could even be a veiled greedy attempt to get more for ourselves - but rather it's a

practice in remembering that what we have ultimately is not our own. As Rebecca de Young puts it - "Our acts of giving are meant to be a part of a practice of habitual detachment that inscribes dependence on God in our hearts."

The other virtue that is set against the sin of greed is justice. So to grow more Christ-like and away from the sin of greed would be to work as hard as we work at getting what we need and what we want for the sake of someone else, especially for those in this society for whom the system isn't quite as easy and generous as it tends to be for those of us of privilege. That's all I'll say about greed though I've hardly scratched of the surface especially since this is probably our country's specialty sin and I've said little regarding greed's damaging and damning effect upon the earth herself which is huge. But the choir is going to take it from here through a sermon set to music that Bernice Regan Johnson of Sweet Honey in the Rock wrote and then I'll just say a few more words to close and lead us into our prayer time...

## SONG

Are there points of greed and gluttony that we can notice in our own lives? Are there small steps that we can take towards temperance or generosity for those are the two countervailing virtues that we can work on in order to become more Christ-like in our lives. We do this with courage and with prayer, remembering that God loves us. In the words of Anne Lamotte - "the secret is that God loves us exactly the way we are... and way too much to let us stay like this." Amen!