

*A sermon given on Sunday, March 8, 2009,
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio
by The Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

***The Seven Deadly Sins:
Part 4 ~ Lust***

Back in the fifth century, Saint Augustine wrote in his *Confessions* about his youthful life and about his concubine. He confided to God, "I had prayed to you for chastity and said, 'Give me chastity and continence, but not yet.' For I was afraid that you would answer my prayer at once and cure me too soon of the disease of lust, which I wanted satisfied, not quelled."

Augustine was, at least, honest!

So was Jimmy Carter. In 1976 he made his own famous confession: "I have looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times." Candidate Carter faced merciless ridicule. In the midst of furor over the interview, then-President Gerald Ford was asked how often he made love. The President responded, "Every chance I get." Though Carter's reflections were deeply biblical, most Americans appeared to believe that Ford had a much more "normal" attitude towards sex.ⁱ

Today is part four in our Lenten series of sermons focusing on the Seven Deadly Sins. So far we have looked at Anger, Envy, and Greed. Yet ahead are Gluttony, Sloth, and Pride. Today we focus on the sin of Lust. I asserted in my introduction three weeks ago that when we say "sin" most people seem to think immediately about sexual misconduct. Indeed, the remarks people have been making to me for the past week incline me to believe that this has been the most eagerly awaited of the seven-part series. The Staff got so carried away with proposed sermon titles to put in the Weekend Email that I had to step in and write the blurb myself. I have been asked many riveting questions, such as, "Will the bulletin this week have a centerfold?" or "So, will you be preaching from personal experience?" (wink, wink, nudge, nudge) I can only assume that this widespread outburst of adolescent humor is attributable either to late-winter tedium or economic anxiety. And to the latter question ("Will you be preaching from personal experience?"), I count myself in honorable company to reply, with Jimmy Carter: Yes, of course. I know all of the seven deadly sins to a greater or lesser extent. And if you are honest, so do you. That's what makes them so deadly – they are all such a basic part of our human existence.

You may have heard on NPR the storyⁱⁱ about a Roman Catholic priest who has tracked and categorized all the confessions he hears according to which of the seven deadly sins underlies the confession. The 95-year-old Jesuit, Fr. Roberto Busa, has been doing this for several decades. Recently the results of his study were published, revealing that the most frequent sin confessed by women is Pride, while the top sin confessed by men is Lust. I want to suggest that, while any good Catholic man knows that Lust is a sin and therefore a worthy item in the confessional stall, nevertheless in contemporary culture a man is conditioned to be proud of his Lust. (Gerald Ford's "every chance I get" illustrating the point.) Therefore, the juicy irony is that a typical man making the sacramental confession of lust is apt to be simultaneously committing the cardinal sin of pride. So, we'll leave all that for three weeks hence when we consider pride, and for now return to lust.

When we speak of greed, gluttony, or lust, in each case we are considering the distortion or misdirection of some normal human desire. Sexual desire as such is not a sin; it is God's invention, and a gift like any other pleasure. The Bible never says that when Adam and Eve begat Cain and begat Abel that they didn't enjoy doing so. (Let's assume they did – why not?) Scripture is not unsympathetic to such desire. [Song of Solomon 7:6-8] *“How fair and pleasant you are, o loved and delectable one! You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its branches.”*

If we define lust simply as desire, we will have to remove it from the list of the seven deadlies. Indeed, in the seven-volume series put out by the New York Public Libraryⁱⁱⁱ, philosopher Simon Blackburn spends the entire volume on lust aiming to rehabilitate its place in human existence. But like the desire for food and the enjoyment of possessions, sexual desire can be taken out of its God-given context of love, the part substituting for the whole. Eating gone wrong is gluttony. Possessing gone wrong is greed. Loving gone wrong is lust. The sin of lust is the sin of love-gone-wrong. Or, as in the title of William Stafford's book to which I am so indebted, *Disordered Loves*^{iv}, lust is “disordered love.” Now, if lust is love-gone-wrong, what is love gone right? If we are made in God's image, and by extension our love should be a reflection of God's love, then what is God's love like?

First, ***God's love seeks the good of the beloved.*** In all the great stories of Scripture, God hears the cries of the people, and comes in love to make them whole. God's love seeks justice and freedom for those whom God loves. It gives life and renewal to the beloved.

Second, ***God's love demands faithfulness from the beloved.*** God makes a covenant, an agreement with the chosen people. And what is the first term of that covenant? Do you remember the first of the Ten Commandments? *You shall have no other gods but me.* God's union with the people of God tolerates no rivals. This love is exclusive and expects the beloved to forsake all others.

Third, ***God's love is not fickle or temporary.*** The faithfulness God demands is likewise returned. God kept that covenant with Israel. God's certain, constant love persevered, even through times when the chosen people themselves were not faithful. God's love is serious and committed.

So: benevolent; exclusive; enduring.

Surprisingly, perhaps, and happily, secular sources confirm these same essential characteristics of love. Psychologist Solomon Schimmel turns to the sonnets of Shakespeare to delineate the psychological characteristics of love and lust. On lust, he cites Sonnet 129:

*Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and, till action, lust
Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
Enjoyed no sooner, but despised straight; ...
Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait.*

Lust, as described by Shakespeare, is fleeting, fickle, and egocentric. Contrast this with love, for which Schimmel cites Sonnet 116:

*[Love] ... is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken; ...*

*Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.*

Love is portrayed as enduring, steady, and serving the other.^v

So Scripture, literature, and psychology point us in the same direction. Love seeks the good of the other; it demands faithfulness; it is enduring, long-lasting. If that is the definition of love, and if lust is disordered love, then lust, by definition, is self-centered, seeking not the good of a beloved; is not faithful or committed to the other; and does not endure.

How far, then, do we fall from the mark?

Think for a moment of the casual sexuality portrayed as the cultural norm in so much of our advertising and entertainment – the sex which seems almost inevitably to accompany a chance physical attraction, or togetherness in the workplace, or an amiable dinner date. Consider such encounters in the light of our description of love: *Does this love seek the good of the beloved? Does it expect to be enduring and committed?* Probably not. Although the encounter itself may be pleasant, it actually only calls into higher relief the disconnection and loneliness of the individuals. It does not speak about the connection of togetherness; it speaks about the yearning of isolation. The generosity and creativity of love are absent in such consummated lust. Furthermore, the degradation of women which continues to characterize so much of sexualized advertising and entertainment cannot be ignored. It is denigrating, dehumanizing, and is surely not of God.

Or think for a moment about the nature of pornography, the universal availability of which has been termed “a dubious miracle of modern technology.”^{vi} The degradation which is implicit in the genre can scarcely remain harmless. And such fantasy, if nurtured, is likely to affect one’s actual relationships as the fantasies either incorporate or replace the human relationships God has given us. We are told by addicts that in the end it is without even the pleasure one seeks to get from it. God’s gift of erotic love desires a true “other” to unite with; but here there is no other, except perhaps those who are exploited in its production. This is not love, but sterile, empty, and potentially abusive lust.^{vii}

It is the way of sin, as I have suggested before, that we comfort ourselves in knowing that there is someone else who is a worse sinner than I, and therefore I am off the hook. But listen: the fact that my level of lust or yours may not rise to the level of the examples I have cited – may not yet qualify for the cinematic x-rating – is surely beside the point. Jesus was clear (as Jimmy Carter understood) that whether it is acted upon or whether it remains hidden in our hearts, our own lust misses the mark of God’s love. It does not seek the well-being of a beloved. It does not pledge faithfulness. It is not meant to last.

What then can we do, we who are all sinners by nature? We, none of whom are qualified to “cast the first stone” of judgment. What is the remedy for our own sinful disposition of the heart?

First, we are to *measure constantly our own relationships*, affections, and desires, against the qualities of love which we have just spent some time describing. We have considered the characteristics of love versus lust with some clarity. Recognizing that our lived experiences are not always so black and white, the constant taking stock of our own relations and yearnings is our assignment.

Second, as we have learned from those in 12-step programs, we face our sins only by **acknowledging the need for a higher power**, one day at a time. In the church we claim this power as God's grace. We affirm that with lust, as with any of our broken ways, it is only by seeking out and claiming God's grace that we are healed. So part of the remedy for lust (and any brokenness) is to abandon the willful denial that puts our sexual lives (or any part of our lives) in a little compartment that we might wish to hide from God. Rather, we confess our sin to God. The declaration of forgiveness is neither a cure-all nor a guarantee that we will not find a way to take our "clean slate" and write some new sin upon it. But when we confess and then feel in the depths of our soul that we are forgiven, it provides (by God's grace) a new spirit by which to resist the lure of sin. True repentance with a genuine sense of forgiveness issues in a renewed intention to strive for God's will.

This leads us to the final remedy: we must admit that there is some capacity in the human mind to **direct our imagination**. "Thought is the rudder of life," says theologian Peter Kreeft, quoting from poet Samuel Smiles:

Sow a thought, reap an act.

Sow an act, reap a habit.

Sow a habit, reap a character.

Sow a character, reap a destiny.^{viii}

In other words, "what one cultivates in one's heart [and mind] is usually what will grow."^{ix} There is no shortage of sexual imagery around us upon which to dwell. Much of it, perhaps most of it, will not stand up to the standard of God's love as we have defined it. But we do not have to allow that to define the images of sex and love that shape our own imagination and desire. As Jonathan Edwards put it, "he could not keep birds from flying over his head, but he did not have to let them build nests in his hair!"^x

Tend to your imagination. If images come to you that are manipulative or demeaning, argue with them. Rebuke them, as Jesus does Peter in today's Gospel. And aim consciously to replace them. Think about what faithfulness looks like. Think about love that seeks the good of the other. Think about people that you know who have modeled faithfulness. Fill your mind with what you would wish to be, and maybe – not by your effort but by God's grace – that is what you will become.

Pray for that perfect union of love and desire. Pray that our own love might look more and more like God's.

ⁱ Cf. John Updike's essay, "Lust," in *Deadly Sins*, Thomas Pynchon et al (NY: Wm. Morrow & Co., Inc., 1993), p. 44.

ⁱⁱ As heard on National Public Radio's "Weekend Edition," Feb. 21, 2009.

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

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

^v Shakespeare as considered by Solomon Schimmel in *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 121-122.

^{vi} Stafford, p. 45.

^{vii} Stafford, p. 47.

^{viii} Peter Kreeft, *Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom for Modern Moral Confusion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), p. 169.

^{ix} Stafford, p. 53.

^x Stafford, p. 53.