**THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS: ENVY**

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July 15, 2018

Texts: Psalm 73 and 1 Peter 6:2b-10

In the fourth century – before most of you were born – one of the desert fathers, a monk with the distinguished-sounding name of Evagrius Ponticus, identified a handful of sins or vices that he believed were particularly challenging for Christians to overcome on their journey of faith. Over the years that list was revised repeatedly until in the late 6th century it arrived at its current popular form under Pope Gregory I. That list, commonly known as the Seven Deadly Sins, includes: envy, lust, pride, gluttony, greed, sloth and wrath. They are sins of excess or disordered loves, and what make these sins notable is not that they cause death to the sinner or to anyone else, but that they give rise to a host of other sins. These seven deadly sins are sins that lead the sinner down a slippery slope to sin and more sin.

Over the centuries that list of seven deadly sins has endured. It has been fruit for theological reflection by theologians like Thomas Aquinas. It has been depicted in great works of art, has found expression in great works of literature including Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, and has been integral to the plot of several movies most of which are not great works of cinema. It has been the inspiration for a ballet and for a Japanese anime and manga series. Mahatma Gandhi drew upon the tradition in laying out his list of Seven Deadly Social Sins – a list which could well form the basis for another sermon series. Today that list of seven deadly sins is recognized for instruction by a number of Christian traditions including Anglicans, Methodists and Lutherans. And if you wander into the local grocery store and stop in the wine aisle, you can purchase a bottle of old vine zinfandel from California with a whimsical label that reads: The Seven Deadly Zins. The Seven Deadly Sins – and Zins – are alive and well in the 21st century!

Over the course of the next several weeks in a series of summer sermons, Sarah and I hope to consider these seven sins from a 21st century perspective. Why have these seven endured across the centuries and found such resonance in the larger church and culture in a time and place far removed from the 4th century desert fathers? Are they rooted in Scripture and if so, what does Scripture have to say about them? Today we begin with *envy*.

One of the first stories in the Bible, there in the early chapters of Genesis shortly after the big bang of creation and the Fall in the Garden of Eden, is the account of Cain and Abel. As you may recall, Cain and Abel are the sons of Adam and Eve, different as night and day. Cain is the green-thumbed farmer; Abel is the shepherd keeping watch over the flocks by night. One day they come before the Lord to offer their sacrifices. Abel brings a couple of fine unblemished lambs from his flock; Cain brings a kale salad, watermelon, and a basket of zucchini. For some unknown reason, the LORD accepts Abel’s offering from the herd but rejects Cain’s gifts from the garden. No reason is given; the text says simply:

*The LORD had regard for Abel and his offering,*

*but for Cain and his offering the LORD had no regard.*

It seems unjust, perhaps to us, certainly to Cain who begins to fume at the rejection of his gifts. The LORD encourages Cain to try again, saying: “If you do well, will you not be accepted?” But the LORD also warns Cain of the sin that is lurking at his door: “Its desire is for you, but you must master it.” That sin is unnamed, but as events unfold it becomes clear that the sin is envy which gives rise to anger which gives rise to violence. Cain envies Abel and the blessing he receives from God, and so days later, unable to master the sin, Cain lures Abel into the field and kills him there – brother killing brother because Abel’s gift was accepted and Cain’s was not.

My parents made sure that my younger brother and I knew this story from an early age and with it the moral of the story: *Don’t kill your brother!* which was probably the right lesson for us to draw from it at that point in our lives. But looking more closely now, God’s emphasis seems to be less toward the violence at the end than toward the deadly danger of envy which gives rise to the anger and violence. It is a slippery slope from envy to a host of sins including violence. I want it; you have it; the world is unjust! So are justified sinful actions to right the injustice – two wrongs to make a right. “Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you and you must master it,” says the Lord. How well have you mastered that sin?

Joseph’s brothers didn’t master it very well. So jealous were they of the love their father showered upon Joseph, symbolized most boldly by that coat of many colors he so proudly wore, that they threw him into a pit and sold him into slavery. Israel didn’t master it very well, for among the ten commandments handed down by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai was this: *You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor* which suggests that there was a whole lot of coveting going on there in the desert. You shall not covet, you shall not be jealous, you shall not envy what your neighbor has – we know it, we hear it, but still we do it. Sin lurks at the door and its desire is for us to be envious of others. How then do we master it?

In the 73rd Psalm that we read this morning the psalmist offers his suggestion for mastering that sin based on his own experience. “My feet almost stumbled, my steps nearly slipped,” he says, “for I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” The psalmist looks around and notices that the neighbors who do all the wrong things seem to fare better than he does. “They have no pain,” he says. “Their bodies are sound and sleek. They have no troubles like others do.” They are fat and sassy, arrogant and rude. They have big houses on the hill, drive expensive cars, and make a ton of money. They bully and belittle others, threaten their neighbors with lawsuits or violence, and declare they have no need for God. They are narcissistic and nasty, yet still people admire them, find no fault in them, even praise them. They could shoot someone on Beverley Street and no one would convict them. “What is the point of being faithful?” the psalmist wonders. “The wicked seem to have it all while I suffer here trying to do the right thing.” Maybe you know how he feels!

It sometimes seems like the wicked are winning, and that all those Christian values we espouse – forgiveness, humility, love, patience, justice, kindness, generosity, righteousness, peace – are for nought. Those who reject those values as weak and unrealistic seem to be succeeding all around us while we struggle to be faithful. The great temptation which lurks at the door is envy – envy of what they have and of how they live, sin that prods us to forsake the values God asks us to live into and embrace the way of the wicked in the hope of winning what they have – power, prestige, personal prosperity.

The turning point for the psalmist in resisting that temptation was a trip to the sanctuary of the Lord. “When I went into the sanctuary of God I saw things differently,” he says. I regained some perspective. I recalled your faithfulness and your promises. I perceived how fleeting are the wealth and success of the wicked who I envied. I remembered that you are with me, and your strong hand is there to guide me, and “there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.” For the psalmist, mastering that sin came about by turning to God. In God he found greater hope, greater joy, and greater peace than he could ever find in the lives of those he had envied.

Jesus doesn’t promise we will have what our neighbors have if we follow his Way; he promises that we will have more – not more things or more admiration from the world, but more peace, more joy, more hope in which to live and in which to die. For the psalmist the key to mastering the green-eyed sin of envy is growing closer to God and recognizing that God offers us much more. We need not be envious of the apparent success of the wicked, for it is illusory. God’s promises alone endure! “For me it is good to be near God,” he says. And so it is for us!

The writer in 1 Timothy offers an additional suggestion for mastering that sin. He suggests we be content with what we have. At its heart, envy is discontentment. It is looking at your neighbor and wanting what he or she has – whether that be a thing or a talent or a blessing or a something – and the lack of that something leaves a hole in your heart or life. It is a hole that can leave us empty or can eat away at our souls and make us numb to the blessings we do have. Instead of being content with who we are and what we have, we itch for more – for what we do not have – and sin lurks at the door to scratch that itch and make us miserable and urges us to do whatever we need to do to fill the hole that envy has created.

“We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it,” says the writer in 1 Timothy. “If we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.” Contentment in our society is not necessarily a positive term; it may suggest settling or being satisfied with something less than we deserve or might otherwise attain. But for the writer in 1 Timothy contentment is an antidote to the poison of sin. It acknowledges the blessings of God. We find contentment in what we have rather than discontentment in what we do not have. Our gifts differ and that is okay. Your talent is a blessing to you, and the fact that I don’t have that talent is not a curse. I have other talents, other gifts that are blessings. To be content is to recognize and give thanks for those blessings without the need to be envious of the blessings of others.

On a sign above my computer desk the words of Julian of Norwich capture well that contented blessing: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” That blessed assurance echoes the writer in 1 Timothy and the words of the psalmist and makes unnecessary our envy of others, for we have the LORD, and with the LORD our God present with us, blessing and loving us – and with the promises of Christ to sustain us and give us hope – and with the Holy Spirit to guide and sustain us along the way – all shall indeed be well! All manner of thing shall be well. That is not something to be envied. That is something to believe! Amen