

“The Seven Deadly Sins: Gluttony”

Philippians 3: 17-4:1

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It was a delight to look out on the street yesterday and see the parade that was a sea of green. Happy St. Patrick’s Day! Let’s talk about gluttony.

There is a prayer that has been handed down since the Fifth century about Fasting.

“We ask you, O Lord, that as our bodies grow weaker
for lack of food during this season of fasting,
so our souls may grow stronger.
May we learn to fight more valiantly against evil,
and strive more earnestly for righteousness.
Thus through abstaining from the fruits of the earth,
may we bear more abundantly the fruits of your Spirit.”

– Fifth-century Gelasian Sacramentary Prayer

There are a variety of spiritual disciplines. I acknowledge and admit and appreciate that the Christian tradition has an extensive spiritual practice of fasting. It is just not mine. I have 3 reasons.

First of all, it’s too easy to do a bunch of body shaming with this. It is a theological statement to say, I can’t participate in that. Jesus loves people of all different shapes and sizes.

Secondly, I’ve had too many young friends who for all sorts of reasons, ended up with eating disorders. This danger is real, and may be closer to you than you realize. Fasting may seriously not be a good idea for many. As a moral statement, I refuse to knowingly advocate for a practice that could easily be misunderstood and lead to misuse. Again, God wants us to feel good about our bodies.

Finally, over the years, I’ve heard far too many people brag about giving up ice cream for Lent. I’ve searched the scripture: Jesus says nothing about soft-serve.

So that puts us in the need this morning of rethinking the traditional deadly sin of gluttony. Let’s start with the Bible. Actually, the whole New Testament only uses the word gluttony twice. And then, it is Jesus’ opponents who use it to criticize him! Remember who they call a glutton? Jesus! “He eats and drinks with sinners!”

Paul's statement in Philippians this morning about people's false god being their belly is a metaphor – not a call to dieting.

If you want to discover the deeper roots of gluttony look in the 10 commandments, where what is prohibited is an excess amount of coveting: wanting, desiring, acquiring. You shall not covet your neighbor's house, nor your neighbor's wife, nor his servants, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything else that is your neighbors."

Jesus agrees with that commandment. Jesus says, "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a person's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." (Gospel of Luke)

John Calvin spoke to that when he said to for us to "banish from our hearts all desire contrary to love." He recognized that a gluttony of things could lead to actions that harm the neighbor. (WDCE, p. 137).

Immoderate desire for things tempts people to commit other sins to obtain them. It leads people to lie, cheat, betray, steal, deceive, kill and even to work ourselves to death.

This leads us to think about Gluttony not in relation to food, but about possessions. When we do, a world of insight opens up. If we become focused on our stuff, our stuff can come to rule our lives.

Let me playfully share my Top Ten List of Things that Stuff Loves.

10. Stuff loves dust. It also loves dust bunnies, little bitty bugs, spiders and mice. Collect enough stuff, and you will end up with a veritable zoo.

#9 Stuff loves to attract other stuff. When you start to collect stuff, it takes on a life of its own. It multiplies! Hang two clothes hangers on a rod in the closet: leave it for a week, open it up, they will be on the floor, hundreds of them, jumbled together multiplying like rabbits.

#8. Useless stuff loves to crowd out good stuff. Have you seen that bumper sticker: "The one with the most stuff wins?"

#7. Stuff loves to stay where it lands. Have you noticed: you put something down, it never cleans itself up? It used to, back where you had that miracle in the house called mom. But not now. Sometimes I look at a pile of stuff, and I try to move it like Luke Skywalker: "Use the power of the force, Luke!" It never works. Stuff loves to stay where it lands.

#6. Stuff loves to expand. Eventually, it will fill up whatever space is available. Do an experiment: Open up the Sunday paper. Take out the sections. Now try to put it back just like it was. It never goes back to its original form. Stuff loves to expand. And if two people are reading the paper, it will soon take up 3 acres. Stuff loves to expand.

#5. Stuff loves to pretend it is invisible. Like a 2 year old standing in the middle of the room, covering her eyes. "You can't see me." A custodian once taught me that people who use a public building become blind to all the stuff that accumulates. This is especially true in churches. Stuff junks up the most special places, and we become blind to it.

#4. Stuff loves to spend your money. First of all, you spend money to look for your stuff. Then you spend money to actually buy your stuff. Then you spend money transporting your stuff home. That's when it really starts to cost: You have to put a roof over your stuff, and buy a house big enough for your stuff. You have to heat your stuff, cool your stuff, keep your stuff dry, but not too dry, so you have to humidify your stuff. Insure your stuff. If you move, you have to pay to move your stuff. Even when you die, whoever inherits your stuff has to pay to house it, or more likely, rent a dumpster to haul it away. Even beyond the grave, your Stuff loves to spend your money!

#3. Stuff loves to play with your mind. Just having stuff, owning it, means you use up massive amounts of mental memory, you have to remember: Where'd I put my stuff? Did I put it in the living room? Did I put it in the attic? Or the basement? And if you go on vacation, you find yourself thinking, I wonder if my stuff is OK? Stuff makes you wonder: When I left home this morning, did I lock the door? That's your stuff, messing with your mind!

#2. Stuff loves to make you do silly things. My grandmother, Cora, was the epitome of grace and dignity. A woman of formal elegance. If you looked on Wikipedia for the definition of Victorian values, it should probably say, "Cora McDonald." Grandma lived in Florida. We lived in Illinois. Every year, she would come to stay with us for 2 weeks. I remember when she came to visit in 1963. The Cuban Missile Crisis broke out. Grandma was absolutely adamant that she had to get back to St. Petersburg. She said, "I have to protect my home." I picture her on the front porch with a wet mop, ready to swat those missiles back to Cuba. Stuff loves to make all of us do the most ridiculous things.

#1. Stuff loves... to make you think that it can make you happy. Did you ever see that sweat shirt: "Dear Santa, I want it all?" Even if you had it all, it would not make you happy.

The reason we are exploring the Seven Deadly Sins is that this theological concept is a simple yet profound way of exploring character ethics. The attitudes we practice become a habit, and over time, it forms our character.

Gluttony: worrying about our stuff, is a habit.

Dante said there was one section of the Inferno reserved for the gluttons: He said the people who practice gluttony end up half buried in a garbage heap. And like the garbage, they are rotting. Cerebos, the 3 headed hound of mythological hell, wanders around the garbage heap, feasting on their appendages. While they were alive, their lives produced nothing but garbage, so in the Inferno, that is what they have become.

Pete Seeger used to sing a song called Garbage. The verses traced a trajectory:

Verse 1: we're filling up the seas with garbage.

Verse 2: we're filling up the sky with garbage.

Verse 3: We're filling up our minds with garbage.

And then he sings:

"What will we do when there's nothing left to read

and there's nothing left to need

there's nothing left to watch

there's nothing left to touch

there's nothing left to walk upon

and nothing left to ponder on

nothing left to see

and nothing left to be but garbage." (Song by Bill Steele)

Whether you go with Dante or Pete Seeger, they raise a powerful critique.

So what virtue can we practice to overcome our propensity to an obsessive gluttony of stuff? There is an old Shaker hymn, (the music is in our final hymn today); the original words went like this:

*This a gift to be simple, tis a gift to be free,
tis a gift to come down where we ought to be.
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'twill be in the valley of love and delight.*

'Tis a gift to be simple. Simplicity has a revisioning effect. To paraphrase Ken Bazyn: After abstaining from whatever is cluttering up our lives and our focus, one comes back to embrace the goodness of creation with a new vigor. After imposing limits on ourselves for a season, we can once more experience the glorious freedom that is ours in Christ. With Christ, we remember to put first things first, and not to let anything else get in the way. Our lives can become clogged with debris that should periodically be swept away. Sin hinders us from becoming fully human; Jesus sets us free.

Fasting – in whatever form it takes – is about us denying ourselves something, so that we can then increase our capacity to do something else. For Some people, fasting from food helps them become more aware of those in the world who are starving.

I'm advocating to make our lives more simple from stuff. Simplicity could also be paring down the mindless activities that overcrowd our lives.

Letting go of these things for a season: the point is to make our soul grow stronger: strive more honestly for righteousness. Abstain from the fruits of the earth to bear more abundantly the fruits of the spirit.

Jesus talks about the pearl of great price, when someone finds something truly worthwhile you get rid of everything else and focus just on the one thing. A profound way to ask: Beyond all the clutter, what really matters? Or, as T. S. Elliot put it: "Where is the Life we have lost in the living?"

If our stuff can get in the way of life, if our frantic list of activities wherein we end up being gluttons for punishment, can enslave us, it is a spiritual freedom to downsize. Right size. Simplify. To clear out the clutter of our lives. To look at our stuff and ask, "Would I really miss this if it was gone?"

Simplicity: Decide what is most important in your life. Organize your life to focus on what is most important. If it is not important, limit it. If it is clutter, get rid of it. Find what matters most. Discover the joy of focusing on what we value most. Simplicity is about discovering the peace that comes beyond possessions. Discover the joy of living in God's grace.

In the literary journal *Freemans*, the lead article is a personal story by Elif Shafak. She grew up in Turkey. She remembers that outside her house, there were strikes, gunshots, bombs, demonstrations. All sorts of political divisions, each trying to force their will on the other. Elif worried constantly about the bombs and the violence. It seemed surreal. And her mother had to go out in this to school all week long.

But on Sunday mornings, she and his mother and grandmother all got to spend the day together. She would watch her mother and grandmother: They would place large, round trays on the table and start making dolmas [a Turkish dish that has been around since the Ottoman Empire.] They would stuff rice and meat and wild herbs inside of green peppers. She writes,

"They didn't talk much, their movements deft and practiced. But their silence was a peaceful one. A harmonious one. A mutual recognition of their different personalities... I would prick my ears trying to catch what went unsaid, and open my eyes trying to observe what remained invisible.

... And when the dolmas were ready my Grandma would say, playfully, "Stop watching us as if we were TV. Whatever you see in us is present in you. One day, you'll know. But now, come and eat, sweetheart. Come and eat." (Elif Shafak, p. 4-5))

In a world gluttonous for violence, weapons and power, practicing simplicity – like spending Sundays together, cooking together, making old family recipes, and eating together, may be just what we need. To spend time on what really matters. Eating together. Listening to one another. Listening to God.

This Lent, consider again what it means to practice simplicity. Remember what truly matters.

Amen.

Sources:

Dante Alighieri. *Inferno*. Modern Library.

Pete Seeger. "Garbage." Song by Bill Steele.

Elif Shafak. Freeman's. "The Best New Writing on Power.

Ken Bazyn. *The Seven Perennial Sins and Their Offspring*. Continuum Books.