

*A sermon given on Sunday, March 29, 2009,  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,  
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

***The Seven Deadly Sins:  
Part 7 ~ Pride***

I want to thank you for the remarkable level of interest that you have displayed in the sermon series which we conclude today examining the Seven Deadly Sins. I am told that sin has been the topic of discussion at dinner tables, workplaces, and even cocktail parties these past six weeks. To hear this is, of course, gratifying. However, I must chastise you for telling me, since by doing so you have led the preacher temptingly towards the sin of pride.

By way of antidote, I repeat the acknowledgement with which I began the series, and that is my indebtedness to several works as source and inspiration for my words of synthesis, reflection, and application over these past weeks: the Rev. William Stafford's 1994 book entitled *Disordered Loves: Healing the Seven Deadly Sins*<sup>i</sup>; Professor Solomon Schimmel's 1997 work, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology*<sup>ii</sup>; The Oxford University Press's seven-book series published in 2005<sup>iii</sup>, with one title on each sin, each by a different contemporary author. And finally, psychologist Karl Menninger's dated but seminal book, *Whatever Became of Sin?*<sup>iv</sup>

Consider the following. The New York *Daily News* runs an article headlined, "Sin Is In: Chances to behave badly abound this summer. Here's where to look for them." In the article the authors assert, "vanity's just plain healthy as far as we're concerned," and they go on to recommend various spas that will guarantee that "your mirror, mirror on the wall has never seen a more beautiful babe."<sup>v</sup> Against such an invitational approach to pride, or perhaps commenting upon it, one analyst has written that "given our national plague of entitlement combined with our go-it-alone approach to the world, I'd say we're full of ourselves ... bedeviled with narcissists, egomaniacs and spoiled brats."<sup>vi</sup> So there it is: our topic today is pride.

I began our series with the sin of anger, and I said at the time that anger is the only sin which can also be a virtue – righteous anger. Perhaps that was not entirely accurate. Pride, in a certain meaning of the word, can also be a good and healthy thing. So let's begin by saying what we do *not* mean by the sin of pride.

As human beings, we were created by God with a self-awareness, and with a constellation of gifts and blessings. God would have us possess a healthy joy and gratitude about this blessed existence. At this past Wednesday's observance of the Feast of the Annunciation, we were reminded again how Mary, the mother of our Lord, responded to the angel Gabriel. She proclaimed, "Behold, all generations will call me blessed!" This was not the voice of self-centered arrogance. This was the voice of gratitude and wonder at the generous greatness of God.

When you and I express "pride" at something that we have done – something that we have made, or drawn, or cooked, or worked towards, or when we express joy at the accomplishment of a child, grandchild, friend – this is not necessarily a failure of humility. More likely it is a healthy word of gratitude and joy at the marvel of our existence. The sin of pride is something different – not grateful self-esteem or self-confidence, but rather self-absorption, self-centeredness, vanity, hubris, arrogance, narcissism. This is the sort of pride the church has labeled sinful. And to paraphrase the judge, it may be hard to define, but we're apt to know it when we see it.

Pride has been categorized and sliced in a variety of ways. For today, let's consider three sorts of pride, as described by Karl Menninger: the pride of attention, the pride of power, and the pride of virtue.<sup>vii</sup>

The **pride of attention** is virtually a way of life for many of us, so natural that we perhaps cannot even see that we are doing it. It's the striving always to hold the center of attention, our own and that of others. This may be done by crafting the way we look – body building or cosmetic surgery assuring just the right appearance. Or we may pick a vocation that puts us in the spotlight. Anything from police work to performing arts to the priesthood (!) can be chosen as a way to get attention and ego gratification.

But the pride of narcissism goes beyond external appearances or jobs. It affects our relationships with other people. Nothing outside the self-centered person really matters, except to the extent that it affects that person. He sees himself as the center of all reality, the “belly button of the world,” as the Russians say. Friendships and relationships are entered into and valued only to the extent that they are useful to the prideful person. “Such people do not have much interest in anyone else. They are apt to be touchy, suspicious, and susceptible to distraction by new objects [or people] which gratify their narcissism.”<sup>viii</sup> This pride of attention is a disposition of the heart contrary to the foundational scriptural injunction: to love your neighbor as yourself. You cannot love your neighbor if you have not gotten beyond yourself.

Next, we name **the pride of power**. Here we relate to others not only as mirrors of our greatness, but as beings subservient to us. Notorious examples of this pride in the last century include such tyrants as Hitler and Stalin, who moved masses of people wherever they wanted, to do whatever they directed, and disposed of them however they chose. For the proud despot, one's own truth is absolute. One's own will tolerates no opposition. And this, of course, happens not only on the global stage but equally with the sinfully proud in our own homes, schools, workplaces. The tyrant at home holds absolute control. Spouse and children must submit in mute and unquestioning obedience. In the school, the self-centered athletics coach is not really interested in the young people and their development. He sees the team only as pawns in the quest for his own glory – a fact painfully obvious to the young people who endure his profane harangues and fury when they lose.

Parents and teachers and others in positions of power need to be confident in their own authority. But that confidence must leave them free to acknowledge mistakes, and it must enable them to give those in their power the same freedom, to err and to grow. Some have called this “aristocratic pride”<sup>ix</sup>, and a subset of this pride includes such communal sins as racism, sexism, and heterosexism. In each, the normative superiority assumed by one group gives it a rationalization for the exercise of restrictive power over the other. The pride of power is not able to give the gift of freedom.

Pride of attention. Pride of power. And the third sort of pride, **the pride of virtue**. This one is a spiritual pride. It can show up in two seemingly opposite ways. Some atheists are proud in this way. Having arrived at their convictions by serious thought, their assumption is that they are more clever than those who have chosen to have faith. Implicit is a refusal to acknowledge any limitations on their intellectual capacity. Yet how can the human intellect categorically deny the existence of something which is by definition greater than itself, and therefore incomprehensible? For a created being categorically to deny the existence of a Creator is a pride of virtue.

This pride can be equally the sin of religious people. It has been said that Creeds make fine weapons. Many have presumed to have God's will and God's blessing on their side, and have used this as an excuse for atrocities against fellow humans. We know the litany: the Crusades, the Inquisition, bloodshed in the Holy Land and Northern Ireland. We have seen this

trail of tears, which continues in the recent framing of East/West cultural battles as religious wars, with God claimed unequivocally by some on each side.

In more personal, more familiar ways, each of us is prone to this pride of virtue. There is the story of a man who congratulated his pastor every week on a fine sermon. “You really told it to them today, Pastor,” he would say. “Yeah, you really blasted them!” Never did it occur to the man that something in the preacher’s sermon might have had any bearing on himself or his own life. The harder the preacher came down on sin, the better ... but the sin, of course, was never his. “Boy, I hope they took that one to heart, preacher!” Then one winter weekend, a blizzard hit, and that man, who lived next door to the church, was the only one at church. The pastor preached a fine sermon to his one-man congregation, feeling free to point out just what he knew the man needed to hear, with a high degree of specificity. “Boy, you really told them this morning, Rev!” said the man at the door. “It’s just too bad weren’t none of them here to listen to it!”

The pride of virtue denies guilt, or if it cannot avoid it, is too proud to ask God for forgiveness. “Thank you, Lord, that I am not like those others,” said the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable. How often we say some version of the same thing.

Pride in all its forms, whether pride of attention, pride of power, or pride of virtue, is a deadly sin because it marks a deep flaw in our relationship with God. It is a refusal to live as a dependent creature of God. Thus, the first and most fundamental remedy to pride is the acceptance of our utter dependence on God. This is hard for us. Being dependent goes against our instinct, perhaps, and certainly against our American culture. We view it as demeaning. It need not be so.

As followers of Christ, we see in him a model of dependence which is in no way demeaning. Jesus constantly acknowledged that all he had received was from the Father. That was how he lived and how he died: dependent. Pride of attention? Of course, he spent his ministry as the center of attention, but he did not scramble for it. Pride of power? We assert that he had more than anyone who has ever lived, but he did not lord it over anyone. Pride of virtue? His virtue, we claim, was unmatched, yet he was never spiritually arrogant. Saint Paul summed it up in his famous words from Philippians: *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.* [Phil 2:5-11]

Perhaps the days in which we are living are reminding some of us once more of the fact of our dependence upon God. We live as best we can by our labors and by the wisdom God grants us. But in the end, we and our world are in God’s hands. William Stafford has this final word about pride: “The most effective means out of pride into reality, I think, are not the disciplines one chooses but the humiliations God sends.”<sup>x</sup> This is true for us individually, and nationally. We can fight against pride or vanity for a very long time, often to little effect. But it is the unexpected or undesired events in our lives that bring us to our knees. It is a sudden illness, the loss of a job or of economic security, or an undeniable failure – these are the things that finally will not allow our bubble of pride to go unpopped.

We could debate to no fruitful end the question of whether God sends such events upon us, or whether they are the random result of a broken world. Some of each, is my bet. In either case, the point is that such experiences break us of our vanity, our pride of power, our spiritual arrogance. But there is no need to wait for those experiences to happen before acknowledging

our dependence on God. We do best to recognize from the start that we are but caretakers, stewards in the vineyard of the Master.

The pride of attention and self-centeredness cannot stand when we acknowledge that the true center is God, who calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The pride of power cannot stand when we remember our Lord Jesus, who turned power on its head, and said that the greatest of all is the one who serves.

The pride of virtue cannot stand, when we heed God's Word, which reminds us that "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." [I John 1:8]

Never forget. Never forget your complete and utter dependence on God. Never forget, either, that whatever your condition, God loves you. Whatever your sins, be they anger or envy; greed, lust, or gluttony; sloth or pride – God is longing to forgive them. God has seen it all before, and God wants nothing more than for you and for me to come on home, and keep on trying.

"Return to me with all your heart," says the Lord. So we heard in our liturgy on Ash Wednesday, as Lent began. And so I say to you again on this last regular Sunday in Lent: "Return to the Lord, your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

I, for one, am glad to hear it. For all my own pride, sloth, gluttony, lust, greed, envy, and anger ... I need to know that God still wants me back. And now, for Lent and always, I suppose it's up to me to let God know that I want to come.

May we join in marking our Lenten contemplations on the Seven Deadly Sins, bending the knee of our heart, and remaining seated, sing together: [Hymn 693]

*Just as I am, without one plea,  
but that thy blood was shed for me,  
and that thou bidd'st me come to thee,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

*Just as I am: thou wilt receive;  
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve,  
Because thy promise I believe,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

*Just as I am, though tossed about  
with many a conflict, many a doubt;  
fightings and fears within, without,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

*Just as I am, of thy great love  
The breadth, length, depth, and height to prove,  
Here for a season, then above:  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

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<sup>i</sup> William S. Stafford, *Disordered Loves: Healing the Seven Deadly Sins* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1994).

<sup>ii</sup> Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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

<sup>iv</sup> Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1973).

<sup>v</sup> Daily News (New York), June 10, 2004, as quoted by Michael Eric Dyson in *Pride*, a volume of *The Seven Deadly Sins Series*, p. 5.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>vii</sup> Menninger, p. 135.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136-137.

<sup>ix</sup> Schimmel, p. 38.

<sup>x</sup> Stafford, p. 129.