

*A sermon given on Sunday, February 15, 2009,
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

***The Seven Deadly Sins:
Introduction & Part I: Anger***

I have a couple of quiz questions for you this morning. The first one will let us know how long you have been around in the Episcopal Church: *What is "Sexagesima?"*

The answer: Sexagesima is today. Prior to the 1979 adoption of our current prayer book, Quinquagesima, Sexagesima, and Septagesima were the church calendar names for the three Sundays prior to Ash Wednesday. They took their titles from the fact that they were roughly 50, 60, and 70 days before Easter. If Lent was a time to prepare for Easter, these three Sundays were a time to prepare for Lent. The current Prayer Book discontinued this medieval practice, perhaps because preparing to prepare seemed a little redundant. But I want to revive this pre-Lenten season this year. The reason is that I have a Lenten Sermon Series with seven topics, but there are only five Sundays in Lent. So in order to have one Sunday for each, I need to start two weeks ahead of Lent, which is today – thus, the return of Sexagesima.

Now, here's the next quiz question: how many of the seven dwarfs can you name? Most or all, I bet. But I am not going to preach a Lenten series on the seven dwarfs. I am going to preach on the Seven Deadly Sins. Now, how many of *those* can you name? I find that in this day and age, more of us can easily name the seven dwarfs than can name the seven deadly sins. Imagine that!

Indeed, we hear little about sin in general nowadays. A cartoon shows the distinguished clergyman at tea, saying to his conversational companion, "Oh, I'm still opposed to sin – I'm just no longer sure what qualifies." Given the way the word is used in our culture, what qualifies as sin seems mostly to be either sexual misbehavior, or seriously chocolate-laden desserts! This is a shame. For what is intended by the religious concept of sin is not simply misbehavior or indulgence. Sin is about the powers that separate us from God. While we may think about sin most often in terms of sinful actions, such as cheating or murder, these sins are actually the outward manifestation of our interior character. Sinful actions are signs of a sinful disposition, expressions of a heart alienated from God. Not misbehavior but alienation and separation from God – this is what sin is all about.

Through the ages, the Church has classified these sinful dispositions of the heart into seven descriptions, the Seven Deadly Sins. The list was hammered out over generations, taking its current shape around the 5th century. It is not found, as a list, in the Bible. But it grew directly out of Christians' real-life experience as they sought to live faithful lives. Each of the Seven Deadly Sins refers to a breakdown, a spiritual weakness which leads us away from God. Three of the seven sins relate to unbridled appetites for worldly things: *gluttony*, *lust*, and *greed*. Two others describe destructive ways we relate to other people: *anger* and *envy*. And two of them go to the center of our relationship with God: *sloth*, in which we negate our own self completely; and *pride*, in which we exalt that self completely.

The list has stood the test of time. Contemporary psychotherapist Solomon Schimmel suggests that theologians of yesteryear were not just sound moral teachers but also profound psychologists. "Modern psychology's disdain for the teachings of the great moral traditions is an example of intellectual hubris," he writes. "The deadly sins are not arbitrary, irrational restrictions On the contrary, most sins or vices, and the seven deadly ones in particular,

concern the core of what we are, of what we can become, and most importantly, of what we should aspire to be.”ⁱ

Insofar as the list of the seven deadly sins has served for 1500 years as a tool for self-examination, and insofar as self-examination is a primary task for the season of Lent, we embark now on this seven-week series. Let me acknowledge in particular my indebtedness to three works as source and inspiration. First, the Rev. William Stafford’s 1994 book entitled *Disordered Loves: Healing the Seven Deadly Sins*.ⁱⁱ Second, Professor Solomon Schimmel’s 1997 work, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology*. And third, a seven-book series published in 2005 by the Oxford University Pressⁱⁱⁱ, with one title on each sin, each by a different contemporary author.

On the Fourth of July 2007 a Cleveland firefighter stormed out of his house and shot five people in the neighbor’s driveway. The noise of their firecrackers had driven him to a murderous fury. This is the extreme consequence of the sin of anger. Most of us will never experience this depth of rage, but all of us experience this natural human emotion at some level. Indeed, we have the idea that some forms of anger are not sinful at all, but downright virtuous. Of all the sins, only anger seems so thoroughly on the border between good and evil. We speak of “righteous anger” or “just anger,” while never daring to claim that there is such a thing as “righteous gluttony” or “just lust!” But righteous anger, surely, has biblical precedent. Think of the prophets who cried out angrily against injustice and immorality, against those who cheated widows and starved the poor. As the prophet Jeremiah said, “I am full of the wrath of the Lord; I am weary of holding it in.” [Jer 6:11] Or think of Jesus himself, furiously overturning the tables in the Temple, driving out the cheating moneychangers with a whip, of all things. Surely there are times of extremity when speaking or even acting in anger can provoke a positive change in human relationships.

Righteous anger, however, is by far the exception and not the rule. Solomon Schimmel suggests that there is “a very fine line dividing moral from immoral anger in two respects. First, we are easily prone to rationalizing our immoral behavior by attributing moral motives to it.” It’s just too easy to persuade ourselves that other people’s anger is clearly misguided and destructive, while our own anger is upright indignation. Second, “it is in the very nature of anger, once aroused, to easily get out of control.” [Schimmel, p. 90] Think about how we act and speak when we get angry. Think how quickly our anger, regardless of its origins, takes on dimensions of scorn, cruelty, pride, the desire to humiliate the person with whom we are angry; hostility, at least, and sometimes even violence. St. Augustine issued this warning: “It is better to deny entrance to just and reasonable anger than to admit it, no matter how small it is. Once admitted it is driven out again only with difficulty.”^{iv}

Thus, against occasional evidence on behalf of righteous anger, the biblical witness condemning anger as a sin is very strong. Right off the bat, in the earliest chapters of Genesis, the story of Cain’s murder of his brother Abel shows how primal is the danger of anger. The author of the Psalms speaks against it frequently, as in Psalm 37[v.9]: “Refrain from anger, leave rage alone; do not fret yourself; it leads only to evil.” Likewise the words of Proverbs 14:29 – “Those who are slow to anger have great understanding, but those who have a hasty temper exalt folly.”

The New Testament continues this disapproval of human wrath. The Apostle Paul lists anger together with other sins such as slander and foul talk. Most importantly, Jesus has this to say in his central teaching, the Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’ ... but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to

the council; and if you say ‘you fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” [Mt 5:21-22] Here, says author Robert Thurman,

Jesus gives the difficult teaching of the conquest of anger. He is not content with the ancient ‘Be angry but do not sin.’ It is not enough, in the light of what he deems possible for humans, that they merely restrain from their outward actions. He wants them to find freedom from anger. He warns them that anger just being present in the mind is enough to bring down condemnation. And a word spoken in anger can become the creator of hell.^v

Anger, then, is a sin against our human, social life. I suspect that you and I will not have to think very far or very hard to come up with our own stories about the destructive power of anger: tales of ill-considered words hurtfully spoken; of friendships damaged; of verbal or physical abuse in homes, wounding or destroying the fabric of relationships meant to be our most cherished; not to mention the communal and global effects of anger in nationalistic hostilities and war. “This is the deadly power of anger,” writes Mary Gordon, “it rolls and rolls like a flaming boulder down a hill, gathering moss and speed until any thought of cessation is ... hopeless. It is not that there is no cause for the anger; but the causes are lost in the momentum of the anger itself.”^{vi}

Connected, as it so often is, with fear, anger arises unbidden and proceeds to demolish our own reason, and subsequently, our relationships with one another. It alienates us further and further from our neighbor, and therefore, further and further from God.

What, then, is the cure? I cannot refrain, for starters, from reading you this account: *An ethical tract of 12th century Germany tells of an individual who was prone to violent temper tantrums which brought great distress to others and himself. After consulting a sage for advice, he made a solemn vow to donate a substantial, predetermined sum of money to charity for each future irresponsible outburst of anger.^{vii}*

As Rector, I am tempted to end the sermon right there, and tell you that your anger-penalty contributions may be directed to St. Paul’s Episcopal Church at any time!

But no – as your pastor, I am bound to move beyond financial disincentives. As Jesus offers healing to the leper in today’s Gospel, so Jesus offers to us the healing of anger. The spiritual cure for anger, which becomes quickly irrational, is to cultivate the equally irrational virtues of humility, patience, and forgiveness.

Humility combats anger, because if we acknowledge that we may not be completely in the right, we may be more restrained in our response. Psychologists call it “cognitive reappraisal of apparent injury.” Translation: You just might be wrong! So settle down and seek a little humility. Humility also invites us to acknowledge our own imperfections and failings, so that, even when we are in the right in a given situation, we are obliged to be less reactive to the imperfections and failings of others. Which brings us to patience.

Patience combats anger, because its cultivation slows us down and allows passion to subside before we speak or act in rash anger. The old technique of “counting to ten” before reacting angrily is simple, maybe simplistic – yet it is a commendable tool for giving patience a chance to get a jump on anger. Patience, finally, leads to the most important spiritual antidote for anger, and that is forgiveness. We go beyond patience as simple endurance or forbearance, and enter the world of “patience as non-retaliation and forgiveness.”^{viii}

It’s of note that modern psychologists have endorsed the benefits of forgiveness as a response to anger. Says one, “Forgiveness is a powerful therapeutic intervention which frees people from their anger and from the guilt which is often a result of unconscious anger ... and decreases the likelihood that anger will be misdirected in later loving relationships.”^{ix} But for us

as Christians, the ultimate call for forgiveness as a balm for anger comes not from psychology, but from the Cross. A blessing, and not an angry curse, was Jesus' response to his executioners: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Not even God's own righteous anger towards a wayward world is the final word, but rather God's grace and forgiveness. Anger yields to love by way of forgiveness.

We confess our sin of anger, and we take it to the Cross, where anger once spent itself out in a futile attempt to put love to death. But forgiveness proved stronger than anger, because love proved stronger than death. And it still does. We proclaim God as a merciful judge, and we rely on that mercy when we go to God for forgiveness of our own sins. How, then, can we justify our own anger and refusal to forgive others?

The discipline of trying to look at the world from God's perspective is a hard one. It means trying to see the people at whom we are angry as God sees them. God does not require us to deny the truth as we see it; God only requires us to forgive, as we hope to be forgiven. And this we accomplish, of course, only with God's help.

Pray and strive for freedom from anger. Pray for God's strength to cultivate humility, patience, and forgiveness.

ⁱ Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 5.

ⁱⁱ William S. Stafford, *Disordered Loves: Healing the Seven Deadly Sins* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1994).

ⁱⁱⁱ Elda Rotor, editor; *The Seven Deadly Sins Series* (Oxford: NY Public Library and OUP, 2005).

^{iv} As quoted by Robert A. F. Thurman, *Anger* (in *The Seven Deadly Sins Series, ibid.*), p. 48.

^v Thurman, *ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

^{vi} Mary Gordon et al, *Deadly Sins* (NYC: William Morrow & Co., 1993), p. 37.

^{vii} Schimmel, *ibid.*, p. 105.

^{viii} Thurman, *ibid.*, p. 95.

^{ix} Richard Fitzgibbons, as quoted in Schimmel, *ibid.*, p. 102.