

Seven sins and what to do about them

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday in Lent, March 1, 2015.

For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

Mark 8: 36

This Lenten season emphasizes spiritual growth by developing personal self-discipline. It is about the self-examination and self-denial. It is about repentance and working to turn our lives around. Because of our tendency to resist change, it is all the more important to break out of the cycle of bad habits that require considerable self-discipline.

A good practice of discipline for all of us this Lent is to identify behaviors that lead to sin. You may have heard of the classic list of the seven deadly sins. They are sloth, anger, lust, vanity, avarice, gluttony, and envy. An easy way to remember them is that they form the acronym "salvage."

Taken in that order, the first of the seven deadly sins is sloth. Sloth is any form of laziness and indolence. Slothfulness consumes our time and wastes our resources. Slothful people accomplish very little of anything. They are bored and don't care about what they are doing and it shows. They take no pride in doing anything and refuse to take responsibility for themselves. Overcoming slothfulness requires a change of attitude and the ability to organize our priorities and not put them off. This includes allowing time for rest and relaxation. The goal is to be vital, caring, and sensitive enough to find meaning in who we are and what we do.

The second of the deadly sins is anger. We all get angry from time to time. When our anger is out of control, it's deadly. When we over react and aim our devastating anger at someone there is little of any regard for their feelings. When kind of damage is done, it is difficult to repair. When buried and repressed, anger manifests itself in depression. Righteous anger can be a way of confronting what is wrong and unjust. Jesus became angry with the moneychangers and threw them out of the temple. Those in the suffrage movement were angry that women were denied the right to vote. Civil rights leaders were angry over the treatment of African Americans as second-class citizens and worked to guarantee all citizens the basic rights to decent housing, public education, the right to vote and access to public accommodations. Child abuse is being confronted and measures are in place to protect them. When channeled in healthy ways, anger confronts all that is wrong and unjust, but when our anger is out of control, it's destructive. To over react and aim anger at someone is disregard their self-worth.

The third of the deadly sins is Lust. Lustful urges go way beyond normal physical attraction to someone. Lust is not about love; it the inappropriate response to an attraction. When lust is disassociated from caring for another, it treats a person as an object to be used rather than to be loved. Lust cheapens what otherwise is a healthy way to express our love for someone. Promiscuity is not only immoral it is destructive for all involved. In light of this, monogamous committed relationships make a great deal of sense.

The fourth one is vanity. Vanity is pride carried to excess. All of us require a certain healthy pride and self-esteem in order to function. When love and respect for our selves is lifted above all else, it becomes disproportionate. We were created to love God and delight in one another and in the world we have been given. When healthy love for self becomes an inordinate fixation on self, it results in arrogance. Vanity and excessive pride creates a gap between God and us and anything that separates us from God is the very definition of sin.

The fifth one is avarice. Avarice is the excessive and insatiable desire for gaining and possessing wealth, material things and power. Avarice corrupts the created world and causes us to want everything for ourselves. The reality is that the more things we possess, the more they possess us. Avarice and greed loves things and uses people instead of the other way around.

The sixth one is gluttony. Gluttony is the consumption of more food and drink than is healthy for us, corrupting both body and soul. When our normal intake of food and drink is taken to the extreme and becomes an end in itself, it results in an eating disorder and alcoholism. A good cure for excessive self-indulgence is the disciplined and prayerful practice of fasting and self-denial. Fasting is abstaining from things that are not good for us and requires discipline and self-control. Abstinence from food

or drink has both physical and spiritual benefits. To get beyond hunger pangs and thirst cravings is to gain control over our life and come to an awareness of the things of the spirit.

The last of the deadly sins is envy. We can have a healthy admiration for something but when it becomes excessive, envy and coveting is dangerous. It is all right to admire something that belongs to someone else, but taken to the extreme it leads to resenting what belongs to others. Rooted in insecurity and jealousy, envy and covetousness resents the good fortunes of others and hatred, it is murderous to the spirit.

There is no better time than the present to work on these seven deadly sins of sloth, avarice, lust, vanity, anger, gluttony, and envy. That this list forms the acronym "salvage" reminds us that in Christ we are saved from the powers that waste our human spirit. The power of Christ's love salvages us from all that is wrong, violent, unloving, and false and brings forth in us all that is right, loving, and true. Make this Lenten season count by working on the sins that deaden the spirit and emphasize the classic seven cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, temperance, faith, hope and love. Make those virtues part of your life even if they can't be put into in an acronym.

Saint Paul assures us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. The sins over which we have control are those that assault us from within. It is all a matter of taking charge of our life by assuming responsibility for our behavior and working on things of the spirit that bring inner peace.