

**“Gluttony and Greed:  
The Seven Deadly Sins Come Home for the Holidays”**

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The holiday season is supposed to be a fun and festive time, full of good cheer and caroling, tinsel and lights and mistletoe, eggnog and warm fires. This is supposed to be a time for getting together with family and friends, enjoying those dear and deep connections. And I absolutely hope for every one of those blessings for each and every one of you.

Realistically, though, is this not also one of the most stressful times of the year? There’s a lot to *do*: writing cards and letters, getting the tree put up and decorated, and then all the shopping and cooking and wrapping and everything. It can be so exhausting!

This is also the time when many of us struggle with wanting more than we know is good for us—more food, more stuff. This is the season when the plates of cookies come out, the pies, the fudge—all this rich food, and for some of us it really is a struggle to be good to our bodies and eat in a way that’s healthy for us.

And we’re bombarded even more than usual with advertisements to buy things of every kind—the season when we are practically required to think about all the things we want and don’t have so that our families and our dear friends

can come up with gifts that will please us.  
This is a time when being content with what we have  
is kind of hard on our loved ones  
trying to get through their shopping lists!

So it seemed to me like an awfully good time  
to come back to the series of services we've been doing  
on the Seven Deadly Sins.  
Because what we are struggling with during the holidays  
must have *something* to do with the ancient sins of gluttony and greed.  
For a few months now,  
we've been looking at the tradition of the Seven Deadly Sins  
with a liberal lens, seeing what's there for us,  
what we can learn from that ancient wisdom  
and what we need to revise  
to be true to our own wisdom and experience.

Let's take gluttony first.  
I'm guessing that most of us, when we hear the word *gluttony*,  
imagine someone eating a huge amount of food.  
But actually, the early Christians who got the whole  
Seven Deadly Sins tradition going in the first place.  
said the sin of gluttony isn't about how much you actually eat,  
but rather how much you think about eating!  
They said, it's a sin to spend too much time  
and thought and effort on what we eat,  
because it distracts the mind too much from holy things.<sup>1</sup>  
The sin is *thinking too much* about food.

And here I have to say, I don't buy it!  
Up to this point in our sermon series I personally have found  
a great deal of wisdom in the Seven Deadly Sins tradition.  
But I have to confess, this idea that it's wrong to think a lot

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<sup>1</sup> See Francine Prose, *Gluttony* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 3; also  
[http://www.evagrius.net/articles.php?article\\_id=6](http://www.evagrius.net/articles.php?article_id=6).

about food and spend a lot of time on it—  
I just don't believe it.  
Has anyone here seen the movie *Big Night*?  
It's about these two brothers,  
Italian immigrants living in New Jersey in the 1950s,  
trying to run an authentic Italian restaurant  
in a culture that just wants spaghetti and meatballs.  
One of the brothers is the chef; the other is the manager.  
The manager is always trying to get his brother to dumb down  
his cooking for the Americans who don't know any better.  
They don't "get" risotto.  
They have no clue what real Italian food is like.  
But this brother who cooks—he cooks like an angel.  
The food he makes is perfect. It's sublime.  
It's like a gift from heaven. It's his art.  
He is an artist as much as any painter or poet or musician.  
The world is better because his food is in it.

That might sound a little over the top,  
but it touches something I really believe in.  
I love to cook, too. I do see cooking as an art—  
which I practice imperfectly—  
and I really do feel that good food deserves our respect  
and appreciation. I think it is worth taking the time  
to create something that is beautiful to all the senses.  
I actually think it's a sin to eat really, really good food  
and not appreciate it.  
It would be like if you went to see a portrait by Rembrandt  
and you just shrugged your shoulders and said,  
"Yeah, yeah, another Dutch master—been there, seen that."  
To me, that is a sin—to be in the presence of sublime beauty  
of *any* kind, and not to care and honor it.

So, for me, the ancient Christian tradition  
really got it wrong on gluttony.

I don't think the care and thought we put into our food is a problem.  
But I do think they were on to *something*  
when they pointed to food and eating as ethical and spiritual matters.  
So many of us today feel guilt about what we eat  
and how our bodies look.

We say a dessert is "sinfully delicious,"  
or if we eat more than we meant to, we say we were "bad."  
Some of us may be struggling with illnesses around food,  
like eating disorders or addictions.

This is a huge topic, and we don't have time to do justice to it today,  
but for now I just want to say  
how much I wish we all could find peace with our own bodies.

I wish we could all be guided  
simply by what our body needs to be healthy  
and what our taste buds want to enjoy,  
and know that whether or not we are model-skinny,  
we are all beautiful.

I know that is true just by looking at you.

I really don't think the amount we eat  
has anything to do with sin.

For us in this country at this moment,  
here's what I think the real sins are around food and eating:  
I think it's a sin to ignore our neighbors who are hungry.  
There's no shame in going through hard times and needing help.  
And those of us who can help need to step up and *give* help,  
as so many of you do richly and often.

I also think it's a sin to ignore the impact of our food choices  
on the planet. Or not even a sin, exactly—  
these are both really questions of mindfulness,  
challenging ourselves to open our eyes  
and pay attention to what we're doing  
and what's happening on our earth.

We are all so lucky to have access to information  
about sustainable eating, and many of us have made choices

to change how we eat so that we're living more lightly on the earth.

But, of course, lots of things get in the way  
of our compassion and our mindfulness.

One of those things is the second  
of our two Deadly Sins of the day: *greed*.

I think of the story of Kosiya that we heard earlier.

At first I thought his problem had to do with food.

He sure did seem to be obsessed with that rice porridge.

But then I realized, the issue wasn't food at all; it was money,  
or rather, this obsessive greedy need to hoard as much as he could  
and not share with *anyone* if he could help it.

That episode when he goes to his assistant's house is so ridiculous—  
he really wants to have some of that yummy rice porridge,  
but he decides not to eat anything

because he doesn't want to have to owe them later!

And it gets even worse

when he decides he's *got* to have some porridge,

but he doesn't even want to make it at home

for fear that someone might smell it and he'd have to share.

This poor guy.

In a way I get it.

He's very fearful.

Kosiya's story reminds me of a little scene I witnessed last summer  
back when my husband John and I still had ducks in our back yard.

John is a real softie when it comes to little creatures.

Every day he'd put out birdseed for them, and not just a little—a *lot!*

He'd put out a couple of scoops in this trough

probably twice a day or more, as much as they could eat.

But the ducks didn't quite catch on

that there really was enough for everyone.

When they ate it was so urgent, like they might die

if they didn't choke down as much as they could in 30 seconds!

One day there was this one lady duck

who kept snapping at the other ducks who were trying to eat.  
She actually stepped into the trough and stood there  
and tried to drive away all the other ducks,  
sticking out her neck and nipping at them.  
Only the whole thing was so ridiculous—  
she used so much energy driving the other ducks away,  
she barely got to eat anything herself!  
And it was sad, really, because she didn't realize  
we really would keep putting out enough for everyone.  
This is what greed looks like in action.

The traditional Christian understanding says greed is a selfish,  
grasping desire for money or anything money can buy,  
especially when it denies other people their legitimate share of stuff.  
I don't think anyone's going to argue with me  
that this is not a good thing!  
But the early Christians had something else to say about greed  
that our culture has all but forgotten.  
They said greed is bad, and we get that.  
But they *also* said the root cause of greed is a lack of trust.  
And this really surprised me!  
They said, people get greedy because they don't truly believe  
that anything good will happen that they don't *make* happen.  
The contemporary writer Phyllis Tickle puts it this way:  
“[G]reed is actually the sin...of desiring a life subject to human  
control over a life of vulnerable trust in the unseen.”<sup>2</sup>

When I heard this, I started to feel a little uncomfortable.  
I'm a person who likes being in control,  
and I had never thought of that as having anything to do with greed.  
But the early Christians were pretty sure it did.  
Listen to our old friend Evagrius, the 4<sup>th</sup>-century desert monk.  
He says that people who suffer from greed  
brood over “a lengthy old age,

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<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *Greed* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 28.

inability to perform manual labor (at some future date),  
famines that are sure to come,  
sickness that will visit us,  
the pinch of poverty, the great shame that comes  
from accepting the necessities of life from others.”<sup>3</sup>  
Greed has its roots, he says, in worrying about the future.

Now, when I read this, I started to feel very uncomfortable indeed.  
Here I’d been thinking I was going to give this sermon  
about greed during the holidays  
and focus on presents and advertising and all that familiar stuff...  
and, honestly, it probably would have been a little dull  
because we all know already  
that the holidays *do* tend to make us want stuff and feel greedy.

But here was a completely different take on greed.  
Evagrius showed up to tell me, greed sneaks in  
when we start to worry about all the things  
that could happen to us in the future  
and we decide to hold on to what we have  
and try to build up more and more because we might need it later.  
And I thought, oh, my gosh, what he describes as a bad thing, all that  
worrying about old age and sickness and not being able to work—  
that sounds an awful lot like retirement planning!  
It sounds like every article I’ve ever read  
about achieving financial independence  
and making sure we’re not a burden on the next generation.  
And I started to realize, you know, mainstream American culture  
is not a very trusting culture.  
We are trained to rely on ourselves.  
We’re trained to prepare for retirement by saving diligently...  
or, in other words, by holding on to what we have  
and building up more and more for the future.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Tickle, *Greed*, pp. 66–67.

Now, I'm not saying we should all give up the goal  
of saving for retirement.  
There's not much virtue in literally giving away everything you have  
when we haven't created a society  
that will take care of us after we do that.  
But Evagrius did make me think about the macro roots  
of the greed which we have so often pointed to  
as the cause of the financial meltdown we're still living through.  
I think whatever we can do to create and maintain  
the safety net in our society is a good thing,  
not only because it's just plain decent  
for a society to take care of its people who need help,  
but also because it promotes trust  
that we are not the only ones who will take care of us,  
and the more we can live in that trust,  
the more we will be liberated from our greed.

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Well, we've come a long way from Christmas presents  
and the temptations of Christmas cookies here.  
Let me just say, I think the really big idea I've been trying to come at  
from all different ways is pretty simple in the end:  
Life is good when we graciously accept what comes our way  
and share it freely with our neighbors.  
Life is good when we give when we can  
and let ourselves receive when we're in need.  
It's good to be part of that dance of giving and receiving.  
It's good to deck the hall with boughs of holly  
and put up a tree  
and put on our fancy clothes  
and eat yummy foods.  
It's good to be a little extravagant—our spirits need that!

And it's really good to invite the whole neighborhood over  
for a big batch of rice porridge, or mulled cider,  
or whatever *your* favorite holiday treat may be.

Beauty is a gift.

Pleasure is a gift.

Extravagance is a gift.

And those good gifts stay pure and lovely  
when we share them freely.

What I wish for you this holiday season is what I wish for all people:  
a heart open to love,  
a mind open to the demands of justice,  
a life open to the calling of conscience,  
a spirit open to joy.<sup>4</sup>

So may it be, today and always.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from opening words by Lindsay Bates, *UUMA 1997 Worship Materials*.