

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

***The Seven Deadly Sins:
Part 5 ~ Gluttony***

Certain ancient Romans, having partaken of a delicious feast, would retire to a special “vomitorium” where they could disgorge their meal, so as to begin a second or third round. They were enjoying the meal way too much to want to quit.ⁱ Maybe it was this sort of extreme gluttony which had made the ancient Hebrews inclined towards extreme measures in response. In that ever-applicable Book of Deuteronomy, we are told that “if someone has a stubborn and rebellious son ... his father and mother shall ... say to the elders of his town, ‘This son of ours is ... a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”ⁱⁱ Yikes.

Today is the fifth in our series of Sundays looking at the church’s traditional Seven Deadly Sins. Having considered anger, envy, greed, and lust, with sloth and pride yet on the horizon, we turn our attention today to the sin of gluttony. Setting aside the extreme of repulsive Roman excess, most of us probably have a hard time thinking of gluttony as being all that serious. Unlike anger or envy, gluttony seems like a pretty harmless sin. What’s it doing on the top-seven hit list anyway? What harm is really done by a little pigging out?

So we need to say at the outset that the sin of gluttony is not about a little pigging out. I have reminded you each week that, at its deepest level, sin is not about behavior or misbehavior. 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. In the case of what we might call the sins of appetite – greed, lust, and gluttony – in each instance we are speaking of the distortion or misdirection of a natural human desire. Possessing gone wrong is greed. Love gone wrong is lust. Eating gone wrong is gluttony. Like sexual desire and the desire for possessions, the enjoyment of food can be taken out of its God-given context. So, what is its God-given context? What is the purpose of eating, in God’s plan for us?

First, God *gives us food for nourishment*. It’s a miraculous thing, when you think about it. How the gifts of sun, water, soil, and air combine to bring forth grain. How the grain is ground to flour, which is transformed to bread. And as I eat, by the miracle inside of me, that sun, water, soil, air, grain, flour and bread, are turned into ... me! When at the end of the day our bodies are tired, our spirits irritable or weary from stress, it is food that works its magic. It is food that strengthens our body and renews our spirit. God gives us food for nourishment.

Second, God *gives us food to bind us to one another*. Mind you, we are rapidly losing this social context of eating. With our fast-food fetish and microwave morsels, the mealtime is not always the bonding, communal activity it has always been. But still, we do know that in eating together we draw closer to one another. Family and friends are bound together by a shared table. It is hard to imagine any truly deep friendship that does not involve at least occasional shared meals. In business and diplomacy and who-knows-what, we arrive at a common vision by sharing food at a common table. Food draws us together.

And then there is its third function. God *gives us food for pleasure*. This was what worried the ancients so much. Because it was pleasant, they feared excess. This is the classic

understanding of gluttony: too much! To eat too much was to put food in the place of God. St. Paul said, “Their end is destruction whose god is the belly.”ⁱⁱⁱ Your god was your belly. And the ancients assumed that if you were eating too much, you were bound to be drinking too much as well. Which meant that one sin would lead to another. Lot ate and drank too much, and then slept with his own daughters. Herod ate and drank too much, and then was persuaded to behead John the Baptist. Gluttony was a ‘slippery slope’ sin, leading inevitably, they thought, towards other sins. The devoutly religious of centuries past were so anxious not to be gluttonous, that they often set aside the pleasures of eating altogether. St. Francis of Assisi is said to have used ashes as a spice with which he sprinkled his food so it wouldn’t taste too good.^{iv} (Try that in your salt shaker for Lent!)

But surely this concern about gluttony as excess was itself excessive. Scriptures, after all, are full of stories in both the Old Testament and the New featuring feasts of celebration which are joyous and not debauched. Did not Jesus himself perform his first miracle at a wedding feast in Cana, replenishing the dwindling supply of wine?

Let’s suggest that gluttony is both “excessive” and “obsessive.” We are not speaking of occasional over-indulgence. We are speaking of a yearning which becomes a driving force, a pre-occupation, an organizing principle of our life. As someone has said, “Do you eat to live, or do you live to eat?”

All of this is to say that there is eating and drinking that includes God, and there is eating and drinking that excludes God. The difference is determined not so much by the quantity as by the mindset. When Esau came home from the fields he was so greedy for a quick bowl of stew that he sold his God-given birthright on the spot to get it. We don’t know that it was a huge serving, but it was gluttony nonetheless. On the other hand, when the Prodigal Son came home, his father laid out a feast fit for a king. Probably everyone ate and drank more than they needed that day, but it was surely not gluttony. It was an act of thanksgiving. If, as today’s Gospel lesson suggests, one’s body can be a temple, then there will be in our temple both fasts and feasts, all dedicated to God with gratitude.

For nourishment, for the forging of community, and even for pleasure: eat what you need, enjoy what you eat, and remember it to be a gift of God. Remember to say thank you.

Now: I am imagining that there are a good many of us here who are not feeling that the series this week has had as much to say to us as prior weeks. Anger we know. Envy we confess. Greed, at some level, we own up to. And lust, well, at the very least, with Jimmy Carter, we’ve had lust in our heart. But gluttony simply has not been our pitfall. If that is so for you, I have one more thing to say. And it begins with a story.

The writer Francine Prose went to a poetry reading. After the reading, the host invited everyone to adjourn downstairs to have some beer and oysters. Francine and her husband helped themselves to a beer, and each of them had what they imagined to be their share of oysters from the platter. Then they heard someone exclaim, “They’ve eaten *all* the oysters.” They turned to see that the tub of ice which they’d assumed to be full of more oysters contained, in fact, only more beer. They had not eaten a huge number of oysters, but they had consumed far more than their proportionate share. They left the party quickly. Ms. Prose cites the episode as she reflects on gluttony:

While it may seem that gluttony is a personal crime that involves only the self, the introduction of a situation in which there is a limited food supply – as there is every

moment, if we consider our planet to be such a situation – makes gluttony seem more serious: a sin against one’s fellow human beings and against humanity in general.^v In other words, surely gluttony is not defined only by how much I am eating. It must also be defined by how much others are not. What is that figure? 20% of the world’s population gets 80% of the world’s food? Whatever the precise statistic, it’s a sin, surely, a sin of collective gluttony. Here are a few numbers that we do know. Every day 30,000 people die of starvation. That’s 1,250 people every hour. That’s 20 people every minute. That’s one person every three seconds.^{vi} Dietrich Bonhoeffer declared, “To allow the hungry man to remain hungry would be blasphemy against God and one’s neighbor, for what is nearest to God is precisely the need of one’s neighbor.”^{vii}

We have heard over and over again that the problem is not production, the problem is not lack of food. Hunger is rather a political problem, one of will and determination, and some willingness to sacrifice. Hunger is before us globally, before us domestically, before us locally. One political leader put it this way:

Malnourishment is a national concern because we are a nation that cares about its people, [and] ... there is a moral imperative. We are the world’s richest nation. We are the best-educated nation. We have an agricultural abundance that ranks as a miracle of the modern world. This Nation cannot long continue to live with its conscience if millions of its own people are unable to get an adequate diet.^{viii}

That was 40 years ago – President Richard Nixon speaking in December 1969 words which are just as true today.

More recently, two political adversaries who turn out to be good friends published a book together on a matter about which both are passionate. Some three years ago senators Bob Dole and George McGovern published *Ending Hunger Now: A Challenge to Persons of Faith*. In it they commend the global hunger initiatives that are represented in the Millenium Development Goals. They encourage all Americans to support portions of the national budget which provide for hunger relief, at home and abroad. They argue that these must continue even in times of budget deficits. They urge support of multinational agencies like UNICEF. And they suggest that every person of faith should not only be personally charitable, but also supportive of a just social order. “It is evident that hunger in the United States and throughout the world requires more than random acts of kindness. However well-intended, [there are] limits to a society based simply on charity rather than on justice. The right to eat in a world overflowing with God’s abundant food ought not to be dependent on random kindness or fortuitous benevolence.”^{ix} “Faith-based charity provides crumbs from the table; faith-based justice offers a place at the table.”^x

The Heights Emergency Food Center bins in our narthex await not just your occasional afterthought, but your disciplined sacrifice. The Apostleship Commission’s Action Groups for poverty, hunger, and the Millenium Development Goals await your response to their various announcements. Oxfam, or Bread for the World, or the hunger action alliance of your choice awaits your support for change initiatives.^{xi}

Our Lenten series on the Seven Deadly Sins has invited mostly personal introspection, self-examination, and individual devotion. But gluttony invites our communal gaze as well. For as long as others are hungry, those of us with more than enough cannot avoid judgment.

The miraculous Feeding of the Multitudes is a story told in all four gospels.^{xii} Loaves and fishes were produced, yea even more than enough. Some biblical commentators have suggested that the true miracle was not that Jesus performed a magic trick, but that he managed

to get a group of people to share generously with one another, so that everyone had enough. We don't know for sure how it happened. We do know what Jesus said when the disciples approached Jesus to report that the huge crowd was getting hungry. Jesus said to the disciples, "You give them something to eat."

Jesus says to us, "You give them something to eat."

ⁱ As recounted in Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 157.

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 21:18-21

ⁱⁱⁱ Philippians 3:19

^{iv} As reported by Fancine Prose in *Gluttony*, in *The Seven Deadly Sins Series*, Elda Rotor, editor (Oxford: NY Public Library and OUP, 2005), p. 28.

^v Prose, p. 32.

^{vi} Bob Dole, George McGovern, Donald Messer, *Ending Hunger Now* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 2.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 12.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 52.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 88.

^x *Ibid.*, p. 89.

^{xi} www.bread.org, or www.oxfamamerica.org

^{xii} Mt 14:13-21, Mk 6:32-44, Lk 9:12-17, John 6:5-13