

*A sermon given on Sunday, March 1, 2009,
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

***The Seven Deadly Sins:
Part 3: Greed***

On July 16, 2002, Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan reflected on the breakdown of checks and balances in the corporate economic world. There had arisen an “outsized increase in opportunities for avarice,” said Greenspan. “An infectious greed seemed to grip much of our business community.” Greenspan’s remarks echoed around the nation and his phrase, “infectious greed,” became a watchword and a flashpoint. Google it, and you will find not dozens but hundreds of entries, from business journals to sermons to a newsletter bearing the phrase as its title: Infectious Greed.

Some in the corporate world were outraged that they had been painted with such a broad brush. But Greenspan’s remarks were not, I think, a condemnation limited to any one sector of the economic system. Rather, his notion of infectious greed applies to a cultural ethos across the board and relates to us all, both collectively and individually. Greenspan said at the time, “It is not that humans have become any more greedy than in generations past. It is that the avenues to express greed had grown so enormously.”ⁱ

Those of you who have been here the past couple of weeks know that I got an early start on a Lenten sermon series. We are taking seven Sundays to consider the Seven Deadly Sins. These seven, worked out by the church over centuries of tradition, represent seven ways that we separate ourselves from one another and from God. Sinful actions or misdemeanors are but the outward manifestation of a heart alienated from God. Not misbehavior but alienation and separation from God – this is what sin is all about. We began our series with the sin of Anger. Last week we talked about Envy. In coming weeks we will consider Lust, Gluttony, Sloth, and Pride. Today we contemplate Greed. Many religious traditions place greed at the top of the list. Religious writer Phyllis Tickle, says that greed “is the mother and matrix, root and consort of all the other sins; and it is to this matriarch of a deadly clan that we now turn our attention.”ⁱⁱ

Sometimes called avarice or covetousness, greed can be close to last week’s topic of envy. But where envy focuses our resentment on other people who have something we wish we had, greed is focused on the objects themselves, on the desire to possess more and more. Greed has been defined as “the inordinate love of money and of material possessions, and the dedication of oneself to their pursuit.”ⁱⁱⁱ It involves placing our trust, our hope, our measure of self-worth in those things which have become the object of our desire.

We are conflicted about greed, because our culture equates happiness with wealth, and equates freedom with lack of restraint.^{iv} So before we consider the sin of greed, we need to make a basic affirmation which we hold as Christians: material things are not inherently evil. God created the material world, and God called it good. Furthermore, God blessed us as humans with the reason and skill to make things. In our own small way we share in God’s creative endeavor by taking the raw materials of this world and inventing, creating, producing. The things that we create – things to protect us, to help us, to entertain us – these things are God-given gifts. We should be grateful for them, and we should enjoy them.

The trouble is, once we put our effort and wisdom and desire into these things, it is possible – very possible – to put them in God’s place. This is how the natural impulse to possess and enjoy turns into the sin of greed. Our possessions, or those things we desire to possess, become our idol. Our self-image is defined by what we have, instead of who God made us. Our schedules, our budgets, our priorities are shaped by our desire to acquire. Like envy, greed becomes consuming.

We may be apt to think of greed as someone else’s sin. If you are coveting what is mine, you are being *greedy*. If I am coveting what is yours, I am being *wistful*. If you have less than I do, you are *less fortunate*. If you have more than I do, you are *greedy*. It is a sin we like to define in relative terms. Greed is Enron, greed is Milken, greed is Madoff. We are not these. Greed is Ebenezer Scrooge, but surely Scrooge is a caricature and has nothing to do with me.

Such avoidance has more to do with our limited definition of greed than our own susceptibility to it. Greed is not defined by the illegality of our means in obtaining that which we covet. Nor is it defined strictly by the scale of value. If the possession of a thing becomes a compulsive motivator for me, if a thing has come to possess me more than I possess it, then its monetary value is beside the point. I was surprised in my reading this week by the suggestion that even thrift can sometimes be a form of greed. If my “saving” is really a guise for “hoarding,” if my “penny-pinching” is more motivated by miserliness than responsible economy, then even thrift is a false front for greed. It is not value which is the criterion, but the quality of possessing.

The Biblical view of greed reflects some of the ambiguity we have acknowledged in ourselves. In some of the early books like Proverbs and Wisdom, we see a tacit acceptance of the idea that good people were blessed with riches and the wealthiest were the most righteous. But they came to see that it was not always so. The prophets often pointed to wealthy people who had become arrogant and hard-hearted in their greed. Today’s gospel reading recollects Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. We know from other gospel accounts that greed was among the temptations he faced. But Jesus did not take the chance to claim power and prestige.

In one of Jesus’ parables God says starkly to the rich man, “Fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have [collected], whose will they be?” [Lk 2:20] Death gets the last laugh over greed. Elsewhere Jesus warns, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” [Lk 12:15] And St. Paul says famously in his First Letter to Timothy, “We brought nothing into the world – it is certain that we can take nothing out of it... But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” [I Tim 6:7-10]

What, then, are we to do? How are we to enjoy our material blessings, without slipping into the sin of greed? Let me suggest four ways to steer ourselves away from the unquenchable desire to acquire.

First, be aware of the message of entitlement, and resist it. From the morning newspaper to evening television, we are deluged with advertisements designed to convince us of all the things that we must have. From the latest features on our cars, to the latest fashions in our clothes, to the latest communications devices, so much of our culture is based on the premise of endless acquisition. If the ad agency has done its job, we don’t just *want* a thing, we are sure that we *need* it. And more and more, we believe that we have a *right* to it. The spirit of entitlement

and that of immediate gratification combine to make a potent invitation to greed. Our consumer culture cannot help but promote desire. An intentional awareness of that fact can begin to put a check on it. Resist the sense of entitlement.

Second, *shape your habits and schedule so as to minimize your desire to acquire*, rather than feeding it. Think for a moment about recreational shopping. There's nothing inherently wrong with shopping, of course. The problem is that recreational mall wandering is bound to feed our desire to buy stuff, so much of which we may not need at all. One writer says, "Shopping malls cultivate avarice as brothels do lust."^v Wow! That might be a little strong. But he has a point. If we wander around in a context designed to promote desire, our desire is likely to be aroused. The same goes for mail order catalogues. (I recall once browsing through a household gadget catalogue and becoming convinced that I could not live without this really cool brush that attaches to the wall of your shower so you can scrub your feet without having to bend down. Honestly!) Psychologists tell us there is a whole generation of people growing up who cope with depression by shopping. When combined with easy credit, this creates huge debts and financial pits which, in the long run, only add to the depression. Whether prone to such compulsive buying or not, it makes sense for us to find other ways to use our time than shopping. Have a friend for lunch. See a movie. Take a walk. None of these is as likely to feed our desire for more things.

Third, *cultivate an ethos of letting go*. I have mentioned that my parents spent several years living in Lebanon. There they had to learn not to compliment people on items in their homes. If they said, "What a beautiful plate," or "I love that picture," they then had to spend the rest of the visit persuading the host not to give them the plate or the picture. Such was the natural generosity and the accepted culture of their hosts. I am not suggesting that we need to be this compulsive about our generosity. But I do think we can be less wedded to our belongings. We can let go of things we do not need. Others will be helped. Our habit of possessing will be lightened. In the words of the Shaker hymn, "'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free."

Finally, and most importantly, *take seriously the call to Christian stewardship*. William Stafford writes about the biblical call to the tithe:

The principle behind it has been clear from the beginning of Israel's life. Everything that God's people acquire comes from God. The tithe means to return one tenth of those acquisitions to God, as an offering owed in duty and thanksgiving.... I depend on God concretely, and I give him thanks concretely.... At the Eucharist we put tithes into the plate, and they are taken forward to the altar to be offered to God with the bread and wine. That is a rich symbol of the offering of the whole material and human world to God in Christ. It is a concrete gift to God's work and an appeal for God's forgiveness for the greed infecting our world.^{vi}

This week I talked with a family that told me of their major financial losses in the past six months. Then they said that one silver lining in all this loss is that, given their reduced income, the level of their giving to the church and other ministries now constitutes a genuine tithe. They had been wanting to reach this goal, and now find that it has been reached not by an increase in giving, but by a decrease in income. I was genuinely moved that their instinct in this situation has not been to slash their giving, but rather to maintain their giving and to feel gratified at the new proportionate level of their generosity. Good for them!

In my newsletter column last week I reflected on my own internal response to our troubled economy. As I wrote there, my modest retirement fund has taken a hit, but I am not among those most deeply affected by the economic downturn. Nevertheless, I find myself in

danger of slipping into a hoarding mentality. I sense a certain protective posture taking hold of me. It is as though my instincts towards generosity are now in tension with an unseen opponent – which, of course, they are. The opponent’s name is fear, and greed is its cousin.

I want to re-dedicate myself to the Christian principles of compassion and the sharing of first fruits. I want to be sure that a pervasive climate of need does not cause me to be less generous instead of more. I want to pledge that, where sacrifices must be made, I will weigh honestly and responsibly the priorities which reflect my deepest values. I want to resist the temptation to protective hoarding, to resist the temptation towards greed. And I am confident you want the same.

So, with God’s help, be aware of all that beckons to you. Shape your habits so as to reduce the temptations. Cultivate a generous letting go. Practice sacrificial stewardship. And pray for the grace and peace of God, which are the best possessions of all.

ⁱ Testimony of Chairman Alan Greenspan, “*Federal Reserve Board's semiannual monetary policy report to the Congress*,” before the Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, U.S. Senate, July 16, 2002. (via internet)

ⁱⁱ Phyllis A. Tickle, *Greed*, in *The Seven Deadly Sins Series*, Elda Rotor, editor (Oxford: NY Public Library and OUP, 2005), p. 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 166.

^{iv} Schimmel, p. 166.

^v William S. Stafford, *Disordered Loves: Healing the Seven Deadly Sins* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1994), p. 72.

^{vi} Stafford, p. 73.