***THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS: GLUTTONY***

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Texts: Proverbs 23:19-21 and John 6:25-35

*There is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat and drink and enjoy themselves… (Eccl. 8:15)* says the writer in Ecclesiastes. While some of our Calvinist forebears were convinced that “if it feels good it must be wrong”, clearly the biblical mandate is for us to enjoy life – to eat, drink, and be merry! That is not our only mission in life, though some of you may wish it was. We are called to love God and neighbor,

to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God,

to go and make disciples of all nations,

but we are also called to enjoy this life and world which God has given us. In the words of the catechism our chief end is “to glorify God and enjoy God forever”; food, drink and fellowship are gifts of God for us to share joyfully. Jesus modeled that joyful life for us in table fellowship with all kinds of people: disciples, tax collectors and prostitutes alike. Ignoring the taunts of Pharisees who labeled him a drunkard and glutton, he ate, drank and made merry at table with saints and sinners, friends and strangers, as he talked with them and invited them into the kingdom of God.

It is one thing to eat, drink and be merry; it is another thing to be a glutton and drunkard. The encouragement in Ecclesiastes to eat, drink and be merry is bound by the wisdom of Proverbs which is this: know when to say when. Our lifelong merry-making is limited by caution against excesses:

Do not drink too much wine

or eat too much food

or keep company with those who do.

The caution in Proverbs is

practical: too much honey will make you throw up,

and moral: gluttons shame their parents,

and financial: drunkenness and gluttony lead to poverty.

The poster boy for the proverb is the prodigal son, the obnoxious kid who wished his father dead, took his share of the inheritance in advance, and promptly threw it all away in “dissolute living” which is Luke’s nice way of saying he indulged in too much wine, too much food, and too many women. Will Willimon suggests that “gluttony consists in that little word *too (t-o-o)*.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Gluttony is being unsatisfied with enough in pursuit of TOO much. For the prodigal son it was too much gluttonous living that led to just what the proverbs said it would: he shamed his parents, found his stomach empty, and ended up in such poverty that he was tempted to eat the food of pigs. He lived a recklessly extravagant life that earned him that prodigal name and left him in the depths of despair and degradation.

We who are heirs to the blessings of God seem to have learned little from the parable of the prodigal about the dangers of gluttony and dissolute living. According to the CDC:

* 39.8% of Americans and 27.3% of Virginians over the age of 25 are obese
* Nationally 18.5% of children and teens ages 2-19 are obese;
* 17.7% of high school students and 42% of college students are reported to binge drink, and lest adults be too judgmental of them, statistics show that one in six American adults binge drinks about four times per month with at least seven drinks per binge.

Obesity and alcohol abuse are local and national problems that span every demographic – every age group, every geographical region, every race and religion. We eat too much food and too many of the wrong foods. We drink too much alcohol and sugared sodas, and we get too little exercise. As a result, the incidence of diabetes is increasing at an alarming rate and alcohol related accidents continue to plague our highways. We are gluttons, eating and drinking ourselves to death, literally and figuratively, while many in the world are starving and, like the prodigal son, long to have just a portion of the corn we feed to fatten our pigs.

Gluttony is not the occasional second scoop of ice cream on your cone. It is a way of life rooted, not in the fear that there will not be enough to meet our needs, but in the selfish craving for more. Gluttony is having enough and taking more anyway which makes us poor stewards of God’s good gifts. As a nation and as individuals we consume far more than our fair share of the resources of this earth, and in doing so, we deny those resources to others who need them. At the final judgment when Christ asks, “Why were you stuffing yourself beyond reason when so many were hungry? Why were you drinking beyond your limit to dull that keen mind I gave you? Why are you wasting the resources of this earth for your own needs when there are so many other needs to be met?” what will you say? When Jesus asks, “Are you taking care of the body God gave you, the body Paul describes as the temple of the Lord?” what answer will you give?

“I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat,” says Jesus, “but you ate until you were beyond full. I was thirsty and you gave me no drink but drank yourself into a stupor. I was naked and you gave me no clothes even though your closet and drawers were full of shirts and pants and jackets and shoes you don’t even wear.” It is not just too much food and drink that mark us as gluttons. We buy too much stuff that we don’t need and rack up too much debt to pay for it; we spend too much time in front of too many screens; and as St. John of the Cross suggests in his classic *Dark Night of the Soul*, some of us fill our time with so many pious practices and heavenly thoughts that we are no earthly good – practices he refers to as *spiritual gluttony*. Gluttony comes in many shapes and sizes punctuated with that little word *TOO*. When will we learn that enough is enough and too much is too much and “moderation in all things” is sage advice?

In the parable of the prodigal, Luke says that when the son reached rock bottom he finally “came to himself,” realized how far he had fallen, and resolved to change his ways even if that meant working as a servant in his father’s house. Crushed by life in the fast lane, he headed home with his head bowed and his spirit broken to confess his sins and to beg for mercy from the father he had so rudely rejected.

It is time for us to come to ourselves, bow our heads, and confess the gluttonous errors of our ways. It is time to stop living to excess and start living within our limits, to foreswear gluttony and drunkenness and the excess of dissolute living and begin to practice a little moderation. Then we might find time and resources to do the work Christ charged us to do:

feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit those in prison, and comfort those who mourn,

love God and neighbor,

do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God,

go and make disciples of all nations,

be good stewards of all that we have – including our bodies!

Do not think that such a life is devoid of eating, drinking and making merry! Recall that in celebration of the return of the prodigal son, his father killed the fatted calf and threw a party to welcome him home; it was the son who refused to join the party who got his comeuppance. Recall the hope-filled promises of great feasts in Scripture like that proclaimed by Isaiah:

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples*

*a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines…(Isaiah 25:6)*

Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana and invited himself to dinner at the home of Zacchaeus and celebrated the raising of Lazarus at table with Mary and Martha and spoke of the kingdom of God as a great banquet to which even those on the margins of society were invited. Eating, drinking and making merry around a table are good things, joyful things to share together as God’s people. But eating and drinking to excess, excluding people from our tables, and hoarding resources make us poor stewards of the gifts of God, selfish gluttons who think of our own excessive desires more than the real needs of our neighbors.

Perhaps that is one reason that Jesus commanded us to gather at this table to share bread and a cup in remembrance of him. Here all are invited. Here the meal is always shared. Here there is something for everyone. Here we eat and drink in moderation in remembrance of the One whose great excess in living was not what he ate or drank, but the love he shared. “I am the bread of life,” he says. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.” As an alternative to drowning in drink our sorrows and pain, Jesus offers himself. As an alternative to eating ourselves to death, Jesus offers his body as the bread of life. In sharing this bread and cup we remember his sacrifice for us and his presence with us, his call to us as disciples and his promise of a heavenly banquet in the kingdom of God to which all are invited. This is a table of remembrance, but it is also a table of celebration. For God wants us

to enjoy life and to savor all God’s good gifts; to eat, drink and be merry;

but to do so responsibly and faithfully and generously and joyfully, taking no more than we need, sharing what we have,

and knowing when enough really is enough! Amen

1. William H. Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian*, Abingdon Press:2013, p.125 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)